



Assessing the Quartet Recommendation to Increase Interaction and Cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians

Summary of a Mitvim Institute Policy Workshop

Jerusalem, 21 July 2016

A. Introduction

The recent [report of the Middle East Quartet](#), published in July 2016, recommends that Israelis and Palestinians “foster a climate of tolerance, including through increasing interaction and cooperation in a variety of fields – economic, professional, educational, cultural – that strengthen the foundations for peace”.

The Mitvim Institute’s policy workshop examined whether and how this recommendation can be effectively implemented under the current political conditions. It addressed critical questions over how Israeli-Palestinian civil society cooperation, in the absence of political leadership, can take place and strengthen the foundations for conflict resolution instead of reinforcing a destructive status quo.

The workshop was attended by local and international experts and diplomats, and featured opening remarks by Amb. Jon Hanssen-Bauer, Ambassador of Norway to Israel and former Director of the Israeli-Palestinian People-to-People Program, Dr. Ned Lazarus, Scholar and Evaluator of Israeli-Palestinian Civil Society Programs at George Washington University, USA, and Elias Zananiri, Vice-Chairman of the PLO Committee for Interaction with the Israeli Society. This document summarizes the different points and recommendations that were raised during the workshop.

B. Relevance of the Quartet Report

Despite its lack of innovative policy recommendations, the report provides a valuable reference point vis-a-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It contains a description of the current impasse and the trends undermining political progress. It shows a consensus from major players in the international community on current barriers to peace, and it includes direct linkage to other multilateral initiatives, via endorsements of the Arab Peace Initiative (API), as well as the French peace initiative.

The report signals a shift in the international community's approach. Instead of prescribing high-level action to compel the sides to return to negotiations, the recommendations focus on a strategy to promote a two-state reality by reversing negative trends. This approach centers on building realities on the ground from the bottom up, in order to create the conditions and structures for later political action.

This "bottom-up" approach is also predicated on the assumption that civil society can bring about political action. The workshop consensus was that this approach can influence policy, but that deliberate action is required in order to overcome deep-seated public skepticism and political apathy. The ten recommendations included in the Quartet report all play a role in creating a context for peace, and people-to-people cooperation on its own cannot defeat political gridlock. There is a need to influence public thinking within both societies, and to draw best practices from past cooperative efforts in order to develop solutions to current obstacles.

C. Israeli-Palestinian Cooperation

Much of the civil society infrastructure built after the Oslo Accords collapsed under the second intifada, and cooperation has further suffered as the peace process has ground to a halt over recent years. While dedicated organizations still exist, fewer are engaged on the Israeli side, and there is growing opposition to civil society cooperation on the Palestinian side. Obstacles to increased cooperation include harsh restrictions on Palestinian movement, the anti-normalization campaign, political apathy fueled by political deadlock and violence, security fears, and donor fatigue. The resulting separation between the two societies constitutes yet another obstacle for Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution.

Israeli and Palestinian civil society organizations -- including those dedicated to increasing cooperation, *and* those focused on internal challenges -- face a battle for legitimacy within their own societies. There is still potential, though, and attacks on peace initiatives are frequently met with strong counter-responses. One internal example on the Israeli side is the emergence of *Tag Meir*, a grassroots anti-racism coalition that aims to highlight and counteract the racism and violence of *Tag Mechir* (Price Tag) attacks led by Jewish extremists against Arabs. On the Palestinian side, challenges range from the anti-normalization campaign to physical threats against activists. These voices are countered by a governmental initiative designed to enhance Israeli-Palestinian cooperation that will be described later in this paper.

This is not the only difficult period for Israeli-Palestinian cooperation. The field has demonstrated resilience during challenging times in the past: dedicated organizations have managed to continue their work and build the foundations for increased cooperation. Civil society organizations are poised to benefit from the knowledge and best practices gained over the last two decades. These make the field more professional and equipped to effect change than it has been before.

D. Building the Foundations of a Two-State Solution

Workshop participants discussed how to progress towards a two-state reality under current conditions, which include a lack of high-level political direction and active attempts to advance a completely different reality. Within Israel, these attempts include political and legislative efforts, including the 'NGO Bill,' to restrict civil society organizations. There is a need to confront these challenges and build popular legitimacy for a two-state solution and for non-governmental action to promote it.

In addition to enhancing the scope and effectiveness of civil society cooperation, a two-state reality requires economic and institutional foundations for the Palestinian state. This is a step that can be taken even without an active peace process. Recommendation number six of the Quartet report includes a call for "the Palestinian leadership [to] continue their efforts to strengthen institutions, improve governance, and develop a sustainable economy." This is an effort that can be supported by the international community. Norway leads a two-pronged approach towards Palestinian state-building: first, by pursuing the bottom-up approach described above; second, by continuing to strengthen institutions and work towards a viable economy. Norway has a two-year goal of developing a framework to balance the Palestinian Authority (PA) budget and inject growth into the economy. The next step in this effort is a donors meeting planned for September 2016 in New York, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, which may be held under the auspices of the French peace initiative.

E. Palestinian Perspectives

Anti-Normalization

Palestinian strategy has shifted over the past several years from negotiations to internationalization. The growing anti-normalization campaign increasingly views civil society cooperation with Israelis as entrenching the occupation instead of resisting it and advancing towards a negotiated resolution. Public opinion is largely skeptical or antagonistic towards civil society cooperation. Furthermore, there are credible threats against those willing to cooperate with Israelis.

There are, however, both governmental and civil mechanisms for reversing this trend. In 2012, President Abbas formed the PLO Committee for Interaction with the Israeli Society. This committee is a messaging and dialogue tool that serves dual purposes: in addition to indicating to the Israeli public that the PA is prepared to speak to all sectors of Israeli society, it also sends a message to the Palestinian public that the PA still believes there is a chance for a mutually beneficial two-state solution along the 1967 lines, with minimal, mutually agreed-upon land swaps. Unfortunately, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman recently [revoked the entrance permit](#) to Israel of Committee Chair Mohammed al-Madani. The move constitutes another barrier towards cooperation and sends a negative message about official Israeli governmental policy towards cooperation. Lieberman's move was criticized by opposition member MK Ksenia Svetlova (Zionist Union) during a parliamentary discussion (20 July 2016) organized by the Knesset Caucus for Regional Cooperation, with the Mitvim Institute.

Responses to the Quartet Report

A common Palestinian criticism of the Quartet report is that while it underscores the necessity of the two-state solution, it stops short of following through with strong political action. This has reinforced a perception that bringing the two societies together will sustain the occupation instead of removing it. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas harshly criticized the report and urged the UN Security Council to reject it. The Palestinians also threatened to boycott the Quartet, amid criticism that the report did not do enough to underscore the destructive role of settlement building.

Beneath criticism of the report is a tension in the relationship between the Palestinians and the international community vis-a-vis negotiations. President Abbas' commitment to a political resolution since his 2005 election was a main requirement of the international community, and strong argument against Arafat's leadership. Many Palestinians feel that this commitment has not advanced statehood in any way, and there is a growing sense that 'the day after Abbas' could mark the disappearance of this line of moderation.

F. Translating Civil Society Cooperation into Policy Change

There is a need for increased interaction and cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians. Despite the challenging political climate, initiatives and organizations should step up their efforts to bridge the divide between the two societies, as this would provide the foundations for additional progress.

Workshop participants discussed strategic dilemmas and recommendations towards this goal, including:

Practical Steps to Increase Cooperation:

- The effort to increase cooperation should begin with an analysis of how to reinforce already existing structures. Organizations should identify shared interests that indicate potential for expanded cooperation, and critically evaluate the programs already underway to reveal which have the most potential to achieve political change.
- Palestinian and Israeli NGOs need to find more effective ways to continue cross-border work that empowers the Palestinian side, which often has less funding and capacity, and faces even stronger societal opposition to such work.
- Peace organizations are experienced with individual and small group activities. They have not yet learned to apply their methods to large-scale outreach.
- Peace organizations should increase outreach activities and diversify target audiences. There is an especially strong need to increase programs for youth in order to build foundations for cooperation among the future generations and to help reverse increasing Israeli-Palestinian disconnect. That said, current restrictions on movement and opposition to cooperation make youth one of the hardest demographic groups to engage.

- Citizens, organizations, and even businesses might not know how to connect with the “other,” should they want to cooperate. This knowledge gap should be addressed by those with experience in the field.

Strategy and Communications:

- Participants discussed a shift in strategy, from discussing the overall conflict to breaking down existing challenges on both sides. Once those challenges are identified, organizations can more effectively focus on influencing perspectives and public discourse within their own societies.
- The Israeli peace camp is still largely associated with the Ashkenazi, liberal, secular elite. Civil society organizations should move past this perception and demonstrate that pro-peace policies belong to and can benefit the entire population.
- Israeli and Palestinian organizations working together often find themselves on the defense. They are criticized by other actors within their respective societies. Organizations must learn how to control the conversation, and to do that, there is a need to offer a credible vision of a different reality. The dominance of fear in Israeli public discourse, for instance, remains a major hurdle. Peace organizations must convince the public that increased cooperation with the “other” has a legitimate place in the discourse, and that peace itself is desirable and worthwhile.
- Israelis must also restore the peace process and the Palestinian issue to primacy within the domestic Israeli discourse. They should also challenge the increasingly popular narrative that Israel can develop significant cooperation with the Arab world without moving towards the resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians.

Occupation vs. Peace:

There is a need to evaluate the terminology used to discuss the conflict; specifically, in regard to the rhetoric of occupation vs peace:

- Israelis feel isolated from the concept of occupation, due to the popularity of the right-wing’s idea that “a people cannot occupy their own land” and a lack of ongoing contact with Palestinians. At the same time, occupation remains the dominant lens through which Palestinians view the conflict.
- Israeli civil society organizations can bridge this divide by more effectively connecting Israelis to the relevance of occupation, through education and outreach that focuses both on the Palestinians and on the effects of occupation on Israel’s interests.
- While Palestinians talk about occupation, Israeli messaging centers on the concept of peace. Decades of violence, however, have left the public largely disillusioned and unaffected by the rhetoric of peace. Instead of communicating via ideals, there is a need to demonstrate that progress in the peace process is in Israel’s own strategic interest.