NOTE: THIS IS ONE OF A SERIES OF REFLECTIONS FROM 4 MONTHS LEADING A STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM FOR 20 COLLEGE STUDENTS IN ISRAEL, PALESTINE, JORDAN AND EGYPT

by Lisa Schirch

After three months of listening to Israelis and Palestinians, particularly those working for change, there is reason for both despair and hope. Official peace processes have failed at best, and many argue they have made the situation worse. But for the past three decades, a variety of community-led organizations have been working to bring about change. Some of these advocate dialogue. Some push for boycotts and sanctions. What was most surprising and disheartening from visiting dozens of peace and justice-oriented organizations was to hear of the internal divisions between the changemakers. I call them changemakers instead of peacebuilders because for many of them, peace is a bad word and they don’t want to be called peacebuilders. This article, the last in a series, highlights the tensions between methods for change in Israel and Palestine and why these divisions are an obstacle to social change.

In both Israeli and Palestinian society, dominant voices argue that the other side only understands the language of force and punishment. They defend their “right” to use violent tactics by outlining the crimes of the other side. But a right is not a strategy. Harsher IDF force or more Qassam rockets or suicide bombers are unlikely to bring safety or recognition to Israelis or freedom and human rights to Palestinians. Despite the lack of evidence that force is an effective strategy, faith in force continues.

In the context of punishment-oriented social change, dialogue is also a crime for some Israelis and Palestinians. The right-wing Israeli government and some organizations seek to silence or outlaw Jewish organizations that foster dialogue. They know that Israelis that talk to Arabs come to have increased empathy and understanding for Palestinian rights. This is why Birthright, the organization that brings young Jews from other countries to visit Israel, has prohibited its program leaders from bringing Arab speakers in the itinerary.

Paradoxically, in Gaza and the West Bank, Palestinians who engage in dialogue with Jews may be threatened on social media or even imprisoned not by Israelis, but by other Palestinians. In 2016, the Palestinian Authority arrested four Palestinians who had breakfast with Jewish community members in Efrat, a settlement in the Gush Etzion bloc. The Palestinian Authority (PA) arrested these Palestinians because the PA sees it as a crime for Palestinians to meet with Jewish settlers because it is seen as promoting “normalization.” Any effort that brings Jews and Palestinians together is seen as “normalizing” occupation and masking the reality of unequal power between Israelis and Palestinians.

Some of the critiques of dialogue programs are valid. Programs that bring Israelis and Palestinians together to build relationships or eat hummus and pita together without providing a structured space for addressing the conflict can be useless at best or pacify a desire for change at worst.
For advocates of the BDS movement, punishment and pressure through boycotting, divesting, and sanctioning Israel is the one and the only path to change. Abandoning hope of a peace process after Oslo, some see BDS as a way to coerce and punish Israel until it withdraws from the West Bank, gives Palestinian citizens of Israel equal rights, and allows Palestinian refugees to return. But progressive Israelis and Palestinians critique BDS, noting that punishment of Jews is hardly a new strategy. And it does seem to be pushing Jews to the right, and uniting Jews against BDS. Even progressive Jews that support most of BDS’ goals of ending the occupation oppose BDS because of its wording that seems to deny any legitimate Jewish presence in Israel. Even Noam Chomsky sees BDS as seriously backfiring and contributing to a rightward shift in the Israeli public.

Ending the occupation and finding a political solution is important to the security, dignity and well-being of both Israelis and Palestinians. So basing social change strategies on solid research of what works and does not work is important.

Reviews of successful nonviolent social change movements identify the necessity of a broad-based, inclusive and diverse social movement that uses multiple tactics and methods. But for some in Palestine, every method other than BDS is seen as suspect. And any questions on BDS tactics or narratives brand you as a traitor. While boycotting can be an important tactic, it should not be the only tactic. It takes more than one tactic to achieve a social change goal.

So, if dialogue, the anti-normalization movement, and BDS each have serious limitations, what is the way forward? First, here are two case studies of dialogue and the impact of anti-normalization that we encountered on our exploration of peacebuilding in Israel and Palestine.

“Other Voice” and Gaza

Maha Mehanna and Roni Keidar are neighbors; separated by the wall between Israel and the Gaza Strip. They believe dialogue is the only path to transforming the isolation and hatred between Israelis and Palestinians. Here is a Washington Post story on their friendship. Both Palestinians and Israelis disagree with Roni and Maha. Some Israelis think all Palestinians, especially those in Gaza, are “the enemy.” Some Palestinians think their relationship with each other is a way of “normalizing” a situation of injustice.

Maha lives in Gaza. During the 1948 war, the Mehanna family, like other Palestinians, had heard of the massacre of Palestinians living in the town of Deir Yassin as well as other villages on Israeli radio. Rather than face a similar fate, her father’s family left their hometown village, Al-Masmiyya Al-Kabira, and fled to Gaza, then under Egyptian control. For Maha and other Palestinians, Zionism equates with the plan to destroy Arab villages and remove Palestinians from their land.

Maha is a banking professional with a degree in Community Rehabilitation from the University of Calgary, Canada. Every summer, Maha travels to Virginia to Eastern Mennonite University’s Summer Peacebuilding Institute to complete her MA degree in Conflict Transformation. Like everyone else in Gaza, she is a prisoner with few rights or freedoms. Maha met with our group and shared what life is like in Gaza. They have 2-4 hours of electricity a day, and tainted water high in salt comes out of their tap so they must buy water. There is 60% unemployment, Israel prevents Gaza’s from travel without their permission.
During the 2008-2009, 2012 and 2014 Israeli military offensives, Maha and her family including her parents, siblings and their children, huddled in the ground floor of their apartment building as bombs rained down. There are no bomb shelters in Gaza. Many Palestinians see Israel’s policy toward Gaza as collective punishment for Hama’s rockets fired into Israel. But Maha emphasizes that most people in Gaza hate and fear Hamas.

Maha faces threats and scorn for her work with Israelis like Roni. Maha has been a voice for what is happening in Gaza on Israeli radio, at the J Street conference in Washington DC, and in multiple media outlets. She told our group the same thing she said in an interview with the Times of Israel, “In Gaza it’s not easy to speak about your friendship with Israelis because Hamas is in control of Gaza, and for them, Israel is the enemy and talking to the enemy makes you a traitor…”
They don’t understand that we connect on a human level, that we’re not a political group but friends, just human beings who really care about each other.”

Roni Keidar lives 800 yards from the wall around the Gaza strip in a cooperative Jewish farming community Moshav Netiv Ha’asara. Roni faces scorn for her work with Maha and other Palestinians from fellow Israelis. Hamas’ Qassam rockets hit Roni’s community, killing her daughter’s friend. At night, Roni and her community hear Hamas firing guns. Her friends in Gaza send her a text to let her know what is happening: “Don’t worry, they are only training.” Roni knows there may be more rockets or tunnels, but she stays and works for peace.

Roni helped to found an organization called Kol Acher or “Other Voice.” Along with other Jewish social justice activists in the region, she longs for the end of the violent conflict and believes that talking and listening are the principal conditions for achieving this goal. Other Voice continues to speak out on the need for a political settlement, and advocates for clean water and electricity in Gaza.

Some Israelis see Roni as a traitor. Roni responds, “I love Israel. It is my country. And it is out of that love that I speak.” Roni’s kids served in the IDF, and she believes that Israelis are under threat and need to protect themselves. Roni rejects the mainstream Israeli idea that there is no Palestinian partner. She knows better because she has found Palestinian partners. And she knows that ending the occupation is work she needs to do both for Palestinian friends and the safety of her own community.

Roni and Maha keep in close contact. They call each other when there are bombs falling on either side. Roni supports Maha in speaking out about what is happening in Gaza. Yet still, anti-normalization activists denounce Roni and Maha’s friendship and the work of Other Voice.

**Women Waging Peace**

Women Waging Peace organizes a yearly event that brings Israeli and Palestinian women together to demand a political settlement. On 8 October 2017, Women Waging Peace held a peace march at the Dead Sea. Thousands of Jewish and Palestinian women committed to social change marched to the very much alive “Tent of Hagar and Sarah” where they talked with each other, listened to speakers, made art and ate together. (Genesis 21:8-21 records the story of Abraham and his wives Hagar and Sarah.) The march reported that over 30,000 people participated and there were over 20 buses of Palestinian women from the West Bank. Maha Mehanna reported that she had wanted to go to the march but could not get permission to leave Gaza.
The international Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign and Hamas both denounced the Women Waging Peace march and accused Palestinians participating in the initiative of “normalizing” relations with Israel. The BDS organizers in Palestine called for a boycott of the “feminist normalization march” and asked for “peaceful sabotage” of the initiative. BDS organizers and anti-normalization activists, who work in unison, said this about the march: “Normalization is an Israeli weapon designed not only to colonize our minds but also
to undermine the BDS movement as it grows steadily and achieves successes in isolating Israel academically, culturally and to a lesser degree economically.... [the march and similar coexistence initiatives are] not only an illusion and a deception but a first way to enable the occupation to penetrate our society and distort national consciousness.”

Huda Abu Arquob is the director of the Alliance for Middle East Peace and one of the main organizers for the Women Waging Peace march. Huda has a Master’s Degree in Conflict
Transformation from Eastern Mennonite University. Huda notes the patronizing problem of the mostly male BDS and anti-normalization activists dismissing hundreds if not thousands of Palestinian women as “naïve” in thinking that they have a role in working for their own liberation. Huda notes the anti-normalization and BDS activists are strong in opposition to her work, but weak on how their own strategies are going to bring about change. At the same time, the Israeli government is also trying to limit funding and permission for groups that organize “people to people” dialogue efforts.

Huda and her colleague Joel Braunold at Alliance for Middle East Peace co-authored an article on the parallel restriction on dialogue between the Israeli right and the Palestinian left:

“Israel’s efforts to limit discourse mirror the anti-normalization movement’s efforts to curb dialogue – only the former does so via legislation, while the latter uses threats and intimidation. Together, these efforts become an anti-democratic front against coexistence groups working to create a shared society. Both sides hope to prevent having the voices heard of those who seek a different path to that of the majority. Both sides fear that unchecked discourse will undermine the majority’s political posturing and goals. Both sides seek to control the debate by preventing it from happening.”

Dialogue: Tool for Transformation or Tonic used to Tranquilize?

Some see isolation of and misunderstanding between Israelis and Palestinians as a key obstacle to change. There is a lot of evidence to suggest they are right. One of the impacts of the Oslo Accords is that it became illegal for Israelis to visit the West Bank and Gaza, and for Palestinians living outside of Israel’s 1967 borders to enter freely. Israelis want dialogue to build a shared narrative and find a way to peaceful coexistence. This means that most Jews don’t ever see or understand what life is like for Palestinians. They don’t know what the security wall has done to the Palestinian economy. They don’t see bulldozed homes. They don’t hear about how Israeli policies impact Palestinians. In other words, an entire generation of Israelis and Palestinians has grown up without ever meeting someone from the other side. What they know of each other is learned on the news, and this news is almost always painting a uniformly negative portrayal of the other.

Researchers document the positive effects of dialogue or contact between groups in conflict. You can read a summary of “Contact Hypothesis” research here. Dialogue reduces prejudice and discrimination and increases trust between groups in study after study. Social scientists do note certain conditions increase the likelihood of positive outcomes. Equal status, commitment to common goals, and informal personal interaction are part of the cocktail of success leading a dialogue encounter toward effective change.

Anti-normalization and BDS advocates claim dialogue has not had positive impacts. But they cite no actual facts or research. Quantitative and qualitative research on dialogue efforts in Israel and Palestine indicates that the people who engage in dialogue with the other side end up understanding the complexity of the situation and deciding to work for social change efforts. Dialogue does lead to action in many, if not most, cases.

Israelis and Palestinians cannot magically develop empathy and trust with each other. It has to be built. People become more committed to change and decide to vote for political parties that seek change.
So it is not surprising that many Israelis and Palestinians view dialogue as a necessary part of transforming the relationship and finding a political solution. But others see those who preach dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians as traitors preaching a false harmony in the midst of unequal power and oppression.

Over the three months we spent in Israel and Palestine, we met with many peacebuilding and social change-oriented groups. In Tel Aviv, we met with the Peres Centre for Peace that brings together Palestinian and Israeli youth to play football (soccer) and build friendships. In Haifa, we met with the Beit Hagefen, an Arab-Jewish community center that emphasizes “dialogue through culture, art, and outdoor training activities with a particular focus on gender and female empowerment.” During our time living at Kibbutz Ketura, we studied at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, where Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian faculty and students address cross-border environmental challenges through peacebuilding and sustainability efforts. In Bethlehem, we learned from the staff of the Holy Land Trust how other Palestinians criticize their participation in the dialogue between Palestinians and Jewish settlers known as Roots, which sees the purpose of dialogue as building “dignity, trust, and a mutual recognition and respect for both peoples’ historic belonging to the entire Land.”

Sami Awad of Holy Land Trust in Bethlehem noted the conundrum as “surplus powerlessness” in Palestine. Organizations fight amongst each other to justify their methods of seeking change. This infighting undermines the entire movement. “Divide and conquer” is a well-known strategy. The movement for change in Israel and Palestine is fractured. And there is clearly a gendered element, where more women see the need for a variety of strategies and male-led organizations seek to exclude or diminish the contributions of these women. What is going on in the fight between methods of change in Israel and Palestine?

Having spent time at many different Israeli and Palestinian organizations that use dialogue as a method of change, the accusations, threats, and punishment of Palestinians who engage in dialogue is troubling. All of the organizations seek change. Most of the organizations are definitely not trying to keep the status quo, are clear that Palestinians suffer from the current situation, are creating positive impacts with their work, and there is no evidence at all from any of the people we met that Palestinians are being pacified or tranquillized by engaging in dialogue. Every Palestinian we met was articulate in defining the problem of living in a country where Palestinians are treated as second-class citizens and lose their land, their jobs, and their ability to visit family because of Israeli policies of occupation. What is really behind the “anti-normalization” movement?

Anti-Normalization: ‘Punish traitors who preach harmony amidst injustice’

The anti-normalization movement demands that any dialogue or project between Israelis and Palestinians must include a clear focus on “resistance” meaning the project must focus on ending the occupation; equal rights for Israelis and Palestinians; and a full right of return for Palestinian refugees. Anti-normalization activists insist on “co-resistance” instead of “co-existence.”

The Arabic word for normalization is ‘tatbi’. It means making something abnormal appear normal. The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, now part of the BDS movement, defines “normalization as a ‘colonization of the mind,’ whereby the oppressed subject comes to believe that the oppressor’s reality is the only ‘normal’ reality that must be subscribed to, and that the oppression is a fact of life that must be coped with. Those
who engage in normalization either ignore this oppression or accept it as the status quo that can be lived with.”

For some, Palestinians talking to Israelis is akin to asking an abused wife to dialogue with her abusive husband. Palestinian poet Remi Kanazi explains why so many see dialogue as absurd in his poem “Normalize This.”

“Nothing is normal about occupation.... Ethnic cleansing, siege, blockades, settler-only roads... rewriting the Nakba... No, I don’t want to normalize with you. I don’t want to hug, have coffee, sit around and talk it out, break bread, sit around the campfire, eat ‘smores, and gush about how we are the same. I don’t want to share the stage, co-write a poem, submit to your anthology and talk about how art, instead of justice, can forge a better path... your dialogue group is a breeding ground for injustice.”

In his blog Why is Normalization Of Israel Stigmatized In Palestinian Society? Jonah Naghi concludes “the anti-normalization sentiment is not necessarily ideological, but rather for practical reasons.” Dialogue can have negative impacts on people with less power to change the situation. Naghi quotes social psychologist John Dixon’s et. al (2010) article, “Let Them Eat Harmony” which describes the negative impact of dialogue encounters between groups with different levels of power. In sum, dialogue in the midst of power asymmetry can leave those with less power feeling less clear about the injustice they are experiencing. “It may lead the disadvantaged to underestimate the injustice and discrimination suffered by their group, diminishing their support for action to challenge inequality.”

Jewish scholar Ifat Maoz of Hebrew University asks the same question in his 2011 article, “Does Contact Work in Protracted Asymmetrical Conflict.” Maoz proposes four types of intergroup contact in Israel-Palestine over the past two decades: coexistence, joint projects, confrontation, and narrative storytelling.

We saw evidence of each of these approaches. Groups like the Peres Centre for Peace emphasize coexistence and didn’t mention any overt critique of Israeli policy in Gaza or the West Bank. Joint projects like community art in Haifa or the environmental cooperation on water pollution between Israelis and Palestinians at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies did acknowledge disparities of power and access to resources and addressed these indirectly. In Tel Aviv, we met with a group called Zochrot that might be an example of a confrontational model. Zochrot, meaning “memory” in Hebrew, educates Israelis and Palestinians about the history of the Nakba with maps and tours of destroyed Palestinian villages. And in Jerusalem, we met with Jay Rothman of the Aria Group that uses a conflict resolution-based method of dialogue that provides a structure for narrative storytelling that includes exploration of the antagonism, resonance, invention, and actions to design responses to address perceived injustices.

In his research, Maoz found that the majority of dialogue efforts in Israel and Palestine are based on coexistence models that emphasize harmony over identifying injustices or taking collective action. His point is this: “psychologists’ tendency to treat intergroup conflict as the problem and intergroup harmony as the solution is at best simplistic.” But Maoz’s argument is also that the structure and content of dialogue programs matters. Reducing prejudice is an important element of change. While it would be ideal for all Israelis to suddenly become aware of Palestinian suffering, or vice versa, that is unlikely to happen on its own.
Yet anti-normalization activists harshly criticize even dialogue efforts that are intentionally and overtly seeking social change, such as Other Voice or Women Waging Peace. In practice, anti-normalization activists denounce any Israeli-Palestinian dialogue efforts, regardless of whether the dialogue is actually about resisting and seeking to change the status quo.

To prohibit all dialogue except between Israelis who already understand the plight of Palestinians seems like an ineffective strategy. In effect, it limits the number of Israelis who will learn from Palestinians about their lives and limits Palestinians who will understand what it is that Israelis want.

The critique of dialogue efforts seems centered not on whether or not the program resists the status quo. The critique seems to focus on dialogue programs that give a space for acknowledging the Israeli narrative; which centers on Jews returning to Palestine after centuries of exile to re-create the state of Israel both because of centuries of anti-semitic persecution in Arab and European countries, and because of their historic and religious connection to the land.

The Palestinian narrative of the Nakba and continuing dispossession of land and homes in the West Bank and the siege on Gaza is accurate and well documented. But for anti-normalization activists, there is no room for any truth to exist on the other side. Kanazi’s poem “Normalize this” goes on to argue that Israelis don’t have legitimate grievances or a legitimate right to be in Israel, so he does not see any equivalence of grievance on which to dialogue.

Dialogue births empathy. Israelis who dialogue with Palestinians develop more empathy for them. And as noted earlier, right-wing Israeli groups don’t like dialogue with Palestinians for exactly this reason: dialogue breeds empathy and self-reflection. And groups like Birthright don’t want to confuse the mainstream Israeli narrative that ignores the plight of Palestinians.

And the same is true also on the other side; Palestinians who dialogue with Israelis develop more empathy. We heard from some Palestinians a lack of understanding or empathy for Jewish history and connection to the land. Many Palestinians equate Zionism simply with a white, colonial attempt to steal Indigenous land. Diverse Jewish definitions of Zionism as a connection with the land for historical or religious reasons are completely dismissed. And anti-normalization statements regard persecution of Jews by Christians in Europe or Muslims in the other countries in the region as simply an attempt to “justify” occupation. There is no space for supporting both Palestinian and Jewish liberation or desire for their own nation. Anti-normalization activists seek a Palestinian state, but in effect argue that a Jewish state of any kind, is not legitimate.

So it isn’t so much that the dialogue groups “normalize” the status quo. It seems that the critique is that dialogue groups give a platform for listening to and acknowledging the legitimate needs and interests of both Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. And for many, if you have any drop of empathy for the narrative of the other side, you are a traitor. For anti-normalization advocates, it isn’t possible to support both Palestinian and Jewish narratives and rights.

For our group of college students traveling in Israel and Palestine for 3 months, the anti-normalization movement was one of the most difficult things to absorb. One of my students wrote this in reflecting on a Palestinian speaker explain to us why he will not talk to Israelis; “You are not even trying to change their minds, and you are are proud of it!” Another wrote, “How in the world do they expect anything to change if they aren’t willing to tell Israelis what they are experiencing under occupation?”
The anti-normalization movement offers South Africa as an example for why all dialogue should wait until after the state changes its policies. This is however false. In South Africa, there was dialogue between white and black South Africans for many years before the end of apartheid. And many would say it was that dialogue that enabled an effective boycott and sanction program that pressured the state to change its policies.

It is understandable why some Palestinians do not want to engage in dialogue with Israelis. Outsiders are not in a position to push Palestinians to meet with Israelis. No one should be forced to be part of a dialogue program. But no one should be punished for talking to Israelis if they want to either. As an outsider, it is necessary to stand up on behalf of Palestinians and Israelis who do want to talk to each other.

The most troubling aspect of the anti-normalization movement is not its critique of dialogue but its punishment of Palestinians who decide they do want to engage in dialogue. Palestinians who dialogue with Israelis can be threatened or imprisoned for accusations of collaboration or normalizing relationships with Jewish Israelis. The anti-normalization movement explains why they punish Palestinians who want to dialogue: “Palestinians, regardless of intentions, end up serving as a fig-leaf for Israelis who are able to benefit from a “business-as-usual” environment, perhaps even allowing Israelis to feel their conscience is cleared for having engaged Palestinians they are usually accused of oppressing and discriminating against.”

During the resistance to apartheid in South Africa, black South Africans “necklaced” collaborators who normalized apartheid by putting burning tires around the necks of black South Africans to kill those who dared talk to whites. Mob justice punished black policemen, councilmembers, and others accused of collaborating with the white government. Winnie Mandela stated, “With our boxes of matches and our necklaces we shall liberate this country” seemingly endorsing the gruesome practice. But it is not at all clear necklacing had any effect at all on the end of apartheid. And the international community also spoke out then about this punishment.

It is hard to find any logic in the long-term strategy of anti-normalization’s punishment of those Palestinians that do want dialogue. In listening to a variety of Jewish people living in the West Bank and Israel, those who had dialogue with Palestinians were far more informed about the policies of occupation. They knew about home demolitions and the economic impact of the separation wall. They knew about land seizures and the many other hardships. These Jewish leaders were also much more likely to believe that Jews and Palestinians could live together in one state with equal rights, or in two states with no security wall between them. The reality is that dialogue programs do seem to significantly shift understanding for Israelis of the need for justice for Palestinians.

And the Palestinians who are being punished for dialogue with Israelis are not, in my opinion, naive, or ignoring or accepting the injustice of occupation. We did not meet even one Palestinian who did not articulate a critique of Israeli policy toward Palestinians.

Scholars for Israel and Palestine (SIP) and the Alliance for Academic Freedom (AAF) issued a statement summarizing the problems with the “anti-normalization” movement. They say it:

- Separates Palestinians and their supporters from those Israeli and Diaspora Jews who themselves seek to end Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands;
• **Deprives** Palestinians of channels to highlight, to Israelis, the injuries and injustices of their lives under Israeli military rule;

• **Prevents** Palestinians from building common cause with those who share their views and aspirations;

• **Provokes** recriminations within Palestinian society, where political leaders and community activists accuse each other of acts of treason merely for advocating the Palestinian cause to Israelis and supporters of Israel and seeking allies among them;

• **Undermines** the forces in Israeli society and among supporters of Israel seeking an end to the occupation and the establishment of an independent state of Palestine;

• **Discourages** cooperation with organizations and activities working to build up the kinds of mutual recognition, awareness, and understanding necessary for achieving genuine peace;

• **Promotes** elements of ideological rigidity and exclusion in the movement for Palestinian rights that work against freedoms of thought and expression dear to democrats of all persuasions;

• **Threatens** the principles of academic freedom and open intellectual exchange, stigmatizes and excludes groups of students on unfair and divisive grounds, and undercuts the process of learning and scholarship in colleges and universities.

Outspoken advocates of the Palestinian cause like Edward Said have also spoken out against anti-normalization. Palestinians should decide for themselves if they want or don’t want to meet with Jewish Israelis. But the policy of punishing other Palestinians who do want to dialogue is counterproductive and oppressive.

**BDS: Boycott, Divestment, Sanction**

Fed up with the lack of progress in finding a political solution and seriously dismayed at the negative impact of the Oslo Peace Process, BDS was born out of frustration. In 2005, over 170 Palestinian civil society organizations put out a joint call for a boycott, divestment, and sanction of Israeli institutions that support or benefit from the occupation of Palestinian land. The BDS campaign has three goals:

• Ending the occupation and colonization of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967 and dismantle the Wall,”

• Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and

• Respecting, protecting, and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.”

Boycotts are a form of power. They work by creating pressure for change and aren’t always used to support justice. Israelis point out that Nazis told Germans to boycott Jews. From a Jewish perspective, boycotts are not something new. People have a right to voice their support or opposition to a wide range of ideas and businesses by buying or not buying. But many if not most Jews view BDS as an attempt to destroy and delegitimize the state of Israel.
The BDS campaign aims to boycott, divest and sanction the state of Israel and its institutions that support the status quo occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza siege. They point to BDS as a successful mobilizing tool, as they hold forums at universities and churches to educate new audiences about Israeli demolitions of Palestinian homes, of how the security wall cuts off Palestinians from their jobs and family members, and the daily humiliation of checkpoints. The BDS campaign asks universities, labor unions, and churches to pass resolutions and to divest in companies benefitting from businesses operating in Israeli settlements.

BDS argues for a complete boycott of Israel, including academic, cultural, economic and political individuals and institutions that represent in some way the state of Israel. BDS organizers insist that outsiders defer to local Palestinians to set the terms for the BDS movement. While BDS states that others can choose for themselves to only commit to a partial boycott of Israeli settlements rather than all of Israel, outsiders should not criticize Palestinian representatives calling for a full boycott.

There are many legitimate reasons to support BDS.

1. Supporters sign on to the campaign because it legitimately has support from grassroots Palestinians, who ask international groups to stand in solidarity with them. A call like this must be answered.

2. Supporters sign on because the situation on the ground is truly dire and immediate action is needed. New Israeli settlements are built on land set aside for a Palestinian state every day. The possibility of a Palestinian state is disappearing, and Palestinian families are losing their land and homes every day.

3. Supporters sign on because BDS is a nonviolent movement that does not use violence to achieve change. Boycotts are far better than the type of violent resistance of suicide bombers or Qassam rockets.

4. Supporters sign on because there is rampant Islamaphobia in the West, and more Westerners need to stand behind Muslim-led nonviolent movements.

5. Supporters sign on because there is no other game in town; there is no alternative movement that can harness public concern about Israeli policies toward Palestinians.

BDS is the only possible method for change for some Palestinians. They don’t believe in nonviolent vigils or protests. They don’t believe in dialogue. They only believe in getting the international community to boycott and divest from Israel.

A Jewish Israeli organization known as Gush Shalom called for the first boycott against Israeli settlements in 1998, well before the BDS movement. We met many Israelis who practice a boycott of products made in the settlements because most Israelis support a two-state solution, and the settlements are a threat to a viable Palestinian state.

Members of Gush Shalom did not join the BDS movement because they did not agree with the need to end the occupation. Members of Gush Shalom and other groups believe a complete boycott of Israel is anti-semitic, seeking the destruction of the Jewish state and in effect attempting to force the 6.5 million Jews who now live in Israel and the West Bank to leave. They think the BDS movement uses language that is offensive to most Jews, even those who agree on the need to end the occupation. As one member of Gush Shalom notes, “BDS must decide whether it is for peace with Israel, or peace without Israel.”
Israelis want Palestinians to recognize that Jews have a right to exist in a state called Israel, whatever its borders. From the very beginning, Arab leaders rejected all efforts to establish a Jewish state, regardless of its size. Jews see Palestinian refusal to acknowledge a Jewish state as an existential threat. For Jews that recognize the right of Palestinians to have their own state, there is anger that Palestinian activists won’t do the same for Israelis.

There are thousands if not millions of Jewish Israelis that want peace and recognize the need for Palestinian rights. In their worst fears, BDS wishes to push out all Jews living in the region. The BDS movement website does not acknowledge any Jewish rights. It avoids talking about a future where Palestinians live with Israelis. By avoiding the topic, BDS looks as if it opposes the state of Israel and all of its 6.5 million Jewish citizens. There is no attempt to assure Jews that Palestinians want to live with Israelis or quell fears of removing Jews. As such, most Israeli citizens we met and Jewish allies in the diaspora see BDS as an effort to undermine the Jewish people and the state of Israel.

So in turn, most Jews oppose BDS as they have other existential threats: with every measure of resistance. Many Palestinians interpret the opposition to BDS as an opposition to Palestinian rights. So confusion on the meaning and goals of BDS is a significant obstacle to the growth of the movement for change.

BDS insists that claims of anti-semitism are completely false propaganda. Without any dialogue to address this serious confusion of goals, it becomes impossible for any coherent change process or inclusive social movement.

The inability for Palestinian and Israeli civil society leaders to develop a strategic nonviolent campaign that harnesses the energy of all of these changemakers – Jewish, Palestinian and international – is a primary reason there is little progress.

If BDS is truly about equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel, ending the occupation, taking down the wall, and finding a solution for refugees, then all those things can happen without undermining the state of Israel, or threatening Jews. BDS leaders do not seem to see that a more inclusive movement is possible, one that assures Jewish Israelis of the desire to end occupation in order to achieve peaceful coexistence in either a one binational state or two-state solution.

Palestinians insist more pressure is needed, and BDS will eventually work. As someone who studies nonviolent strategy and boycotts, in particular, I have almost no hope that BDS will work because of the lack of attention to building a movement that also has wide Jewish support.

Most internationals that support BDS are not strongly anti-semitic and haven’t spent time reading Jewish opposition to the movement. Many people don’t read the BDS fine print which holds statements that appear anti-semitic to most Jews. (Unconscious bias against Jews does exist, for antisemitism has deep roots in Christianity and Islam, and many have not done the deliberate work needed to root out antisemitic frameworks from their theology. See my last article on anti-semitism and Israel). Without taking the time to listen to all sides, they see the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians as a simple case of white Europeans taking Indigenous land without actually studying the issue and different narratives.

In the fine print and the statements by BDS leaders on the ground, there are many problems with BDS. BDS organizers seem unable to acknowledge that antisemitism is still a real issue in many parts of the world. And BDS organizers do not take into account that real anti-semites may be enthusiastic to punish Jews.
• **BDS dismisses charges of anti-semitism without sifting through the valid or invalid points.** It dismisses past persecution of Jews – particularly through boycotts – as irrelevant. It is ahistorical, assuming that Jewish trauma in the past should have no relevance on how Palestinians seek to address their own past trauma of the Nakba or current trauma of the siege on Gaza or occupation of the West Bank. BDS does not look at legitimate concerns about BDS by progressive, anti-occupation Jewish people. It seems not to care that it is a tactic that is easy to dismiss as anti-semitic because of this history, or that the BDS movement language and the tactic of seeking to punish and undermine the state of Israel seems to be contributing to a rightward shift in the Israeli public as Jews across the political spectrum unite against what they see as an existential threat.

• **There is no logical path for how BDS translates to different Israeli policies within an elected government.** BDS appears to believe that the Israeli public and government will somehow change their mind about current policies because of international support for BDS. But there is no theory of change that relates to who is elected in Israel, and the debates within Israel on its policies in the West Bank and Gaza. BDS organizers do not appear to understand that nonviolent movements need to build a wide coalition, including a much larger segment of the Israeli population who oppose the occupation. They don’t seem willing to address progressive Jewish and Israeli groups on language and demands related to the boycott.

• **BDS focuses on punishment and uses highly inflammatory language** that makes it difficult for many people and groups to join. Terms like “settler colonialism” communicate that BDS advocates see no legitimate history or connection between Jews and the land. Supporters of BDS often refer to the whole of Israel as “a colonial project carried out by a racist and violent settler society at the expense of an indigenous population.” By comparing Jewish refugees fleeing persecution in Europe, Arab countries and the larger world to the white colonization of North America, which was largely driven by economic desires, BDS erases history and invalidates key aspects of Judaism that have advocated a return to “Zion” for thousands of years. BDS does not distinguish between potential progressive Israeli allies and right-wing groups spewing racism. The BDS website makes wide generalizations about Israelis that undermine the ability for more people to sign onto the movement.

• **BDS ignores any Palestinian responsibility.** The BDS organizers appear to believe that only Israeli policies are an obstacle to justice for Palestinians. No mention is made of the corruption and bad decisions or politics within Gaza or the West Bank.

• **BDS cuts off any other routes for social change by punishing anyone who engages in dialogue.**

• **BDS ignores the legitimate causes of other justice movements.** At an LGBTQ conference, for example, Israeli gay and lesbian women were asked to leave. BDS advocates think Israeli LGBTQ advocates are simply covering up Israeli policies with a face of gender justice. In the same way, BDS advocates accuse Israeli environmentalists of simply being a “greenwashing” even though many Israeli environmentalists speak out on behalf of Palestinian rights. BDS accuses Palestinian women’s movements that engage with Israelis as traitors, ignoring the sexist and patriarchal dynamics at play within male-led Palestinian movements. To label every other type of justice movement as invalid is a
serious attack against intersectionality; the interconnectedness between different types of struggle.

- **BDS** is based on a theory of change that punishment and isolation are effective. BDS and counterterrorism share the same theory of change. Counterterrorism strategies in the war on terror seek to isolate and punish various non-state groups that use terror around the world. Counterterrorism laws (like the anti-normalization movement) make it illegal for peacebuilders to have contact with those listed as terrorist groups. So, for example, in Gaza, US laws prohibit any contact with Hamas. Counterterrorism also engages in collective punishment. The peacebuilding field renounces these theories of change. Change happens through engagement and relationships, not isolation. BDS demands that isolation and punishment of all Israelis are likely to be just as ineffective and backward as counterterrorism. What has been the result of counterterrorism? There are more terrorist groups today thanks to counterterrorism strategies of bombs and drones serving as a recruitment tool. Counterterrorism has serious strategic flaws. The opposite of counterterrorism is engagement, not isolation.

As a nonviolent activist, I believe strongly in the use of nonviolent tactics and strategies. I also believe extensive analysis should be done to choose which tactic will be used in each specific situation. There is a significant difference between using nonviolent tactics because they are justified, and using nonviolent tactics as part of a larger strategy that aims to end the occupation. Tactics may be just, but that does not mean they will be effective. There are compelling reasons why BDS is just. Because of the strong support for BDS in Palestinian civil society, the movement must be taken seriously and outsiders should respond. But outsiders support for Palestinian rights does not require an automatic “yes” without a discussion of the points above.

BDS will only be effective as part of a larger strategy to end the occupation that includes dialogue, joint projects and problem-solving, and other creative efforts for a just peace. Building a successful nonviolent movement requires careful listening and coalition building to build an inclusive and diverse movement capable of bringing successful change.

Building stronger relationships with Israelis and American Jews is necessary for that strategy. It is necessary so that BDS does not simply contribute to the rightward drift of the Israeli public. BDS requires monitoring and evaluation. Is it capable of building substantial Jewish support from those who support Palestinian rights but not at the cost of Jewish rights? Is BDS pressure having any impact on changing Israeli policies? Is it actually creating momentum toward specific agreements or toward collapsing the Netanyahu and far-right coalitions?

**Building a Successful Israeli-Palestinian Social Movement**

So which is it? Is dialogue between Jews and Palestinians a betrayal of Palestinian rights and acceptance of the status quo? Or is it a transformative event, helping Jews understand history from a Palestinian point of view, and question current Israeli policies? Are boycotts and sanctions really the only path forward? And what validity is there in the widespread belief in both Israel and Palestine, that violence is a necessary tool?

*Strategic peacebuilding* is an umbrella term for a variety of different types of programs and activities that aim to transform and address the root causes of conflict. Descriptions of peacebuilding often allude to social movements and nonviolent tactics that empowered local
populations and led to successful negotiations. Negotiation processes that attempt to find solutions between groups with vastly unequal levels of power rarely work, or if they do lead to a settlement, it quickly falls apart.

Social change builds up like an avalanche. Small changes build and build until there is a breakthrough, and massive change happens. And often the cycle of small change and big change is never-ending. No social justice movement addresses all injustices. No peacebuilding process ever reaches perfect peace.

In the US civil rights movement, African American leaders used both dialogue and nonviolent tactics to empower Black communities while educating white communities. In South Africa, key black leaders engaged in dialogue with white leaders, particularly religious leaders and business leaders, long before there were democratic elections and political apartheid ended. In both the US and South Africa, as well as dozens of other countries with successful social change movements, dialogue between social groups helped to build effective coalitions that enabled massive social change to take place.

Israelis and Palestinians can build a strong social movement that addresses both of their needs and interests. But any movement for change needs to fully understand the narratives of both sides. Here is, a recap of what we heard Jews and Palestinians say about their interests and needs.

The Trilemma of Jewish Interests

What kind of change do Jewish Israelis want? Our group listened to a wide swath of Jewish Israelis describe what they want. Here are the top five Jewish Israeli interests that we heard:

- Israeli Jews want to be safe, with their security protected by Jewish forces that they can trust.
- Israeli Jews want the world to recognize their connection to the land of Israel, their peoplehood, and the traumatic history that forced them out of their homes in Europe, the Arab world and beyond.
- Israeli Jews want to live in a society that runs on a Jewish calendar, follows Jewish law, speaks Hebrew, and fosters Jewish culture.
- Israeli Jews want to have the freedom to live and travel to areas that are sacred to their historic ties with the land.
- Israeli Jews want to live in a democratic society, where there is rule of law and freedom from corruption.

Many Jewish observers, drawing from Thomas Friedman, observed that it seems impossible to address this “trilemma”: for Israel to be safe, democratic, and Jewish. Israel can be democratic and Jewish, but not safe as long as it does not address Palestinian rights. Israel can be Jewish and safe, but not democratic as long as Palestinians are second class citizens. Israel can be democratic and safe if Palestinians are given full rights, but then some fear it would lose its Jewish character.

The Trilemma of Palestinian Interests

What kind of change do Palestinians want? Our group also listened to a wide array of Palestinians who live in Gaza, Israel, and the West Bank. Here are the top five Palestinian interests that we heard:
• Palestinians want the world to recognize the Nakba, the loss of their homes, villages, and farms in the 1948 war and the impact of Israeli policies on almost every aspect of their daily lives.

• Palestinians want a sense of justice that would include compensation for their lost land and the option for return for refugees.

• Palestinians want freedom of movement. Gaza is a prison. The Oslo Accord effectively made it impossible for many Palestinians to travel freely between Israel, and Area A, B, and C. This makes it difficult to work, to get healthcare, and to visit family members living in other areas.

• Palestinians want fair laws that treat Jewish Israelis and Palestinians equally so that Palestinians can live and work without the threat of detention without trial or charge, build homes and schools without the threat of home demolitions, and trust that the government is protecting, not attacking, their interests.

• Palestinians want safety. They want to be able to protest nonviolently, to work in their fields, to travel freely without the threat of violence to them from Jewish settlers or Israeli soldiers.

Palestinians also face a “trilemma”: for Palestinians to be safe, free, and part of a Palestinian nation. Palestinians can continue to seek a Palestinian state and their own freedom, but this requires ongoing conflict with the state of Israel and the Jewish settlers it supports. Palestinians can be safe and free, but this might require giving up the idea of a state and instead becoming part of Jordan or Israel.

Possible Solutions

Given these trilemmas and conflicting interests, it becomes understandable why this conflict between Israelis and Palestinians continues. Any one of the solutions on the table seems to ensure a compromise on at least one of the major interests of all sides.

Two States: For many Israelis and Palestinians, a two-state solution is the only way possible to address the national desires of both peoples. Some say this solution is flawed because of the approximately 400,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank, and because this solution does not identify what would happen with Gaza.

One, Jewish State: In the Israeli media, strident politicians declare that the two-state solution will never happen because of distrust for the Palestinian leadership. The Netanyahu government seems to be advocating a solution of annexing all of the West Bank into Israel but denying Palestinians that live there a right to vote or equal treatment under Israeli law. Some say this solution is flawed because it assumes that Jewish Israelis can be safe while living in a context of an endless military suppression of Palestinian rights.

One, Bi-national State: We met both Palestinians and Jewish people living in the West Bank who have regular interaction with each other who believe that, because of the vast Jewish settlements in the West Bank, a two-state solution is no longer possible. Some suggest Israel should annex all of the West Bank and give Palestinians full and equal rights: a one-state, bi-national solution. Some say this solution is flawed because most Jews are fearful of losing the Jewish character of the state if Palestinians gain voting rights. There are some excellent articles
outlining this. Jonathan Kuttab’s article “And Now What…” gives a really creative description of how this could work to free Palestinians while also addressing Jewish security concerns.

**Two States, One Homeland**

**This solution** would recognize that the land from the Jordan River to the sea is all Palestine and all Israel. It acknowledges the reality that both groups claim all of the land. In this proposal, two separate governments govern a patchwork of blocks of land, some mostly Jewish, some mostly Palestinian, and work together to provide public goods while citizens have freedom of movement and choice of where they live. Some say this solution is too complicated and would require new thinking about the state system itself.

Any solution is difficult. Yet any of them still seem possible. And there are at least 30 other possible solutions in discussion.

**Threats and Use of Force**

Both Israelis and Palestinians share a belief in the effectiveness of the use of force to achieve security and rights.

Israelis turn to their “right to defense” in every conversation about bombing Gaza or occupying the West Bank. Indeed, Jews have a right to self-defense. The question is not whether Jews have a right to be safe, but where one’s group’s rights infringe on the rights of others, and when a violent strategy itself actually undermines security. Israeli intelligence and defense officials themselves seem to be more aware than the Israeli public or American Jews of the boomerang impact of using force. Any sort of safety that must be continually reinforced by the use of force is tenuous. Jews everywhere may still experience antisemitic threats. But it isn’t too difficult to argue with the statistics that Jews in Berlin or Boston are safer than Jews who live in Israel. Despite years of using force to secure Jewish lives, this right to defense has not brought about sustainable security. For many years, Jewish people faced threats from their Arab neighbors, whose interests were often quite distinct from local Palestinian interests. But now, it appears that Israel’s Arab neighbors are recognizing the state of Israel and actually collaborating with Israel on regional economic and environmental challenges. Hezbollah, Iran, and ISIS pose continuing threats to Israel and other Arab countries in the region. But the possibility of a safe future seems to rely on reaching a sustainable political outcome with Palestinians rather than continuing to attempt to enforce a peace through overwhelming firepower or military occupation.

Palestinians, likewise, also assert their “right to defense” and their use of violence to protect their loss of land and threats to their lives. Indeed, Palestinians, too, have a right to self-defense. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish: “She wraps explosives around her waist and blows herself up. It is not a death, and not a suicide. It is Gaza’s way of declaring she is worthy of life.” But a right to self-defense is not permission to kill civilians in a school or shopping center. And after decades of attempts, it is certainly not an effective way of changing Israeli policy.

Force, dialogue, anti-normalization and BDS all share one thing: none of them seem to be working.

**Steps Forward**

So at the end of three months of visiting a variety of groups working for change, here are some closing thoughts. As an outsider, I offer this humbly, knowing that I do not share in the pain experienced by Israelis or Palestinians. As a peacebuilding professional, I do think I have some comparative experience in other countries and in teaching nonviolent action that is relevant. So
here is a tentative list of some possible steps forward for Palestinian, Israeli, and international change makers.

**Palestinian Changemakers**

1 **Think critically about dialogue, but don’t ban it.** More Israelis need to understand what Palestinians are experiencing. Dialogue is one of the only ways this can happen. Structure dialogue programs and efforts so that the inequality is addressed.

2 **Change the language and anti-semitism in BDS.** Recognize that the wording of the movement and its refusal to acknowledge any rights of Jews is preventing others from joining the movement. Address the key problems with BDS identified above.

3 **Research refugee return and restitution options:** The issue of refugee return is one of the most difficult issues in formal negotiations. During the 1948 war, Palestinians left their homes for a variety of reasons: they were afraid of being killed, they were told by Palestinian leaders to leave their homes until after the war, and some were forced to leave their homes by Jewish forces. After the war, Israelis prevented Palestinians from returning to their homes. Jewish refugees were moved into Palestinian homes. Multiple generations of Palestinians have lived their whole lives in refugee camps. Today, Israelis assume that all Palestinian refugees would want to return and they would be overwhelmed by a Palestinian demographic majority. But many Palestinian refugees would likely not return. We know at least some would prefer restitution. Israeli and Palestinian negotiators acknowledge that peace talks have included agreements that Israel would allow some but not all Palestinian refugees to return and would provide financial restitution to others. The BDS movement calls for a return of all refugees. But not all of them want to return. So this point seems to lack clarity. Palestinians and Israelis should work with international organizations to do solid research on how many refugees want to return, and how many would prefer restitution payment and citizenship in another country so real data can be discussed in official negotiations.

**Jewish Changemakers**

1 **Advocate for stopping Israeli demolition orders on Bedouin and Palestinian homes and villages.** In the immediate future, only vocal Jewish and international advocates can prevent more homes from destruction. The quickest way to have Jewish voices advocating to stop demolitions is through dialogue. More Jewish groups should find partners to help them build relationships with Bedouin and Palestinian communities whose homes are under threat of demolition.

2 **If you don’t like BDS, create an alternative path to justice.** Dialogue is not enough. Meaningful political pressure is necessary. J Street and other Jewish groups need to do more to create an alternative to BDS or to convince BDS organizers to change their tactics and narratives to be less antisemitic.

3 **Mediate on the front lines of settlements:** Jewish mediators and facilitators are needed to open up channels of communication in settlements in conflict with neighboring Bedouin and Palestinian communities. Improving the relationship between these communities is urgent, as interpersonal and intercommunal violence is imminent. Even basic conciliation can improve trust enough to prevent more loss of life.
4 **Encourage dialogue on different meanings of Zionism.** Nearly every Palestinian and Israeli we met used the term “Zionism” in a different way. The term is at the very center of the conflict. There can be no progress without a robust dialogue about what this word means. Here are just a few of the definitions of Zionism we heard. Palestinians need to identify which of these definitions they oppose, as not all of them require persecution of Palestinians, and given that it is unlikely that 6.5 million people living beside them are going to abandon the term.

- The recognition that Jews are a people and a nation.
- The right for Jewish people to self-determination.
- The right of a Jewish state to exist.
- The right for Jews to take land away from Palestinians
- The right for Jews to live with Palestinians in a land they both share.
- Spiritual Zionism of having a presence of Jews in the Holy Land that seek to live out a Jewish tradition on the land.
- Territorial Zionism which seeks to militarily and political control all of the land from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean.

**International Changemakers**

1 **Listen to all sides and understand what a “balanced approach” requires.**

Taking a balanced approach does not mean that Palestinians and Israelis are equally responsible for the current situation. Nor does it mean that they all sides suffer equally under the current situation. Far more Palestinians have died and suffer daily because of the conflict.

Taking a balanced approach means that we listen to all sides and recognize the history, trauma, connection, and narrative that describes their connection to the land. A balanced approach requires addressing the core interests of all sides. Any advocacy statements or resolutions should communicate that outsiders have done the work of listening to a wide variety of Israelis and Palestinians.

2 **Don’t put all the blame on one side.**

Many Israelis and Palestinians are eager for outsiders to take sides and to see the situation in simple terms of good versus evil. Some want to put all the blame on Palestinians. Others want to put all the blame on Jews.

Blind loyalty to Israel, without being able to ask any questions of Israeli policy, does not help the Jewish cause. Many Israelis themselves recognize the mistakes that have been made and the way Israeli policy has made Jews less safe.

At the same time, blind loyalty to Palestinians, without being able to ask any questions of the Palestinian leadership and while holding a monotone of criticism against Israel and Israeli society is also unhelpful and wrong. Any question of BDS gives a label of “traitor” or “enemy” as if the BDS organizers are the sole legitimate voice for all Palestinians.

Calling anyone who sees the validity in both Jewish and Palestinian traumas and claims to the land a traitor slows progress toward an actual way these two people can live side by side in peace.
Recognize that peace processes can result in harm

The desperation to find solutions can lead to the assumption that any peace process is better than the status quo. That is not true. Once a peace agreement fails, the chance of future peace agreements failing is much higher. So a peace process can actually result in harm. And that is exactly what has happened in Israel and Palestine.

We heard an overwhelming critique of the Oslo Peace Process from everyone, on all sides of the conflict. From Palestinians, we heard that Oslo resulted in the loss of water and land rights, greater Israeli control over the West Bank, and a fragmentation of Palestinian society as they were separated into Areas A, B, and C. Palestinians expressed disdain for their leadership, who often didn’t consult with local communities about where the lines of Israeli control were drawn. From Jewish Israelis, we heard about the increase in attacks on Jewish communities following Oslo. For Jews, Oslo failed because it delivered insecurity rather than safety. Jewish rabbis told us that the Oslo process excluded religious leaders from the Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities and prevented them from playing a role.

A final love note to Israelis and Palestinians

We spent three months traveling all over Israel and Palestine. We loved meeting people, climbing mountains, visiting ancient sites, and swimming in the Med, Red and Dead Seas. Some call it the Holy Land; we saw it as the beautiful, creative, resilient home for people who have been through trauma.

For me, it is all Israel and it is all Palestine. I believe it can be either one country with equal rights for all citizens or two countries with open borders. I believe Palestinian refugees can return without threatening the Jewish population. I believe the very best of Palestinian and Israeli culture and society can enrich each other and create a synergy that will make this land a much holier place.