Building a Trauma-Sensitive Change Movement to Address Israeli and Palestinian Interests

Israelis and Palestinians can build a strong and effective social movement that addresses both of their needs and interests. Justice and human security for both Israelis and Palestinians is possible. But any movement for change needs to fully understand the narratives of both sides and be trauma sensitive, recognizing that all people living in Israel and Palestine have experienced generational trauma that impacts how they respond to social change efforts.

This blog is the result of three months of research and listening to a wide variety of Israelis and Palestinians, particularly those engaged in seeking social change, from September-November 2017. The “trilemmas” or choices facing Jews and Palestinians became clear in trying to address a range of their interests and needs.

The Trilemma of Jewish Interests
What kind of change do Jewish Israelis want? Our group listened to a wide range of Jewish voices from all across Israel and the West Bank and Golan Heights. 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. Many say this solution is flawed and impossible because of the approximately 400,000 Jewish settlers now living 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. Many 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. Jonathan Kuttab’s article “And Now What…” provides a 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 Mediterranean 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 services 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 the status quo is also a terrible option. And there are at least 30 other possible solutions in discussion. No solution will be easy.

Threats and Use of Force
Many Israelis and Palestinians share a belief in the effectiveness of the use of force and coercion 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 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. Yet Hezbollah, Iran, and ISIS pose continuing threats to Israel and other Arab countries in the region. 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.

What does it mean to be “trauma sensitive”?
Jews and Palestinians share a history of trauma. They have been refugees. They have lost their homes, farms and businesses. They have feared for their lives. They have lived now side by side for decades with intense fear of each other.
Trauma is passed down both genetically and socially. The scientific field of epigenetics studies how people’s DNA changes as a result of trauma, and how trauma experienced generations ago impacts the descendants of those traumatized. Trauma is also passed down through stories, and objects. Many Palestinians carry keys to their former homes as a symbol of the Nakba.

Being trauma sensitive means paying attention to the history of trauma. It requires anticipating the way any tactic for change is likely to be received by the other side. Many Palestinians and Israelis have a mindset that they have “nothing to lose.” Coercion and force against either side simply acts as a “trauma trigger.” For groups that don’t perceive they have many options, coercion and force simply create a dynamic of further commitment to fighting.

Instead, changemakers need to consider trauma sensitive change methods that both seek to address historic trauma on all sides by creating new relationships of trust, and at the same time pushing for change in ways that break they pattern of hate and distrust.

Steps Forward

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.

3. **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 as an outsider, I see it as all Israel and 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.