



## **United States Institute of Peace**

### **“People to People: Examining Grassroots Peacebuilding Efforts Between Israelis and Palestinians”**

**Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the  
Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism**

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July 21, 2021**

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson and members of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism, thank you for this opportunity to testify on grassroots peacebuilding efforts between Israelis and Palestinians. The timing of this hearing is critically important coming on the heels of the recent 11-day conflict between Israel and Hamas that was preceded by ongoing tensions and clashes in Jerusalem and violence between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel. These recent events underscore the significance of the bipartisan Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act, a new law initiated by Congress to foster peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians.

I am the director of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict program at the United States Institute of Peace, although the views expressed here are my own. The U.S. Institute of Peace was established by Congress over 35 years ago as an independent, nonpartisan national institute to prevent and resolve violent conflicts abroad, in accordance with U.S. national interests and values.

### **The Challenge and Opportunity for Grassroot Peacebuilders**

The challenge of bringing Israelis and Palestinians together is immense. After decades of entrenched conflict, failed rounds of diplomacy, and perennial flare-ups of violence such as in May, Israelis and Palestinians mirror each other in their lack of faith in a near-term political solution to the conflict and in seeing each other as a good-faith partner for peace. The trajectory of these attitudes is not optimistic. Both societies are young. The median age of all Israeli citizens is 30.5 years with an estimated 42 percent of the population under the age of 24.<sup>1</sup> The median age in the Palestinian Territories is 20.8 years with 69 percent of the population under the age of 29.<sup>2</sup> Consistent polling of Israeli and Palestinian public attitudes indicate that within these young demographic cohorts, the perceptions of the other side are more negative and attitudes toward the conflict are significantly more hardline than those found in older generations. *This* is the challenge that Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilders are tackling head-on in their work today.

While many on both sides share a desire for absolute separation, the geography dictates that regardless of ultimate political solutions, interaction and socio-economic interdependencies will be inevitable for Israelis and Palestinians. As it stands, the near-term prospect of negotiations toward a final status agreement in this conflict is low. However, this is precisely why investment in people-to-people work is crucial. Indeed, a challenge of past conflict resolution efforts has been viewing civil society peacebuilding as a supportive adjunct to a political process and an effort to mobilize Israeli and Palestinian publics around a political framework for ending the conflict. But Israelis and Palestinians do not have the luxury of waiting for diplomats and politicians to deliver a better tomorrow for them. They are living with the violence, the fear, the hatred, the tension, and the structural barriers to peace every day.

While grassroots peacebuilding is not a substitute for a political process when it comes to formally ending the conflict, it cannot be dismissed as an afterthought or mere derivative of diplomatic goals. Rather, it should be understood as a set of intentional practices aimed at

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.indexmundi.com/israel/demographics\\_profile.html](https://www.indexmundi.com/israel/demographics_profile.html)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2021/0222/Can-a-new-generation-change-Palestinian-politics>

preventing and reducing violence and incitement while building trust and relationships that improve daily lives and livelihoods. In societies where an ultimate peace agreement will be brought to a public referendum, creating these conditions can facilitate renewed diplomatic progress and will be needed to sustain eventual diplomatic breakthroughs.

The good news is that the peacebuilding tools to bring about meaningful impact exist. Studies on people's experiences have demonstrated that people-to-people activities are effective in countering demonization, distrust, and dehumanization while affecting practical changes to improve the quality of life and engagement within and between target communities. This is a general finding in the conflict resolution field and specifically in the Israeli-Palestinian context. However, until now, the Israeli-Palestinian grassroots peacebuilding field has operated with too few resources to enable far- and deep-reaching change. The Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act is a game-changing opportunity for Israeli and Palestinian people to build peace.

### **Impact and Potential**

The Israeli-Palestinian grassroots peacebuilding field has long been underestimated and even caricatured. However, it is a dynamic field that encompasses a range of approaches and strategies to advance peace, including dialogue, leadership training, Track II informal processes, media training, engagement in common-interest recreational activities, and cooperation on technical issues of mutual interest and benefit such as health, technology, and the environment. The overarching common goal of this range of activities is to create relational and structural conditions conducive to peaceful coexistence and reconciliation.

Another misperception is that grassroots peacebuilding programs are solely “preaching to the converted” and attracting participants who are not broadly representative of their societies. While self-selection is a feature of the field to some extent, the motivations that bring participants together in a given program vary from despair, to curiosity, to desire to tell one's “side of the story” to academic or professional opportunity. In the past decade, the field has also experienced a perceptible growth in participation from Israeli and Palestinian communities previously considered outside of the so-called “peace camp,” specifically those from more religiously and politically conservative groups. This diversity of impetus and identity means that once people are engaged, they are doing the hard work of confronting their pre-existing assumptions and attitudes about multiple “others,” whether from within their own communities or across religious and ethnic divides. These factors strengthen their capacity to disagree nonviolently and build skills and relationships that can transform the conflict and open space for more peaceful outcomes.

Multiple organizations and individuals are working with seriousness and purpose on grassroots peacebuilding. They are employing self-reflective practices that are impacting attitudinal, behavioral, and socio-economic dynamics. The field is characterized by a culture of learning and willingness to adapt. The peacebuilding approaches that are used and the communities engaged in this work have evolved in response to shifts in the dynamics of the conflict.

This growing rigor and adaptability are enabled by U.S. funding mechanisms, including USAID's Conflict Management and Mitigation started in 2004, that have helped emphasize and

professionalize approaches to monitoring and evaluation of impact among grant recipients. Academic evaluations of field-wide approaches and individual project assessments show a field that reduces stereotypes, fosters critical thinking skills, creates openness to hearing the perspective of the other side, and provides motivation to work longer-term toward peacebuilding goals.

Longitudinal studies have been scarcer, itself a factor of limited resources, but a few studies have appeared in the past decade that provide some valuable observations. In 2011, Dr. Ned Lazarus published his comprehensive study on the long-term impact of peace education participation among more than 800 Israeli and Palestinian participants of one of the early post-Oslo Accords peacebuilding organizations, Seeds of Peace. His findings included that 17.5 percent of the first ten groups of Israeli and Palestinian participants were working for 40 different peacebuilding initiatives as adults.<sup>3</sup>

The diversification of approach and participation in the field since 2011 bodes well for its ability to have greater impact. A United States Institute of Peace 2015-2016 meta-evaluation of facilitated dialogue projects in Pakistan, Colombia and the Israeli-Palestinian context conducted by Drs. Ilana Shapiro and Nike Carstarphen sought to understand the factors determinative of success in such projects -- where success is defined as the extent to which the effects of a given dialogue project spread from the participants to broader groups, practices, or policies in society.<sup>4</sup> The findings included that highly successful projects take an inclusive approach to participation, engaging a more societally representative group of participants. In addition, projects that combined dialogue with skills-building and training or action components were more sustainable and more successful at transferring outcomes beyond the participants than dialogue projects alone. Strategic partnerships between implementing groups, and built-in processes for reflecting and adapting along the way, also yielded greater success, minimized duplication of efforts, and created more opportunities for transfer of impact into the broader community.

Each of these factors is present in the Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding field today, and success stories exist that indicate the potential of people-to-people interventions to have tangible impact on the lives of Israelis and Palestinians.

One need look no further back than the overlapping set of tragic events that played out in May to understand the value proposition of the grassroots peacebuilding field. Former president of Israel, Reuven Rivlin, referred to the violence and hatred between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel that consumed the streets of some Israeli cities at that time as a "civil war." In the midst of property desecration and hideous attacks, one organization--The Abraham Initiatives that has been working in the field of shared society for years -- facilitated the release of a widely reported public statement by a dozen elected Jewish and Arab officials in mixed cities calling for calm. Another longstanding nongovernment organization, Mosaica, mobilized their mediation network of Jewish and Muslim religious leaders to walk the streets together in the mixed city of Ramla to send a message to their tense shared community.

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<sup>3</sup> Lazarus, N. (2011). Evaluating peace education in the Oslo-Intifada generation: A long-term impact study of Seeds of Peace 1993-2010. Washington, DC: American University.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-07/sr407-what-works-in-facilitated-dialogue-projects.pdf>

Beyond the value of public modeling and immediate-term tension-defusing, over the longer term several organizations have been successful in institutionalizing the change their individual projects and programs yield, including:

- The Abraham Initiatives developed a program of spoken Arabic language instruction in Jewish Israeli schools, taught by Arab teachers. The Israeli Ministry of Education ultimately adopted the curriculum, to be taught as a compulsory program in all the schools throughout its northern district, and in many beyond. Evaluations of the program registered positive attitude and academic changes.<sup>5</sup>
- Search for Common Ground’s Jerusalem office partnered with the Jerusalem Intercultural Center to bridge divides, reduce tensions, and prevent violence between Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities on Mount Zion, a site with shared faith attachments. Their impact was possible by combining community police engagement, a community leader dialogue forum, and volunteer mobilization. For the first time representatives of the resident religious institutions at the site began to gather regularly to discuss common concerns and joint action that yielded administrative responsiveness to shared safety and security needs. The Mount Zion police commander credited the presence and function of volunteers trained and mobilized by the project with maintaining unprecedented calm during predictably flashpoint dates and events.<sup>6</sup>
- Among its many projects, EcoPeace Middle East, a joint Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian environmental organization, has created the “Good Water Neighbors” community project that identifies cross-border communities and uses their mutual dependence on shared water resources as a basis for developing dialogue and cooperation on sustainable water management. The project engages youth and adults alike alongside municipal staff and mayors to develop common solutions to their water management problems. An example includes the construction of a sewage collection network in a Palestinian community, and its connection to a neighboring Israeli community by which the Palestinian wastewater is now being transferred for treatment on the Israeli side.<sup>7</sup> The organization has also worked closely with faith communities to encourage rehabilitation of the Lower Jordan River, a water source of religious significance to Christians, Muslims and Jews alike.<sup>8</sup>

## **Lessons from Northern Ireland**

Another misperception about the Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding field is that it has benefited from massive amounts of funding over several years. While Congress, the U.S. government, and the broader international community have invested in Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding programs, relative to the scope of the challenge these investments have been minimal and fall short of what is needed to enact wide-spread change.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://abrahaminitiatives.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/The-Ya-Salam-Program-Evaluation-Study.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.mountzion.org.il/about-window-on-mount-zion/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://old.ecopeaceme.org/projects/community-involvement/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://old.ecopeaceme.org/publications/publications/lower-jordan-river/>

By contrast, in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict, the United States alongside other governments, created and funded the International Fund for Ireland to both support and sustain peace efforts. Beginning a dozen years before the Good Friday Agreement, the Fund invested heavily in both social and economic advancement projects while encouraging dialogue and reconciliation between Unionists and Nationalists throughout Ireland. The Fund was launched in partial recognition that several efforts at brokering political solutions had failed and broken down amid profound communal divisions and violent spoiler behavior, and that a “bottom-up” effort was needed to address the interrelated low levels of social interaction, deep mistrust, and poor economic conditions that were fueling to the conflict.

The comparative amount of investment is striking. For three decades, beginning 12 years before The Good Friday Agreement peace treaty—and paving the way toward it—the Alliance for Middle East Peace has estimated that the international community spent the equivalent of \$44 per capita annually on peacebuilding priorities in Northern Ireland. By contrast, today in the deeply entrenched Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the international community spends \$1.50 per capita among Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, the bipartisan Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act’s authorization of \$250 million over five years to both people-to-people and economic development presents a remarkable opportunity to improve the lives of Palestinians and Israelis. It also provides a new and significant policy tool to the administration in its pursuit of preventing conflict deterioration and paving the way for a sustainable solution to the conflict.

When Martin Indyk stepped down as Special Envoy to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict following the last round of final status negotiations in 2014, he diagnosed the conflict’s seeming immunity to diplomatic resolution as a matter of “distrust between the leaders and between the people” more than a matter of the core issues dividing the two parties. The Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act’s People-to-People Fund offers an opportunity to the administration to take the lead in a long-term and large-scale investment strategy, leveraging international partnerships to address the trust deficit at its core, and strengthen the parties’ and publics’ readiness to engage in a constructive and fruitful set of negotiations toward a sustainable peace. This initial investment can help solidify the impacts the field has already registered, scale participation and professionalization, and shape a long-term and strategic approach to building the foundations of sustainable peace.

### **Recommendations for Initial Funding and Policy Priorities**

Initial funding from the Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act should be directed toward foundational investments that focus on enhancing the capacity of the field to absorb and maximize the impact of future investments. The field has operated on a relative shoestring for decades, with organizations often improvising space for convening and drawing heavily on rotating volunteer leadership. Given the relatively small pool of funding that has been available, the field has tended to be more resource competitive than cooperative. In this vein, consideration should be given to the following priorities:

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.allmep.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ALLMEP-Memo-How-an-International-Fund-Helped-Make-Peace-in-Northern-Ireland-Lessons-from-a-Conflict-Solved.docx.pdf>

- **Physical space.** Given socio-political tensions, security considerations, and movement and access challenges, it is often underestimated how difficult it is to find spaces conducive to Israelis and Palestinians efficiently and safely meeting with each other. Investments in physical space could serve as a “peace hub” or hubs at which multiple organizations could build community, share resources, co-create, train, and host events. Having dedicated space would go a long way toward institutionalizing innovation, cooperation, and collaborative partnerships that would maximize the field’s collective footprint.
- **Functional Capacity.** The field has been limited in its ability to capture and communicate its impacts, learn from others and apply best practices, and hone its skills in a variety of areas. Full-time staff who are well-trained in these areas and who can focus on them exclusively, is important.
- **Communications.** Israeli and Palestinian youth engaged in peacebuilding programs often express the value of “safety in numbers” when it comes to publicly modeling and messaging the value of engaging in people to people programming. But the ability to be resilient in the face of opposition, go against the positions in one’s own community, and recruit others to engage to advance peace is made easier when there is greater awareness of the grassroots peacebuilding field. This is a challenge when the idea of peacebuilding is minimally socialized in Israeli and Palestinian societies. Investment in communications capacity that can highlight peacebuilding activities through robust media and social media engagement and community outreach can go along way toward building more positive and nuanced understandings of the goals, diversity, and benefits of peacebuilding programs.

Congress can also build on the message it has sent through passage of the bipartisan Nita Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act to give ongoing support and legitimacy to the field of grassroots Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilding, including:

- **Prioritizing civil society meetings** with a broad and inclusive range of Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilders and organizations during trips to the region. Amplifying their impact stories will go a long way toward empowering peacebuilders whose work and voices are too often drowned out or overshadowed by the violent spoilers that capture the headlines.
- **Messaging to the Palestinian and Israeli political leaderships** that peacebuilding work is a bipartisan priority and a U.S. interest with the expectation that the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority will do their utmost to protect, legitimize, and enable implementation of this foundational work to prepare the ground for peace.

Senator George Mitchell, who served as a Special Envoy to both Northern Ireland and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has reflected on the role of the International Fund for Ireland in preparing the ground for the Good Friday Agreement that he helped broker. In acknowledging that role, he has also noted that, “By itself, the Good Friday Agreement did not guarantee peace,

stability and reconciliation. It made them all possible.”<sup>10</sup> It is the efforts of Israeli and Palestinian civil society peacebuilders, the foundations laid by their work and relationships, and the support they receive from those committed to securing a sustainable and peaceful future for both parties, that will ultimately help move from the promise of peace and reconciliation to its actualization.

The Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act is an invaluable tool with which to pursue the U.S. interest -- and the shared interests of the parties to the conflict -- to make peace happen.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee. I look forward to answering your questions.

*The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.*

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/03/grassroots-work-israeli-palestinian-conflict>