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Conflict resolution and asymmetric conflict: The contradictions of planned contact interventions in Israel and Palestine

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyses a contradictory phenomenon experienced by local-level conflict resolution initiatives in Israel and Palestine. Despite their widespread utilization in other contexts of inter-communal conflict, facilitated contact interventions, including citizen dialogue and arranged encounters between Palestinians and Jewish Israelis, are being rejected and publicly denounced by many within the Palestinian and Israeli conflict resolution community in this case. This paper contributes to an understanding of this rejection by investigating arguments in favour of and against planned contact intervention initiatives through an analysis of interview narratives from 40 respondents working for peace and conflict resolution organisations in Israel and the West Bank as well as secondary research reports. Our analysis reveals deeply conflicting viewpoints. Arguments in favour of contact-based strategies suggest that they have the potential to disrupt an entrenched status quo of asymmetry-inspired social segregation. Conversely, arguments against suggest that these conflict resolution initiatives are struggling to level power asymmetry and bypass the structural and historical drivers of violence. In response, this paper introduces a grounded proposal for conflict resolution inside asymmetric conflict that emerges from the interview narratives of practitioners, themselves, regarding effective strategies, the nature of agency, and the scope of influence of local-level contact-based conflict resolution initiatives inside asymmetric conflict.

Introduction

Planned intergroup contact interventions in Israel and Palestine have been broadly promoted as fundamental components to bottom-up conflict resolution initiatives because of their perceived capabilities to counteract the failure of official peace negotiations and agreements, reconstruct individual and group identities, reduce prejudice and hostility, and increase the odds of sustainable peaceful coexistence in the future (Abu-Nimer, 2004, 2012; Maoz, 2002, 2003; Pundak, Ben-Nun, & Finkel, 2012; Ron, Maoz, & Bekerman, 2010; Steinberg & Bar-On, 2002). However, facilitated contact-based conflict resolution initiatives are being widely rejected in Israel and Palestine. For example, in 2014 Palestinian anti-normalization activists publicly disrupted, stalled and dispersed participants at two peace conferences involving Jewish Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank city of Ramallah and in East Jerusalem. Principled objections to joint meetings have ground many local-level conflict resolution projects to a halt, and dialogue initiatives between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians have become quite rare at the current juncture. While objections to contact have emerged from within both Palestinian and Jewish Israeli societies, the scope and intensity of the objection to contact interventions varies. Objections are widespread, public and forceful within Palestinian society, and are correlated to growing contention with the

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aftereffects of the 1993 Oslo Accords. Objections within Jewish Israeli society are mostly limited to a small subset of younger more 'radical' activist organizations, including both left-leaning human rights organizations and right-wing nationalist organizations. This public resistance and castigation points to a growing debate within the Israeli and Palestinian conflict resolution community over the contradictions of contact-based conflict resolution practices (Barakat & Goldenblatt, 2012).

Existing research literature only superficially recognizes the contradictions of planned contact interventions in Israel and Palestine - conflict resolution research has only partially connected contact and dialogue to the overarching asymmetrical political conflict (Abu-Nimer, 2012; Francis, 2010; Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004; Maoz, 2011; Selby, 2003), while social psychological research has only just begun to explore these interventions in relation to other avenues of social and political change such as collective action (Dixon, Levine, Reicher, & Durrheim, 2012; Saguy, 2017; Wright & Baray, 2012). In neither body of research has the reasoning behind this rejection of contact been explicitly theorized. In response, the present research contributes to an understanding of this contradictory phenomenon and investigates how those closest to the action, conflict resolution practitioners who are either active participants in, or resisters against, contact-based conflict resolution practices, theorize the contradictions of contact interventions in Israel and Palestine.

This article proceeds by first surveying the theoretical background that situates the practice of planned contact interventions in the ongoing debates within the social psychological and conflict resolution literature over the validity of the contact hypothesis and the contradictions of conflict resolution action inside asymmetric conflict. Against this backdrop, our research methods are outlined, followed by a presentation of findings that begins with the viewpoint that planned contact interventions are constructive at the current juncture. Critical responses to contact-based strategies are presented next, with special reference to their apparent inability to either level power asymmetry or attend to the roots of ongoing violence and injustice. The final discussion and conclusions sections construct and examine a grounded proposal for conflict resolution inside asymmetric conflict that emerges from the interview narratives.

Theoretical background: planned contact interventions inside asymmetric conflict

Planned contact interventions

Planned contact interventions such as citizen dialogue, reconciliation and healing sessions, micro-negotiations, joint schooling and training, social, sports and cultural events, and economic and development cooperation are widely used by conflict resolution organizations as strategic initiatives in response to protracted social conflict and intergroup violence in Palestine (Abu-Nimer, 2004, 2012; Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Maoz, 2000a, 2002, 2003; Ramsbotham, 2010; Ron et al., 2010; Steinberg & Bar-On, 2002). Widely utilized in other contexts of intercommunal violence including between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, planned contact interventions (often labelled 'people-to-people' activities) in Israel and Palestine were first initiated in the 1970s and 1980s, often as high-risk ventures for facilitators and participants, which evolved into a flood of internationally-funded contact-based conflict resolution activity after the Palestine Liberation Organization adopted a two-state platform in 1988 and the promotion of cross-communal contact after the 1993 Oslo Accords (Herzog & Hai, 2005).

A growing body of research and evaluation literature has shown that planned contact interventions in Israel and Palestine are modifying individual perceptions of the 'other' (Abu-Nimer, 2012; Maoz, 2000a; Steinberg & Bar-On, 2002), encouraging multiple perspectives and deepening understandings of conflict (Khuri, 2004), reconstructing individual identities (Maoz, Steinberg, Bar-On, & Fakhereldeen, 2002) and motivating sustained participation in further conflict resolution ventures (Lazarus, 2011). More broadly, research has evidenced that intergroup contact facilitates the re-imagining of in-groups boundaries and category memberships (Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005; Wright & Lubensky, 2009), allow individuals to learn about outgroups, modify social behaviours, generates positive emotions, trust and empathy (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), and shape in-group norms and customs in relation to outgroups (Pettigrew, 1998, p. 71). Transformational influence is directional – flowing from micro-individual to macro-institutional-political levels – which requires a consistent focus on historically advantaged groups as the primary agents of change in creating a more peaceful society (Dixon et al., 2012, p. 418; Wright & Baray, 2012). These outcomes were predicted by Allport's 'contact hypothesis', which proposed that competing ethnic or national groups would be able to reduce hostility and develop positive perceptions of their adversaries through structured encounters (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969).

However, these positive findings are ostensibly dissonant with the principled rejection of such activities in Israel and Palestine. There currently exists scant empirical research that considers the principled rejection of planned contact interventions - conflict resolution literature on planned contact interventions has, for the most part, limited itself to the internal dynamics of group dialogue sessions, and social psychological research on contact and prejudice reduction has only begun to move out of idealized contexts (e.g. between equal status groups) and consider the manner in which intergroup encounters can undermine other avenues of social and political change (Dixon et al., 2012; Saguy, 2017; Saguy & Dovidio, 2013; Wright & Lubensky, 2009). The present study expands these debates by shifting the focus of analysis out of group contact sessions and into 'non-ideal' contexts by considering how conflict resolution practitioners theorize this rejection of planned contact interventions in relation to the protracted asymmetrical conflict between the State of Israel and the Palestinians.

Asymmetric conflict, power and oppression

Conflict resolution literature reveals a hesitancy to consider the stature and efficacy of various conflict resolution prescriptions in relation to asymmetric social and political conflict and has evidenced a predilection to detach micro-level conflict resolution

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