

The role of academic institutions in mitigating the Israeli–Palestinian conflict[☆]

Miki Malul^{a,*}, Dafna Schwartz^b, Raphael Bar-El^{a,c}

^a Department of Public Policy and Administration, Guilford Glazer Faculty of Business and Management, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

^b Department of Business Administration, Guilford Glazer Faculty of Business and Management, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

^c Department of Applied Economics and Management, Sapir Academic College, Israel

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Abstract

We explore whether the implementation of an education policy with Israeli students in a business school, including the elaboration of business projects, actually affects their attitudes toward cooperation with Palestinians. We find that this education pilot project increases the awareness of important barriers, but still at the same time improves the ability to identify appropriate cooperation models and the evaluation of benefits to all sides. Appropriate policy measures are derived, including education programs with the potential participation of third countries, subsidies and governments actual support to cooperation as an instrument for the optimization of socio-political benefits and indirect economic benefits.

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1. Introduction

Economic cooperation is essential for the promotion of peaceful coexistence. The complex political situation of the Israelis and the Palestinians demands an imaginative approach to seeking

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +972 8 6472775/+972 52 2765749.

E-mail addresses: malul@som.bgu.ac.il (M. Malul), dafnasch@som.bgu.ac.il (D. Schwartz), rbarel@som.bgu.ac.il (R. Bar-El).

ways of improving the way each side thinks about the other as a prerequisite for peace. In this paper we explore whether the involvement of Israelis in a program designed to improve the well-being of the Palestinians improves their perceptions of Palestinians.

Broome (2004) discussed a program that brought Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots together in a peace-building workshop, and concluded that “Although it was a struggle at the time, the end product has resulted in stronger bonds among the group members and a clearer sense of direction both for individuals and for the group as a whole” (p. 207). Tropp and Pettigrew (2005) studied the differences in changes in attitude as a result of contact as it pertained to minority and majority groups separately. Their results indicated that the relationship between contact and prejudice tends to be weaker among members of the minority group than among members of the majority. In other words, intergroup contact had a very strong positive effect on the attitudes of the majority group, whereas the attitudes of members of the minority group attitudes were less affected. These authors posited that this is the case because of the minority group’s “ongoing recognition of their group’s devaluation,” which reduces the likelihood of positive attitude changes when meeting with members of the majority group (p. 956). Similarly, a study conducted with members of conflicting groups in Sri Lanka illustrated the efficacy of intergroup contact on changing perceptions. Malhotra and Liyanage (2005) studied the changes in the perceptions and behaviors of the participants one year after completing a four-day peace workshop, relative to the perceptions and behaviors of non-participants. They found that the participant group “showed greater empathy toward members of the other ethnicity, even one year after participation” (p. 1). After being surveyed about their perceptions of the conflict and the other group, the respondents (both workshop participants and non-participants) were asked to donate money to underprivileged children from the other ethnicity. “Consistent with the attitudinal data on empathy, [workshop] participants donated more money to help the poor children of the other ethnicity than did non-participants” (p. 1).

Between 1994 and 1998 there were countless collaborative Palestinian–Israeli projects. An extensive study conducted by Barnea et al. (2000) analyzed 148 of these projects, which involved approximately 4000 professionals on both sides of the conflict. They interviewed 112 Palestinian and Israeli health care professionals, 28 Palestinian organizations, and 39 Israeli organizations. The researchers questioned the participants about their satisfaction with the collaborative project and their willingness to participate in a similar project in the future. Results showed that 97% of the Israeli participants and 82% of the Palestinian participants were satisfied with their involvement in the joint projects, and that they would be interested in participating again in the future. Furthermore, approximately two-thirds of the Palestinian participants and one-third of the Israeli participants claimed that their personal attitudes and beliefs regarding mutual coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis were positively changed as a result of their experience in the cooperative work. Over 70% of those who reported a change in attitudes said that the effect was positive, proving to them that cooperation was possible and increasing their desire for coexistence in the future. In addition, of the participants who reported no change in attitude regarding the conflict, 40% of the Israelis and 20% of the Palestinians reported having a positive attitude to begin with. Only a small percentage of the Palestinians, and no Israelis, reported that their involvement in the cooperative work had a negative effect on their attitude toward coexistence.

Consistent with these findings, Dajani and Carel (2002) found that both the Palestinian and Israeli participants in collaborative projects experienced positive attitudinal changes as a result of their involvement in the cooperative work. They claimed that the long-term success of such projects rests on the parity, symmetry, and equal division of work and responsibility between both sides during the cooperative projects. Furthermore, according to 53% of the Israeli participants

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