

Amid Crisis, Peacebuilding Advances with Smart Donor Strategies

Top Challenges and Opportunities in MEPPA's Second Year

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June 2023

Executive Summary

While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems only to deepen with each day, another trend is at play this year: unprecedented resources continue to grow to stem the polarization starting from the ground up, in order to lay the foundations for a peaceful and equitable future. In the second year of grant competition under the \$250 million Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act of 2020 ([MEPPA](#)), the program points to new and unexpected opportunities even as NGOs strategize how to navigate a number of core challenges to their work.

Findings and recommendations in this paper cover:

- MEPPA's first year, which revealed a stunning level of demand to implement peacebuilding projects.
- A breakdown and analysis of what to expect in MEPPA's second year of grants, which has a framework that makes room for significant growth, leaning into conflict resolution, smaller grants for smaller local partners, and core new audiences.
- Challenges facing civil society peacebuilding work and responsive strategies. The current environment needs this work more than ever but rising extremists fear it and threaten it.
- The role that international public and private donors and allies can play in standing up for civil society, amplifying it, and scaling the impact for conflict-sized change. Indeed, despite otherwise contentious politics and despair, broad support for large-scale peacebuilding investments continues to grow in Washington and other capitals, including the UK, Canada, and the EU.

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A. Introduction

Israelis and Palestinians are sinking further into crisis. Democracy, long absent for Palestinians, has been in freefall in Israel. The pace of instability and bloodshed, after breaking records in 2022, has increased sharply again in 2023. More shootings. More rockets. More missiles. More funerals.

Those who reject any form of compromise are stronger than ever across the two populations. New splinter militias are gaining strength in Palestine while Israel's farthest-right government has declared that the entire land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea is the "exclusive right" of the Jewish people. Fear, uncertainty, dehumanization, and despair run rampant.

Those who follow the attitudes that drive violence are particularly distressed by [polls](#) showing that we seem to have lost an entire generation. The young people who grew up in the separation, fear, and violence of the Second Intifada and its aftermath have some of the most extreme views and are powering some of today's most troubling developments. Those concerned about today's violence are downright frightened about what we can expect in years to come as this generation takes its place at the helm.

More than ever, the world has been at a loss for how to overcome the political inertia that has set in for over a decade. The usual diplomatic toolbox feels frustratingly empty with no diplomatic horizon in sight. It's been almost a decade since the last attempt at final status talks. No one can reasonably offer hope for change in the short term.

While all of this is all-too-painfully familiar, one important variable is now different—something that was largely overlooked for decades that is now gaining attention. Policymakers now appear to be leaning into a longer-term, yet more resilient, strategy: expanding investments in the ultimate source of power—the people—to build trust and partnership directly between Israelis and Palestinians on the ground to create the environment that any future diplomatic initiative will need to succeed.

This approach recognizes what [Bill Clinton recently said](#) was a primary factor in producing a durable, 30-year peace in Northern Ireland. The peace process there "was driven by the people ... they were determined that the conflict must end." The "people ... were out in front of the politicians because they wanted their children and grandchildren to grow up outside the shadow of violence and hatred. The Good Friday Agreement negotiations were driven and maintained through the rough spots" by this popular "demand for peace."

Such a strategy has never been tried at scale in the Israeli-Palestinian context, but that may be starting to change thanks largely to MEPPA. It took twelve years of advocacy to pass MEPPA into law. No one knew then what 2023 would look like. But in many ways, MEPPA's long-term focus is tailor-made for a time like this, a moment so completely lacking in short-term potential.

This year of violence and despair happens to be the second year of grants activity for MEPPA, presenting significant challenges to its implementers and NGO partners. But for any who doubt that there is appetite or energy for grassroots-level change, take note: in MEPPA's first year, [USAID received a staggering 166 project proposals](#). Of these, it selected nine projects that are now launching as USAID's second-year grant competition is also underway.

These early days of MEPPA already point to an even longer-term, broader effort taking root. MEPPA envisions investing \$50 million annually for at least five years. Despite a challenging budgetary environment, it has been fully funded each year. If you think there's no longer any consensus in Washington, MEPPA will check your assumptions. Earlier this month, an [astounding 94 members of Congress](#) from both political parties re-committed their support.

It has also started a global conversation. Big players in private philanthropy have watched with close interest and are considering funding some projects originally proposed for MEPPA. Other major state donors, including Canada, the UK, and the EU, have stepped up their peacebuilding investments. Meanwhile, a repeat agenda item at international forums is whether and how to build something even greater and longer-lasting together, such as the proposed [International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace](#), the initiative proposed by the Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP) that led to MEPPA's passage.

For many stakeholders, the long-term fruits of this work can't come soon enough. They want to know: What has MEPPA accomplished so far? What can we learn from the program's first year? And what should we expect in year two?

Many also recognize that the current environment also makes the work infinitely more challenging. They wonder: How can civil society and economic peacebuilding initiatives thrive in such a hostile environment? How should they adapt? And how can other stakeholders in government and private philanthropy play their parts in the year ahead?

B. What is MEPPA, and what has it done?

When USAID first rolled out a MEPPA grant application process in late 2021, peacebuilding practitioners, philanthropists, and diplomats alike took notice given the law's commitment to make the largest single investment ever in Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding and shared society efforts: at least \$250 million over at least five years (see [MEPPA's Progress and Promise, One Year In](#), August 2022).

The first year's call for proposals, the "Annual Program Statement" (APS), broke new ground. Its emphasis on cross-border programs prompted some institutions that previously worked only within Israel's borders to explore partnerships over the Green Line. A first-year launch strategy using larger grants led to super-sized projects from some of the most scaled and experienced NGOs. Of the \$25.36 million allocated in the first year's nine grant awards, the **average grant was \$2.8 million over three years.**²

The [projects chosen by USAID for the first year of grants](#) all focus on Israelis and Palestinians working together on shared development challenges, such as training medical professionals, developing environmental partnerships with experts and youth advocates, or serving elderly and

² Congress authorized a total of \$50 million annually for MEPPA (an amount that has been fully funded each year so far). In addition to the \$25.36 million allocated through the "Partnership for Peace Fund" APS, \$21 million funded a separate "Building Regional Economic Bridges" program and \$3.5 million went to the Joint Investment for Peace initiative managed by the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC).

disabled communities. Most came from a few sectors of work, namely technology, business, and health, with the exception of one environmental initiative.

An organization's ability to operate at a larger scale may have been a major factor in selecting grantees. The winning proposals aimed to target large numbers of beneficiaries (most with several hundred people directly impacted), develop connections with key actors in both societies, and build toward system-level change. Likewise, even though USAID stated a preference to fund Palestinian-led projects, most of the first-year applications came from, and most awards went to, Israeli NGOs and international non-profits (an outcome that reflects a longstanding imbalance in capacities and challenges on the ground).

The first year's awards invested in well-established actors that could deploy funds relatively widely, quickly, and with a high likelihood of success—a recipe for achieving early impact that will help make the case for funding and extending MEPPA. This strategy thus provided cover for USAID to take new directions for the program in this second year and beyond, in order to fully maximize its potential.

C. What can we expect in year two?

In February 2023, USAID published its [call for proposals for MEPPA's second year](#), announcing that it expects to allocate approximately \$15-21 million to the Partnership for Peace Program (by comparison, in the first year USAID said it would allocate “at least” \$15 million but ended up providing more, granting over \$25 million). Before issuing the APS, USAID solicited public comments, and it seems the agency took seriously the input it received. So what's new?

1. MEPPA is now more accessible to smaller organizations.

A series of positive changes should make the program more accessible to these NGOs, which comprise the vast majority of the peacebuilding field. The new APS includes a separate “small grants” track for grants of \$100,000 to \$500,000, in addition to offering larger grants of \$500,000 to \$5 million. Helpfully, these grants will be structured as “fixed award agreements,” which involve a lower administrative burden.

In addition, USAID will again make initial grant decisions based on short, seven-page concept notes, which do not require detailed budgets at the initial stage. The agency has already announced two proposal submission opportunities and a continued offer to provide feedback on unsuccessful applications, allowing organizations to submit more than once and revise proposals as needed.

Responding to another common suggestion, USAID says it will also kick in capacity-building resources to help organizations grow and meet grant requirements. The APS has further put greater weight on local organizations to apply. Together, the result may mean not only more small implementers but also more partnerships between NGOs as large organizations seek smaller partners, who have a perceived leg up—a formula to strengthen the field overall.

2. USAID has signaled an openness to projects focusing on several important, emerging audiences.

As constituencies that oppose reconciliation and engagement have gained ground in recent polls and elections, it's important that MEPPA's second-year APS mentions several of these key groups to reach a wider sweep of society. Chief among these "unusual suspects" for the peace camp are religious communities. Engaging people who may start with strong opposition to the historical peace processes and reconciliation can bring its own challenges but also a big payoff by converting objectors to proponents.

Given current demographics and attitudes, this is especially important. A 2020 [poll of Israeli and Palestinian youth](#) by ALLMEP and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) found a clear correlation between religiosity and support for some hardline and extremist positions. These are the very attitudes that peacebuilding programs disrupt and reverse. Future MEPPA grants in this lane would show a willingness to take calculated risks in order to engage a vital core of both Israeli and Palestinian societies. It also could have an outsized impact in creating the conditions for peace by creating new parallel constituents in key communities.

The APS also places greater emphasis on projects focused on women and youth this year. Ensuring greater inclusion of women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding is a growing global priority, especially since research shows that [peace processes including women are more successful](#). Israeli and Palestinian youth, meanwhile, offer a sobering view of the future, with increasingly radical and intolerant attitudes that make future peace even harder – unless we engage them with extensive, focused interventions.

3. MEPPA may aim even more strategically at conflict resolution.

In the first year, there was ample focus on economic ties. Now, however, programs in technology, business, medicine, and employment have potential support from the Building Regional Economic Bridges (BREB) initiative (another part of MEPPA), too. Last year, USAID spoke only generally about effecting policy change, strengthening Israeli-Palestinian engagement, and increasing community building, dialogue, and reconciliation.

This year, however, the APS targets several leading-edge slices of peacebuilding. It aims to help address internal divisions within each side that are obstacles to the two sides coming together. It calls for projects to connect people with influence—"key actors"—between the two societies and improve the "enabling environment" for Israelis and Palestinians to work across borders, including by focusing on "policies, procedures, and structures." Finally, it invites initiatives that "strengthen the resilience of peacebuilding constituencies and institutions" overall.

Based on the language of the APS and areas of growth in the peacebuilding field, it's quite possible that MEPPA will support more conflict transformation through dialogue and advocacy, education and sports, and soft skills such as leadership. The latter could really add to the resilience of peacebuilding, since alumni from these initiatives so often find their way to roles of influence in other sectors or in civil society itself.

In fact, MEPPA could add resilience by directly supporting programs that target continued engagement with alumni. Also promising is the APS encouragement for projects that deliver

system-level, institutional, and policy change, all of which help to leverage, extend, and deeply embed the gains made by peacebuilders.

4. Shared society projects (interventions inside Israel) will be considered.

Shared society should have a chance at MEPPA support this year even if cross-border work continues to receive priority focus. In the MEPPA statute, Congress not only indicated some level of priority for funding cross-border work but also made clear that shared society programs were intended partners, too.

USAID mentioning shared society again is a positive signal, after shared society proposals did not seem to advance in the first year of grants. Shared society programs can be important partners for strengthening and expanding cross-border work, lending their relative strength and expertise to the growing cross-border space. In addition, relations between Jews and Palestinians within and beyond borders have never been more tightly linked than they are today (under the current far-right Israeli government and following the civil unrest in May 2021).

Equally important is need. Other funding for shared society is down. MEPPA effectively replaced the USAID funding stream that used to be a core funder of many shared society projects precisely at a time when the Israeli coalition is trying to defund such work, ban it from schools, and claw back hard-won gains for equality within Israel.

Put together, these changes in MEPPA's second year are quite positive. They not only respond to much of the feedback submitted to USAID, but they also touch upon many of the key audiences, issues, and opportunities in peacebuilding in 2023.

D. How does the current crisis affect peacebuilding?

For all the future possibility and impact that civil society peacebuilding initiatives can produce, they still must operate in the here-and-now. Most of the organizations working in this space were founded during and after the Second Intifada. In that time, they became quite resilient, working through repeated violent escalations and inter-communal fighting.

And yet, the situation today is particularly full of obstacles and challenges that complicate the work. A wide array of actors and events are converging to throw up speed bumps and barriers in the path of civil society. Overcoming them will require strategic efforts not only by individual peacebuilding NGOs, but also by actors across the field working together and the international community exerting its influence. Following are some of the biggest challenges of the moment and strategies to respond.

1. Restrictions on movement

It is hard to bring people together when they cannot meet in person. Along the border, IDF signs warn Israeli citizens not to cross into Palestinian areas. Widespread mistrust and fear of violence do a lot of convincing, too. Likewise, physical checkpoints prevent Palestinians from entering Israel unless they have explicit permission. Needless to say, there is essentially no movement of Israelis or Palestinians in or out of Gaza for peacebuilding programs.

In the current environment, even the little movement that occurs is under threat. Earlier this year, [reports emerged](#) that Israel's Civil Administration in the West Bank was restricting permits for Palestinians to participate in peacebuilding activities. It's [not the first time](#) that permits for such programs have come under attack.

While ALLMEP and allies have been working to mitigate that threat, it may well just be a preview. Since that time, power over COGAT was transferred to Bezalel Smotrich, who [has called human rights organizations an "existential threat"](#) and more recently gained notoriety for his call to "wipe out" the Palestinian town of Huwara. Indeed, it took an emergency Supreme Court ruling to allow bereaved Palestinian families to attend the Joint Israeli-Palestinian Memorial Day ceremony in April (the event went on to draw over 15,000 people in person and 300,000 online).

As it stands, the number of permits available for peacebuilding activities is tiny. Last year, after significant efforts by civil society, Israel expanded the number of allowed permit-holders for peacebuilding from 2,700 to 5,000 (compared with a total of approximately [140,000 permits for work purposes](#)). This level of access is not sufficient even for existing grassroots efforts, causing activities and events to be canceled or scaled back when participants are unable to attend. With MEPPA and other funding trying to expand this work to many more participants, the current allocation will be completely inadequate, and that's without further attempts by opponents of this work to constrict access to programs even more.

2. [Assault on the values and agenda of equality and democracy](#)

Many of the core shared principles of the new Israeli coalition government run counter to the purposes of peacebuilding organizations. Whereas peacebuilding efforts seek to build human engagement, trust, and equality, the [coalition's first principle](#) is premised on inequality, declaring, "The Jewish people have an exclusive and inalienable right to all parts of the Land of Israel."

This principle merely sets the tone. Across the board, coalition members seek policies to reverse civil society progress in creating greater equality and fewer tensions. Changes in budgeting could stall or reverse historic progress in equalizing government spending for Palestinian communities inside Israel. In the West Bank, [groups that promote inequality are already getting a boost](#) while more resources will go to expanding settlements and legalizing illegal outposts.

Just after Palestinians in Israel first found a seat at the table inside the last Israeli government, now the package of sweeping changes to the judiciary contains a bill that would dramatically weaken or even eliminate Arab political parties and representation. Coalition members are pushing to increase unequal housing policies and religious compulsion in public spaces. They are resisting efforts to reform policing and eliminate discrimination. In pursuing this agenda, the coalition sets itself directly opposed to civil society and all that it stands and works for.

Among Palestinians, meanwhile, the BDS and anti-normalization movements also often threaten peacebuilding's most core principles. Rather than bring people together to confront the conflict and become allies in the fight against occupation, they urge Palestinians and their allies to boycott and cancel Israelis. The bark of these initiatives is often larger than their bite, but they

nonetheless send signals that push people further apart, embolden zero-sum thinking, and create cross-winds that can challenge work on the ground to disrupt the status quo.

3. Direct attacks on civil society organizations

Other aspects of the coalition agreements promise to target NGOs outright. Section 136 of the [Likud agreement with Otzma Yehudit](#) (the “Jewish Power” party), commits that “within 180 days the coalition will enact a law to impose a tax on donations transferred from foreign governments to Israeli organizations.”

They’re working quickly. A [pending Knesset bill](#) by Member of Knesset Ariel Kallner (Likud) and other coalition members would tax NGOs at 65% on income they receive from foreign state entities and revoke their status as non-profit, public institutions, likely triggering additional taxes (a 23% corporate income tax, a 17% value added tax on certain purchases) and ending their ability to receive tax-deductible donations. That bill was slated for consideration at a May 28th ministerial meeting before an [international uproar led to its removal from the agenda](#). The bill remains pending, and its [sponsors say they are committed to advancing it](#).

On March 13, MK Kallner held an inaugural event for a new Knesset lobby to fight antisemitism and delegitimization, where he reinforced the government’s determination to curtail such donations to some 70 NGOs, calling out donors like the EU and Germany. The list he cited was compiled by far-right MK Avi Maoz, and references NIS 890 million in funding between 2012-2021 from virtually all donor states, including the US.³ Even a watered-down version of this bill would spell financial and reputational ruin for many organizations focusing on peacebuilding, human rights, LGBTQ rights, and pluralism.

At the same time, coalition members [have called for excluding from Israeli schools](#) NGOs that teach tolerance, mutual respect, and openness to reconciliation. Even a program to reduce crime in Palestinian communities, which is run by the non-political, diaspora-funded Joint Distribution Committee and the Ministry of Defense, [has been attacked and canceled](#).

An accelerated shrinking space for civil society in Israel would only further constrain the operating environment. Sadly, civil society has long faced a hostile environment in the West Bank and Gaza, too. Hamas [singles out people participating in people-to-people efforts](#) for arrest while the Palestinian Authority has [suppressed civil society and dissenting voices](#). These constraints add to the difficulty of Palestinian NGOs in reaching new participants and scaling up.

4. A fight for legitimacy and attention

Extreme and violent times, when fear and us-versus-them thinking run rampant, also create a tricky terrain for those who work to overcome this mindset. Practicality and psychology combine to strain the bandwidth that people and society have to focus on peacebuilding. Feelings of insecurity and months of weekly political protests leave them with little time or energy for such activities.

³ Maoz himself has since [proposed a bill](#) that would force NGOs receiving such funding to declare themselves “foreign associations,” and would slap a 37% tax on such income.

In Israel, business, media, and political leaders are all-consumed by the battle over the judicial legislation and democracy, with many unaware or disinterested in its connection to the conflict. Many Israelis worry that the very fabric of their society is tearing apart. Palestinians, meanwhile, face record levels of violence in the West Bank, with regular army raids and gun battles with militias leaving scores dead and injured, and with an increasingly authoritarian Palestinian Authority whose legitimacy and popularity is at an [all-time low](#).

It takes extra courage and commitment to stand up for peace at times like these. [Polls show](#) that violence affects public attitudes, leading to less trust and lower support for peaceful solutions. Traumatized people are in no mood for seeking understanding or reconciliation. They begin to believe that the other side “only understands violence.” There is no shortage of politicians and media personalities who fan these flames and [attack the peacebuilders as traitors](#) to their communities for reaching across conflict lines.

Worse, people may fear for their physical security if they engage with civil society. Anti-occupation protesters attending the democracy demonstrations have been attacked, and Palestinian anti-normalization activists have periodically [threatened and disrupted](#) Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding events. The undertones of Itamar Ben-Gvir’s push for a national guard (which critics dubbed his “private militia”) and loosening of firearms rules is not subtle: he seeks to arm and normalize the kinds of right-wing extremist gangs and vigilantes that helped escalate violence against Palestinians during the May 2021 street violence.

E. The silver lining with an international strategy

While these challenges are *immense*, civil society and international allies *can* forge a path forward. In fact, this period of upheaval and activism may even present some opportunities.

For one, the current moment is drawing more attention to the conflict and its costs. The extreme approach of the coalition inside Israel has even opened many people’s eyes to the far right’s agenda vis-a-vis Palestinians. After the settler rampage in Huwara, crowds of Israelis at the mass democracy protests [chanted at police](#), “Where were you in Huwara?”

Indeed, more and more people seem to be realizing that the current coalition’s aim of neutering the judiciary has an awful lot to do with its settlement agenda and oppressive policies toward Palestinians. The coalition wants to remove the Supreme Court’s power to block far-right-wing policies that go to the core of the conflict: using greater force against Palestinians, retroactively legalizing illegal outposts, and entrenching Israel even more in the West Bank in a way that will demand more of the military even while coalition religious parties seek to expand and formalize their community’s exemption from service.

Gradually, this message seems to have spread. In the early days of the protests, some who brought anti-occupation messages were attacked by those who disagreed. But more recently, they have found growing acceptance, and the “blocs” where demonstrators gather to focus on conflict-related protest have only grown.

Even more fundamentally, people have awakened to their own power. The very exercise of activism on a scale so large will be felt for some time. A multi-generational wave of civic

engagement and activity has swept over Israel. Many who were previously apathetic are learning the power of taking to the streets.

The conflict and occupation are other key areas that could be transformed if the public embraces a sense of agency in place of despair and fatalism. There's no reason that social change initiatives can't tap into this new general mood of activism and participation. While it is true that there are unprecedented pressures on civil society and peacebuilding today, there is also a potential opening that we have not seen in a generation. In fact, research by aChord shows that significant [major portions of left, center, and right-leaning protestors are open to including the conflict](#) in the democracy protest agenda.

Overcoming the obstacles outlined above won't happen automatically. Importantly, the goal is not simply to tread water – the waves and currents made by opponents of peace and democracy are too strong. We're either moving forward or being pulled back. The goal should be to lean into a moment of opportunity and to sail far forward. Doing so will take a concerted effort by the international community, donor nations, private philanthropy, and civil society itself. The three-pronged strategy in a nutshell should be: defend, amplify, and scale.

1. Defend: Stand up for civil society.

Stakeholders with influence in the international community and major philanthropy should make clear to the coalition government that the world has the back of civil society, not because they oppose Israel, but because they support Israel's democracy. They should make clear that anti-NGO moves would directly harm their own national interests.

Some actors will be better-positioned to take this stance privately while others do so publicly. But it's a message that should be strong, clear, and consistent. The US, in particular, should invoke both its special relationship with Israel and its interest in implementing the bipartisan MEPPA program that could be harmed by these various proposed moves in Israel.

As it does so, the US should maintain a united front with allies to avoid any attempt to carve out projects by favored countries while attacking others – an approach that has succeeded so far in the united opposition to the NGO taxation bill. The strong and united international opposition to the recent NGO taxation bill is a great example of how effective this strategy can be.

Standing up also means backing civil society as it circumnavigates new obstacles. As NGOs adapt program goals and strategies, they'll need donor understanding and sometimes expanded support if the new path forward is costlier. According to analyses by [Sikkuy-Aufog](#) and the [Interagency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues](#), NGOs will need to monitor harmful policies and design new interventions.

But they can also find new partners beyond national leaders. They can create change by working together with civil servants, large non-government institutions (like universities and large employers), regional councils, and municipalities. They can mobilize their donors, members, and stakeholders and create new public-facing campaigns. But they will need reliable support to do so.

2. Amplify: Spread the impact

The concerted effort by rejectionists to marginalize and stigmatize civil society is as important as the attempt to penalize and obstruct the work on the ground. It's part of the battle for the hearts and minds of Israelis and Palestinians. The extreme minority hopes that civil society, especially those who attempt to resolve the conflict, will be seen as an enemy of national interests.

Unfortunately, these forces have a natural advantage, due to what [Rabbi Michael Cohen has called](#) the "asymmetry of the sensational." Those who want to scare and divide us prey on our brains' fight-or-flight response, a powerful unseen impulse that pushes aside our rational thinking. A single violent act plays on loops on TV and social media, traveling farther and wider than a positive act of equal significance. Violence gets instant credibility and attention, seeming to confirm long-held historical fears. As Ittay Flescher noted in [an article](#) examining the media's treatment of a recent Gaza/Israel escalation, editorial and production decisions often hide the human cost of conflict, and rarely platform those trying to bring it to an end.

The positive, transformative acts happening every day need a boost. The international community and leaders in business, media, and philanthropy must do more to put their thumbs on the scales in this PR tug-of-war. They should take every opportunity to amplify, promote, and embrace civil society leaders and initiatives, especially those of peacebuilders.

This should be a sustained effort integrated into the public affairs and press functions of every major diplomat and power operating in the region. It means site visits, meetings, sponsoring and speaking at events, peacebuilding messages integrated into public speeches and talking points, social media amplification, and of course, funding projects that harness media to challenge the zero-sum narratives and dehumanization that too often prevails.

3. Scale: Strategically multiply the work and results

During the Oslo years, we failed to do peacebuilding at scale. While some small-scale and a few high-profile projects did important work in the 1990s, it wasn't until the Second Intifada and its aftermath that the peacebuilding field began to come into its own. Though this runs counter to the prevailing narrative about this work, it is true. 60% of ALLMEP's 160+ member organizations were founded during the Second Intifada or in its immediate aftermath.

During the period where diplomacy was most active, we instead spent billions on three legs of a four-legged stool: getting the political leaders to the table (to sign agreements they didn't implement), expanding top-down security measures (which, used improperly, can drive further violence), and building infrastructure (which an ongoing conflict quickly destroys).

Missing a leg, the stool collapsed. Indeed, in other places, at similar moments in history where conflict resolution was markedly more successful, [we also spent billions on the fourth leg](#) that strengthens the entire stool: building the public cooperation, trust, and support that (1) incentivizes top-down politicians to support peace, (2) proactively addresses the root causes of insecurity rather than just policing it reactively, and (3) creates durable development built upon real interconnections and interdependencies.

Starting with the Second Intifada, the US, EU, and other public and private donors did provide important *seed* funding for a budding field of peacebuilding initiatives. Though these programs

started small, the results have been stunning, creating real transformation for tens of thousands of people. For instance, [in one program](#), 70% of participants gained trust and empathy towards the “other,” while 80% were more willing to work for peace. In fact, another program produced such motivated alumni that 17.5% went on to dedicate their careers to peacebuilding. A recent randomized control trial study of PeacePlayers Middle East [shows similar outcomes](#).

These initiatives have more than demonstrated a proof of concept ready to be scaled. MEPPA could be the opening of a new chapter, when we turn the page from seed funding to IPO. It is the single largest Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding investment to date, with strategic, long-term possibility and an open invitation for donors, both public and private, to build upon it.

As MEPPA evolves and funds an increasing range of activity and organizations, it opens a number of opportunities for private and foreign governmental funders to pounce on, and in the process, increase their own impact and return on investment. If most actors investing in this space make strategic moves now, and, critically, establish mechanisms that can provide broader and deeper coordination, each investor can leverage its resources to multiplied effect – even before it’s possible to deliver the highest-impact solution of creating an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace.

An ALLMEP [white paper circulated and presented around the world](#) over the last year details a full spectrum of specific actions that donor governments and private philanthropy can and should take. Here are just a few key highlights, adapted for the current moment:

- **Revisit investment strategies, especially for private donors.** Private philanthropy is often a catalyst, more agile and flexible. It can often put the “first money on the table” for new initiatives, help programs expand in new directions, and be a lifeline when government grants end. Now is an ideal moment for private funders to revisit their strategies for maximum effect.
- **Tap into unfunded MEPPA concept notes.** As the overwhelming interest in MEPPA’s first year showed, there are many more worthy projects than MEPPA can fund. But those concept notes need not go to waste. Other funders should step in, considering projects that USAID could not accommodate (ALLMEP has a collection of concept notes and permission to share them with appropriate potential funders; USAID could do the same).
- Fund **pilot projects** that MEPPA can later scale, and offer to match any US grant.
- Offer **expansion grants** for shared society initiatives to add a cross-border element to the project in order to give organizations experience in the cross-border space.
- **Encourage partnerships.** To strengthen the work on the ground, NGOs can work in partnership – formally and informally. They can partner on projects, serve as pipelines channeling participants and leaders to each other, or participate in a growing number of [affinity groups that connect all the organizations](#) working in a particular sector, such as education, sports, or tech. The result is stronger and more resilient projects and initiatives and a steel web of change agents.

- Invest in **capacity building** for organizations with the potential to scale but in need of the right scaffolding. Work directly with them or through [trusted trainers](#) to build up their know-how and systems so they can be the best organizations possible when it comes to program design, financial management and compliance, grant administration, impact evaluation and monitoring, alumni engagement, and more.
- **Do what MEPPA may not.** Offer priority to areas of work that may not get early focus by MEPPA, including those that touch on the conflict's more political aspects; engage religious and non-liberal audiences; lay the groundwork only with one side at a time (uninational work); or connect shared society and cross-border.
- **Invest in alumni.** Support NGO and [field-wide efforts to actively engage with alumni](#) so that each year of programming adds to a growing, connected, and mobilized constituency—future voters and leaders—for peace and cooperation.

Individual donor countries and foundations can move the needle by adopting these strategies on their own. But to really leverage this moment and achieve the longest-term, conflict-sized impact, they should **coordinate, institutionalize, and think big.**

F. Concluding remarks

MEPPA sprang from an effort to establish an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace. At its core, that idea is simple: to have any hope of countering the powerful momentum and extremist forces that propel the conflict forward, peacebuilding requires no less investment. It also requires an institutional, long-term home and champion so that it's not an episodic afterthought but rather a strategic, thoughtful, decades-long campaign to overcome generations of trauma, violence, fear, and mistrust. The idea came from the success in Northern Ireland, where this very strategy played a decisive role, with the International Fund for Ireland and EU PEACE Programmes pumping \$6 billion into bottom-up efforts to build and hold peace.

Since MEPPA passed, a multilateral effort has been taking steps forward. At its first meeting, the MEPPA Advisory Board unanimously asked USAID to explore internationalization, echoing the language of the statute. The UK has offered broad support, renewing funding in the field, with both the [government](#) and main [opposition parties](#) endorsing an International Fund, and with [Prime Minister Sunak championing it in a speech](#) late last year. Canada has pledged CAD \$5 million for peacebuilding as part of a broader \$25 million strategy, which elevated it to become a top funder of civil society in the region.

EU funding is continuing to grow, as well, while EU parliamentarians who differ intensively on the conflict itself have all joined together to call for the EU to join an international effort. And this year, ALLMEP traveled to Morocco and the United Arab Emirates to introduce the idea of an International Fund to policymakers there. There are those in the wider Middle East who will be glad to leverage the Abraham Accords toward a strategy that can directly address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by investing in grassroots efforts to end it.

Even with this progress, launching a new institution will take time. Yet there is an urgent need to coordinate, strategically deploy, and maximize these expanding resources now. Funders of

Israeli-Palestinian civil society cannot afford to wait. Already today, we can create a first-stage pilot mechanism for field-wide coordination, collaboration, and long-term strategy to counter the forces of instability and crisis with far greater impact.

Over the last 18 months, ALLMEP has convened both governmental and private funders around these issues,⁴ most recently this month. Each time, participants expressed strong value in the convening and a strong desire for more. By continuing and deepening this conversation, they could begin to share best practices, experiences, and relevant updates and briefings from the field; benefit from a centralized, field-wide mapping of needs, activities, and funding; share project proposals and opportunities; receive updated polling data to inform peacebuilding strategies; and develop standardized evaluation metrics and tools to measure and drive impact.

Ultimately, there is little doubt where this level of coordination and partnership can lead. NGOs and funders will receive multiples of the current impact from a strategic, networked approach. Meanwhile, leveraging each other's investments will become irresistible. With \$50 million each year on the table from the US, imagine matching funds coming from the EU, European and other G7 countries, the Abraham Accords countries, and private philanthropy. The resources for a groundswell of change could reach true scale to touch and activate enough people over the next generation, not only to halt and reverse today's crisis but also to create the conditions and consent that meaningful diplomacy—and a new world for Israelis and Palestinians—will require.

⁴ Over twenty diplomats drawn from over a dozen donor countries participated in a roundtable at UNSCO in May, 2022. ALLMEP also convened and participated in a number of events with private and public stakeholders, including an AJC roundtable with some 20 countries (December 2022), a Social Venture Fund and Israel-Arab Task Force private philanthropy roundtable (September 2022), and a private-public funder discussion in the UK (May 2022). USAID convened its own call for potential partner governments in December 2022. ALLMEP also has hosted conversations with other consortia of private philanthropists, including the Jewish Funders Network (October 2021), the Forum of Foundations in Israel (April 2022), and Israel-based foundational representatives (March 2023).