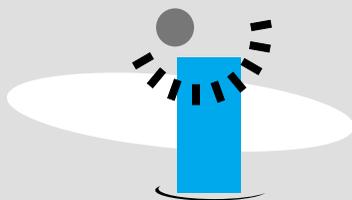


The Power of Possibility:

The Role of People-to-People Programs in the Current Israeli- Palestinian Reality



Forum Israel

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Editorial

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Opening Note

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Economic Cooperation Foundation (ECF) are pleased to support this publication, *"The Power of Possibility – the Role of People-to-People in the Current Israeli-Palestinian Reality."*

The last few months have seen dramatic changes in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. Many feel that recent developments – within each of the two sides as well as the relative calm and renewed coordination – have the potential of leading to a resumption of negotiations. At the same time, current instability and the negative residues of the last years of violence create harsh barriers for such positive developments.

Within this changed environment, we view Israeli-Palestinian cooperation as an important area that deserves enhanced attention and support. While the current reality is admittedly very different than that of the 1990s, lessons learned from the previous decade of Israeli-Palestinian relations should be studied, researched and implemented. In adapting the lessons of the past to the current reality, People-to-People (P2P) players could enhance strategic discussions among themselves, with donors and with local and international bodies and governments. This could maximize the impact of their activities.

As such, we view this paper as an important contribution to the ongoing learning process of Israeli and Palestinian civil society actors and of the P2P field specifically.

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The Power of Possibility:

**The Role of People-to-People
Programs in the Current Israeli-
Palestinian Reality**

by

Shira Herzog and Avivit Hai

“It will be seen that they go mad in herds while they only recover their senses slowly and one by one.” Charles Mackay, 1852

No matter how high the walls of hostility, Israelis and Palestinians have talked to one another for decades -- virtually since Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza as a result of the 1967 war. Throughout the 1970s, a handful of individuals initiated informal, clandestine talks in order to examine the potential for a negotiated resolution to the conflict. During the 1980s, backchannel, “track II” contacts increased and were joined by joint political solidarity and humanitarian activities during the first Intifada.¹ In 1993, the Oslo peace process² that was heralded by the Israel-PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) Declaration of Principles created a political and institutional framework for these scattered activities. They became known as "People-to-People" (P2P) programs and their chief purpose was to encourage Israeli-Palestinian understanding and cooperation.

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1. The first Palestinian uprising (1987-93). For detailed analyses of such pre-Oslo contacts, see, for example, Herman Tamar, *The Sour Taste of Success: The Israeli Peace Movement*, 1967-1998, in Gidron Benjamin, N. Katz Stanley & Hasenfeld Yehezkel, *Mobilizing for Peace – Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and South Africa*, 2002, pp. 97-104. For other in depth discussions of pre-Oslo Israeli-Palestinian civil society and back channel dialogues see for example Abbas Mahmoud (Abu Mazen), *Through Secret Channels*, 1995 chapter 2-5; Agha Hussein, Feldman Shai, Khalidi Ahmad and Schiff Zeev, *Track II Diplomacy: Lessons from the Middle East*, 2003 chapter 2; Hirschfeld Yair, *Oslo – A Formula for Peace*, 2000 Chapter 1 (Hebrew).
 2. In this article, we use the term "Oslo" to refer to the entire period, throughout the 1990s, that included formal peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians and not necessarily to a specific agreement or encounter during that time.

P2P has become the code name for post-Oslo, Israeli-Palestinian civil society cooperation and dialogue efforts. While the name was originally given to the “formal”, Norwegian-supported program institutionalized in Annex 6 of the 1995 Interim Agreement (“Oslo II”), it has come to encompass the entire field of joint endeavors by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other informal institutions from both sides.

Importantly, while various organizations promoted P2P under the framework of Oslo, other Israelis and Palestinians opposed to the “Oslo deal” nevertheless maintained cooperation throughout the 1990s. They were adamant about not being included in the “P2P industry”, which they viewed as synonymous with Oslo. We include these groups since they, too, promoted cooperative actions based on an agreed-upon, negotiated solution to the conflict.

Attitudes to P2P activities have been polarized. Over the past decade, “P2P” has been acclaimed as one of the most important processes that bring the two communities closer to reconciliation, but has also been associated with negative connotations ranging from corruption to “normalization” and from naiveté to unpatriotic behavior. In this paper, we use “P2P” as a neutral term (sometimes as a noun) in referring to the wider field of civil society-based, Israeli-Palestinian cooperation activities and to projects that are not strictly political, commercial, or humanitarian in nature.

In spite of the hopes activists had, today it's clear that these programs were little more than an isolated "bubble" in a troubled sea: P2P activities had no impact on the troubled political process; they were virtually ignored by local and international policymakers; and they were unable to mobilize substantial segments of the two peoples. Following the breakdown of the Oslo process in 2001, the limited P2P activities were also criticized for "not preventing the violence" and for glossing over both sides' failure to honor their respective commitments.

Still undeterred, activists tenaciously stayed the course. Through nearly five years of violence (the second Intifada of 2000-2004) that destroyed all vestiges of mutual trust, they maintained channels of communication among people who believed in a negotiated settlement. They continue to talk today, in the aftermath of Israel's pullout from Gaza.

It's fair to ask what purpose there is in activities that have not succeeded in breaking down the walls of hostility, and to query if they deserve continued international support and funding. We explored these questions in the context of conflict resolution theory and the Israeli-Palestinian relationship during the Oslo years.

Our conclusion is that given the protracted nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ontological issues related to "conflict repertoire" and realities need to be seriously addressed for the conflict to be resolved. P2P activities, which use direct contact and cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians to challenge this "conflict repertoire" and to suggest an alternative, are one component of "transformational" efforts that are needed to address such ontological issues. Therefore, there is value in P2P activities either as a supportive and complementary element of a formal political process, or as one element of an alternative discourse

in the absence of political negotiations. We also believe that in spite of the important changes that have occurred over the last decade, P2P players and international and local policy makers have much to learn from the experience of P2P efforts in the 1990s.

Part I of this article examines today's political reality as it relates to P2P work; part II examines the protracted nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the need for a "legitimization strategy"; part III examines the dialectic impact of the Oslo process on P2P activities in the 1990s; part IV describes the P2P field today; and part V presents our conclusions and recommendations.

I. Today's Paradoxical Context:

It's a perplexing time in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many view the Gaza pullout as the harbinger of a renewed peace process. But in reality, there's little trust between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas or among their peoples. Israel has indeed left Gaza and has evacuated settlements but is doing so unilaterally -- on its own terms, at its own pace and without negotiations. That's because the last four years have left Israelis unsure that peace can be obtained even if they leave settlements behind.

Underlying Israel's unilateral approach is the belief that there is no credible Palestinian partner for peace even after Yasser Arafat's death and that a deal based on negotiations and mutual interests cannot be sustained. Therefore, Israel is better served by acting alone to protect its interests. The Gaza pullout and the West Bank "security fence" are practical manifestations of this unilateral attempt to define the country's future borders. In this approach, relations with the Palestinians are

characterized by minimal interaction, hard borders and separation. Ironically, then, Israelis question the relevance of the historic “land for peace” formula at the very time that settlements have been evacuated.

For Palestinians, the mirror image is true. They recognize the benefit of the Gaza exit and especially of the evacuation of settlements, but have little faith that this will lead to a resumption of negotiations. Fearful of Gaza being not just “first” but also “last” and suspicious that Israel intends to perpetuate its hold over parts of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has reacted by demanding immediate negotiations on all outstanding questions. Ironically, then, Palestinian expectations of the “land for peace” equation have also been undermined even as occupied Gaza has been vacated.

However limited, Israel’s evacuation of West Bank and Gaza settlements could have created an opportunity to bridge gaps between the sides. But because of the way the pullout has been defined by one side and perceived on the other side, the result is a further polarization of the relationship. Whatever calm has been achieved is tentatively embraced, and the likelihood of further violence is widely accepted.

Here’s today’s paradox: In this century-old conflict, the residue of a decade of talks and their traumatic collapse is a web of mutual denial and mutual recognition; total ignorance and intimate knowledge; remoteness and proximity. At their core, the majority of Israelis and Palestinians aspire to peace -- and expect war.³ This paradox creates a serious challenge for the peace camps and for P2P activists on both sides. They’re in the minority and they’re fighting to keep alive the

3. Ofer Shelah and Raviv Drucker make this point in referring to the post-Camp David atmosphere in 2000. *Boomerang*, 2005 (from Hebrew), p. 14

option of a mutually agreed-upon, two-state resolution to this conflict and the sense that there are partners for a future of non-violence and cooperation.

In this changed reality and charged atmosphere, continued P2P work seems like a contradiction. P2P was institutionalized under a negotiating process that reflected a vision of two sovereign states with open borders and cooperative relations. But now, the “face-to-face” cooperative framework of Oslo has been replaced by a “back-to-back” discourse of separation, mistrust and unilateralism, and Israeli and Palestinian leaders remain far apart in their respective expectations and objectives. It’s easy, therefore, to question the value of efforts at bridging the gap between the two societies and P2P’s contribution in such an environment.

More so than in the 1990s, skeptics on both sides dismiss P2P activities as opportunistic or Quixotic, and cynics claim their only impact is to legitimize the continuing Israeli occupation. In contrast, sanguine observers continue to simplistically embrace P2P activities as ensuring a better future for both peoples. The activists themselves have a consistent position: Keeping channels of communication open is critical at any time. They’re committed to “doing something” about the general rule of hostility, mistrust and unilateralism. They believe that by the very fact of their existence, contacts among Israelis and Palestinians exemplify an alternative relationship.

Taken on its own, each of these perspectives errs in viewing the value of P2P too narrowly. But taken together, the combined perspectives provide an informed answer to the question of P2P’s value: There is inherent value in ongoing contact among Israelis and Palestinians. The area Israelis and Palestinians share is simply too small and their

interdependence is too great for either to rest secure behind literal or figurative walls. Over time, hostility and violence can only be challenged through breaking down human barriers -- but context is critical. P2P never exists in isolation and its potential is inextricably determined by its historical, political and social context.

Optimally, “bottom-up” activities like P2P should be an organic component of a sustained, “top-down” political process. Northern Ireland and South Africa are two examples where such strategies have apparently been pursued with some effect.⁴ But in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, P2P hasn’t been given a chance to be an effective tool in conflict resolution. During the 1993-2000 Oslo peace talks, both local and international policy makers gave little attention to the important issues of citizen engagement and “bottom-up” support. The limited P2P efforts at the time suffered from an inherently flawed political process that paid them lip service but actually hindered their progress.

In today’s political atmosphere of mistrust and unilateralism, P2P lacks even the semblance of a supportive political framework and is therefore more isolated from the mainstreams of the two societies. But ironically, within the small, committed P2P community, there’s a discernable spurt of new energy as a result of “violence fatigue” and the relative calm.

This is matched by new funds: For example, the recent EU “Partnership for Peace Program” received close to 200 proposals in response to its

4. On Northern Ireland see, for example Fitzduff Mari, *Changing History – Peace Building in Northern Ireland*, in *People Building Peace – 35 Inspiring Stories from Around the World*, 1999; Knox Colin and Hughes Joanne, *Crossing the Divide: Community Relations in Northern Ireland*, *Journal of Peace Research*, 1996. On South Africa see, for example, Marks Susan Collin, *Watching the Wind – Conflict Resolution during South Africa’s Transition to Democracy*, 2000; Boraine Alex, *A Country Unmasked – Inside South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, 2000. For a comparative discussion on the role of civil society peace building efforts in all three see, for example, Gidron et. al., *Mobilizing for Peace*, 2002

“call” several months ago, and will distribute approximately ₪ 7 million for peace-building activities. Following recent legislation in Congress, USAID is distributing close to USD 10 million for such activities as part of a worldwide budget called Conflict Management and Mediation (CMM). The EU, Canadian and Norwegian representatives recently organized a conference on evaluating P2P and its role in the current situation (April 5, 2005, Jerusalem). The Israel Institute for Jerusalem Studies and the Palestinian International Peace and Cooperation Center (IPCC) are currently conducting research for UNESCO on P2P. Finally, in 2004, after a three-year freeze, the Center for International Cooperation (MASHAV) at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs resumed its support of Palestinian training courses, and this year it allocated a specific budget for such activities.

This resurgence can be misleading. While P2P’s existence continues to be valuable and even critical, we now know that to be successful, it needs more than dedicated, competent activists and an assured supply of funds. On its own, P2P cannot substitute for the formal diplomatic and institutional mechanisms needed to create a constructive opportunity out of Israel’s Gaza and Northern West Bank disengagement.

This is the key, sobering lesson from fifteen years of sustained activity. Still, experience gained over a decade of formal peace negotiations⁵ does offer some lessons that may help maximize the limited potential of today’s P2P efforts.

5. A decade of talks between Israel and the PLO opened with the Madrid Conference (October 1991) and a series of talks in Washington (December 1991 through 1993). In parallel, the secret Oslo negotiations led to mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO and the joint Declaration of Principles (September 1993). In 1994, the Paris Economic Protocol (April) and the Cairo (Gaza-Jericho) Agreement (May) were signed. The latter led to the return of Arafat and the Tunis leadership and started the clock ticking on the “Interim Period.” The Interim Agreement (Oslo II) was signed in September 1995, followed by the Hebron Agreement (January 1997), the Wye River Memorandum (October 1998) and the Sharm El-Sheikh Memorandum (September 1999). The Camp David Summit took place in July 2000. Following the outbreak of the second Intifada (October 2000), US President Bill Clinton proposed guidelines for a permanent status agreement (December 2000). The decade concluded with the inconclusive Taba Talks (January 2001).

II. The Need for a Legitimization Strategy in Protracted Conflicts:

Ironically, there's as much to learn from what didn't happen during the Oslo years as from what did happen. A central flaw of the process was its neglect of peace-building efforts that could complement the formal negotiations by building "bottom-up" support. This "blind spot" was particularly damaging in light of the protracted nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Protracted" (or "intractable") conflicts are stagnant and burdened by inherent obstacles to resolution, while "tractable conflicts" are dynamic and contain potential for resolution.⁶ Because of this, resolution of protracted conflicts is more complex and requires multiple strategies on the political, psychological and social levels.

Protracted conflicts have several key characteristics⁷:

- (i) *Substantial length*: The conflict is ongoing for a number of generations.
- (ii) *Deep-rooted identity issues*: The conflict is of an "ontological" nature; the parties perceive it is about needs and values that are absolutely essential to their existence and survival.
- (iii) *Zero-sum*: Each side sees its goals as radically opposite to those of the other side; therefore, the conflict is seen as irreconcilable.

6. The issue of protracted conflicts has been extensively researched since the mid 1990s by numerous researchers, including John Paul Lederach (1997), Luis Kriesberg (1995), Josef Monteville (1993), John Burton (1993) and Daniel Bar Tal (2005) (see details in footnote 7 below).

7. Based on the analyses of Kriesberg Louis, *Intractable Conflicts*, in *The Resolution of Intractable Conflicts: The Israeli-Palestinian and South African Experiences*, 1995; Gidron et al (eds.), *Mobilizing for Peace*, 2002, p. 7; Bar Tal Daniel and Teichman Yona *Stereotypes and Prejudice in Conflict* 2005, pp. 59-60; Burton John W., *Conflict Resolution as a Political Philosophy*, p. 60 and Montville Josef V., *The Healing Function in Political Conflict Resolution*, p. 115, both in Sandole Dennis J. and van der Merwe Hugo (eds.), *Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice*, 1993.

- (iv) *Violence*: Substantial percentages of people from both sides are affected by the violent nature of the conflict. This often leads to feelings of “victimization” because both sides view themselves (and seek recognition) as innocent victims and portray the other side as the cruel victimizer.

- (v) *Centrality and costliness*: The conflict occupies a central place in the lives of the groups involved; they make vast military, economic and psychological investments that later impede the conflict’s resolution.

- (vi) *Dehumanizing the “other”*: Even if the parties are situated in close proximity, they deny the neighboring community meaningful recognition and have little communication with it. This stems from -- and in turn reinforces -- dehumanization and demonization of the other side and a simplistic view of the conflict (“us” vs. “them”; “good guys” vs. “bad guys”).

Societies living under conditions of protracted conflicts develop coping mechanisms to ensure their survival and mobilization. Daniel Bar-Tal and Yona Teichman describe psychological and cognitive conditions, abilities and beliefs developed by such individuals and groups to help them cope with the continuous stress of the conflict. These “societal beliefs” include several components: belief in the justness of one's own goals; the centrality of concepts of security, patriotism and unity; a vision of peace as a utopian goal; a feeling of victimization; and an exaggerated, positive self-image mirrored by an excessively negative image of the adversary.⁸ This “negative psychological conflict repertoire”

8. Bar Tal and Teichman, *Stereotypes and Prejudice in Conflict* , 2005, p. 62-7.

helps societies survive within the conflict -- but also inhibits its resolution. Over time, each side becomes prejudiced and resistant towards information that does not fit expectations developed over years of conflict, fear and vulnerability.

In resolution of a protracted conflict (like in any other conflict), formal negotiations are key to addressing disputed technical, “transactional” aspects. However, in protracted conflicts there is an equally important need for a parallel, “transformational” process to address deeper ontological components of the conflict and to legitimize “the other”.⁹

“Contested issues of substance (such as territory and governance) are intimately rooted in the cultural and psychological elements driving and sustaining the conflict.” John Paul Lederach (Building Peace, p. 8).

In his conflict-resolution pyramid, John Paul Lederach describes three levels of society that require different kinds of peace-building interventions.¹⁰ At the top of the pyramid, intervention relates to senior political, military and religious leaders. These leaders are highly visible and usually have “significant if not exclusive power and influence”, but they are also “locked into” traditional political positions. At the middle of the pyramid, intervention relates to mid-level leaders from various walks of society (academy, civil society, religious leaders etc.). These players are connected to-- and known by-- the top leadership, but they also have connections with wider constituencies. They are less visible and command less power and influence, but they are therefore often

9. Interview with Aaron David Miller, then President, Seeds of Peace, former US State Department official, March 2004. We drew from Miller's distinction to develop the more comprehensive concept of a “legitimization strategy.”

10. Lederach John Paul, Building Peace – Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies, 1997, pp. 37-43.

more flexible and connected (professionally, business-wise or otherwise) to counterparts from across the conflict lines.

At the very bottom of the pyramid, in its widest part, intervention relates to grassroots leadership that is characterized by “survival mentality”, is intimately connected to local realities and constituencies and usually operates on a “day to day basis.” For Lederach, the mid-level players are key in bridging the gap between the “top” and “bottom.” For the most part, P2P activists and organizations fall into this category.

While “transactional” negotiations usually involve only the top leadership, “transformational” efforts should involve all three of Lederach’s peace-building levels: top-level policy makers, mid-level players and the grassroots. This is because transactional negotiations typically address contentious issues in formulaic terms, while populations can be “left behind” with long-held fears, prejudices and grievances. “Transformational” efforts -- which we term a “legitimization strategy” -- are thus important precisely because they can reduce the gap between transactional aspects of the leadership-driven, formal talks and the needs and perceptions of the societies at large.

In theoretical terms, our legitimization strategy concept encompasses measures that facilitate and encourage what Bar-Tal and Teichman describe as four essential psychological steps for moving a protracted conflict towards resolution: 1) *legitimization* of the rights and national identity of the other group; 2) *personalization*: seeing its members as people “like us”; 3) *equalization*: seeing the other group “at eye level”; and 4) *differentiation*: seeing the other side as diverse and heterogenic.¹¹

11. Bar Tal and Teichman, 2005, pp. 391-393.

These measures can complement, enhance and widen peace-building efforts to include major segments within the two societies, and can provide a forum for tackling issues too complex for formal negotiations.

By definition, such a legitimization strategy must be evolutionary and participatory. It aims to create ongoing support for a political peace process by challenging the existing “conflict repertoire”, and it helps to transform historical enemies with diametrically opposed interests into partners with a shared interest in the future. A legitimization strategy does so by acknowledging the existence, rights and needs of the other side through ongoing contact and cooperation. In an optimal model, the formal negotiations and legitimization efforts happen simultaneously, with mutually reinforcing “bottom-up” and “top-down” processes: The political process offers legitimization of “the other” and support for “bottom-up” activities; in turn, a “bottom-up” process provides credibility and relevance for the political process.

“While saving the world one person at a time is not the most ideal way to proceed, it's critical if we are to move beyond peace as the purview of diplomats to reconciliation and peacemaking shared by broader constituencies.”
Aaron David Miller.
(Stanford Social Innovation Review, Spring 2005)

The local application:

Anyone familiar with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can recognize the characteristics of a protracted conflict. Over decades, both societies developed an array of societal beliefs that created mirror-like “negative conflict repertoires.” These repertoires helped both sides survive the harshness of conflict but once the Oslo process began, they greatly hindered its success.

Even before Oslo, the first Palestinian Intifada acted as a “wake up call” for both societies and their respective leaderships. Interestingly, the uprising had a dialectic impact -- it reinforced awareness and recognition of the imperative of diplomatic progress and dialogue, but it also deepened hatred and mutual suspicions. Even as the Intifada and other domestic and international developments gradually nudged both leaderships and societies towards pragmatism and tentative mutual acceptance, conflict-based societal beliefs remained fundamental to both sides’ respective national identities. Thus, for most Israelis and Palestinians, the Oslo Declaration of Principles and subsequent official negotiations between Israel and the PLO came as a shock. The historic breakthrough of mutual recognition rudely challenged long-held perceptions, beliefs and identities.

“I tell [the Palestinians] that they do not understand how much Israelis need security and that even if they [Israelis] have the atomic bomb they do not feel safe in Tel-Aviv.” Sufian Abu Zayda, Palestinian Minister for Prisoner Affairs. (Interview, August 2002)

“Giving anything of your identity up at this stage makes you afraid you will not have any energy left to sustain your nationality, and that’s what most Palestinians fear.” Dr. Sami Adwan, Co-Director, PRIME - Peace Research Institute in the Middle East. (Interview, August 2002)

With the cautious wisdom of hindsight, it is nevertheless clear that given the protracted nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the centrality of the conflict repertoire, a legitimization strategy should have been an integral part of the Oslo peace process. Public leaders could have honestly articulated the broader vision of peace and reconciliation. They could have given consistent political backing to

development of joint institutions, shared decision-making mechanisms, and cross-border cooperation among public sector, non-governmental and informal institutions and organizations. International donors could have provided large-scale financial and political support for encounters and capacity-building programs. No less importantly, such a legitimization strategy could have included broad-based, domestic “uninational” dialogue activities within

“We thought that everything was ripe for an ideological revolution, while in fact the real reaction was more one of shock than of acceptance. We thought we were exempt from the need to shape a [new] national consensus and on that we were wrong.”
Yossi Beilin. (Touching Peace, pp. 15-16)

each community. A P2P framework for Israeli-Palestinian encounters could have been one component of such a comprehensive legitimization strategy. All of this could have happened -- but it did not.

III. Oslo’s Dialectic Impact on P2P:

The statement of mutual recognition by Israel and the PLO (as part of the 1993 Declaration of Principles) was a historic turning point laden with potential for both transactional and transformational interactions -- but none of this potential was fulfilled. Even though Oslo had the appearance of a comprehensive, “face-to-face” peace process, and even though at the time it appeared to alter relations between the sides, it never actually was what it seemed. A symptom of this was the limited nature of legitimization-

“The [political] process was very arrogant. They [the politicians] didn't need to invent [Israeli-Palestinian] dialogue - they just had to upgrade it. They just didn't think about it.” Judith Green, Rapprochement. (Interview, June 2002).

type clauses in the formal agreements and the even more limited implementation of those clauses by Israeli and Palestinian central institutions and bureaucracies. The weaknesses of the diplomatic “top-down” process, domestic dynamics and ineffective international efforts -- all conspired against the creation of a de-facto legitimization strategy that could support the political process “from below.” Given these circumstances, expectations were bound to be dashed.

Little information can be added to the numerous volumes that have debated “what went wrong” in the political process.¹² From the psychological prism of a protracted conflict, it’s clear that central elements of the conflict repertoire, like the inherent “blindness” to the other, prevailed right through the talks. For example, Palestinians remained blind to the corrosive impact of terror on the Israeli public’s faith in the process, while Israelis remained blind to the impact of ongoing settlement activity on Palestinians’ confidence in their intentions. At the end of the day, the “settlements vs. terror” equation spoke louder than all the signed accords.

In addition, leaders on both sides withheld core truths from their people, thereby reinforcing “zero-sum” elements of the existing conflict repertoire. For example, Palestinians were not told that in the framework of a negotiated agreement, the right of return of 1948 refugees could not be exercised within Israel’s borders, and Israelis were not told that sovereignty in Greater Jerusalem would eventually have to be shared.

12. For example: Abbas Mahmoud (Abu Mazen), *Through Secret Channels*, 1995; Beilin Yossi, *Touching Peace*, 1997; Savir, Uri, *The Process: 1,100 days that changed the Middle East*, 1999; Hirschfeld Yair, *Oslo – A Formula for Peace*, 2000 (Hebrew); Beilin Yossi, *Manual for a Wounded Dove*, 2001, (Hebrew); Sher, Gilad, *Just Beyond Reach: The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Negotiations 1999-2000*, 2001 (Hebrew); Pundak Ron, *From Oslo to Taba: What Went Wrong?*, in *Survival*, 2001; Rubinstein, Dani, Rashomon Camp David, (translation of papers by Agha, H. Malley, R. Barak, E. Moris, B.), 2003; Enderlin, C., *Shattered Dreams: The Failure of the Peace Process in the Middle East 1995-2002*, 2003; Swisher, Clayton E., *The Truth About Camp David: The Untold Story About the Collapse of the Middle East Peace Process*, 2004; Ross Dennis, *The Missing Peace – the inside story of the fight for Middle East peace*, 2004.

Additional problems on the “transactional” level were the open-ended nature of the process (no clear goal was stated or set) and both sides’ failure to meet their respective obligations within the set timetables. Finally, the highly personal negotiating process suffered from frequent changes in Israel’s political leadership (four prime ministers in six years)¹³, which led to fluctuating policies and attitudes to the process and from Yasser Arafat’s duplicitous leadership style.

“The basis of the Oslo Accord was changed and actually was never implemented... The ability to fulfill the potential of Oslo was gone even before [Rabin's assassination].”

Jacob (Mendy) Or, former Coordinator for Governmental Activities in the Territories. (Interview, August 2004)

There was a deeper psychological problem. More often than not, even positive aspects of Oslo were not given a chance. The potential that existed within the text of the different accords was not realized and most of the annexes dealing with civilian and civil society cooperation¹⁴ were not implemented. In spite of the dramatic changes that Oslo heralded and in spite of the mechanisms put in place by the formal accords, most Israeli and Palestinian politicians and civil servants continued to think and act according to old societal beliefs, perceptions and prejudices.

“I don't think Oslo failed, because Oslo was never tried.”

Amos Oz. (Haaretz, 2003)

13. Yitzhak Rabin (Labor) was elected in 1992 and following his assassination in November 1995, was replaced by Shimon Peres (Labor). Binyamin Netanyahu (Likud) won the May 1996 elections and served until the (early) elections of May 1999, which Ehud Barak (Labor) won.

14. Agreements on civil cooperation between Israel and the future "Interim Palestinian Authority" were included in Annexes 3 and 4 of the 1993 Declaration Of Principles (DOP) and Annex 6 of the 1995 Interim Agreement (“Oslo II”). These clauses called for creating mechanisms for Israeli-Palestinian cooperation on a wide variety of issues such as water, energy, trade, communications, capacity building, environment, labor etc. The potential in these clauses was only partially realized and was often compromised by politics. For example, civil cooperation (between government ministries and other formal institutions) continued to be managed mainly by the Israeli Civil Administration (a military body), which Palestinians perceived as an instrument of the illegal occupation, and which sometimes assisted but more often impeded the limited efforts to develop contacts undertaken by Israeli and Palestinian civil ministries. On the implementation of the formal “People-to-People Program”, see discussion below.

Taken together, all of these factors added up to the “unfulfilled potential” of Oslo.

Once the transactional process was undermined by such serious obstacles, Oslo could neither override the inherent characteristics of the protracted conflict nor support a transformational environment. The confusion and ambiguity surrounding the Oslo process created confusion and ambiguity around P2P, and the “unfulfilled potential” of the formal process robbed P2P activities of the legitimization framework necessary for their success. While P2P reflected the original “spirit” of the Oslo Accords, it ran counter to the letter and “spirit” of their eventual implementation.

Explaining the absence of a legitimization strategy:

The absence of a legitimization strategy stemmed from complex multifaceted and multilayered dynamics. Most important among these was the lack of any consistent “top-down” support for efforts to bridge the gap between the two societies. Such efforts were especially important in light of the protracted nature of the conflict and the need to compensate for the closed, elitist nature of the formal negotiating process.

In practice, Israeli and Palestinian leaders failed to assume responsibility for transformational elements within the agreements, were neither proactive nor consistent in supporting far-reaching governmental and institutional cooperation and did not articulate clear public messages to this end. More often than not, leaders overlooked, misunderstood or sabotaged the engagement of committed citizens and their attempts to reach out to new constituencies. This was a serious mistake. Given the controversial nature of the Oslo Accords and the deep-rooted conflict repertoire, sustained declarative and practical backing for both formal and informal legitimization activities was sorely needed.

The fate of the formal People-to-People program¹⁵ (sponsored by the Norwegian government through FAFO/Institute For Applied Social Science) was symptomatic of the failure of political support. According to its Norwegian “godparents”, the program’s original vision was to encourage cooperation between national Israeli and Palestinian public sector institutions. However, Mr. Netanyahu’s election in May 1996 led to an attitudinal change on both sides that undermined this ambitious vision. The new Israeli government was less than enthusiastic about Oslo and anything associated with its validation. The PA was suspicious of the new government’s intentions regarding implementation of the diplomatic agreements. The Norwegians felt that the change in political mood rendered a high-profile, institutionalized program unrealistic. Consequently, the Program’s secretariat shifted its focus to smaller-scale projects promoted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and in so doing, altered the “official” program’s original vision.¹⁶

“From the moment the accords were implemented there was no concept of the two sides that they need to enter into a new era of reconciliation, but they saw peace as furthering traditional aims. In order to achieve a lasting peace, it must be embedded in reconciliation.” Uri Savir, former Director General, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (Interview, August 2002)

15. Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Annex VI, “Protocol Concerning Israeli-Palestinian Cooperation Programs”, and Article VIII, “The People-to-People Program”, signed September 28, 1995 by Israel and the PLO. Article 8 defined the “People-to-People Program”: “1. The two sides shall cooperate in enhancing the dialogue and relations between their peoples in accordance with the concepts developed in cooperation with the Kingdom of Norway.”

16. Endersen Lena C., *Contact and Cooperation, the Israeli-Palestinian People-to-People Program*, FAFO Institute for Applied Social Science, 2001, p. 10.

It's hard to say what role the Norwegians themselves might have played in preventing the unraveling. However, it's clear that the two political leaderships remained suspicious and critical of -- or simply uninterested in -- even the reduced program. For example, Israel offered little support on the critical issue of travel permits for the program's Palestinian participants, and the PA

"In the Middle East... East...political leaders don't believe in the involvement of citizens...They do everything. They decide everything."
Yolla Hadadeen, former head of the Palestinian Center for Peace. (Interview, August 2002)

offered no more than grudging political support that was the casualty of any crisis in the official negotiations. If this was the fate of the so-called "formal" program, other civil society cooperative programs fared no better.

In addition to the lack of political support, another significant factor militated against the development of a legitimization strategy: Internal social dynamics within each society often undermined what should have been a new form of two-way communication.

In Israel, the historic "security ethos"¹⁷ trumped any alternative concerns. For much of Israel's military establishment and skeptical public, security was narrowly defined in military terms. Civilian dimensions of the relationship (including dialogue) were not seen as factors enhancing Israel's security or as incentives for Palestinian cooperation. The PA was only as good as its performance in fighting terrorism -- and nothing

17. According to Tamar Herman, "The Israeli mainstream security ethos...is based on the following tenets: (1) Power politics are central to international and inter-communal relations...the Israeli-Palestinian relationship is seen as a zero-sum struggle...(2) Israel's struggle with its neighboring states is part of a pattern of persecutions and catastrophes that has occurred throughout Jewish history...(3)This...existential anxiety has led to a glorification of the Israeli army...(4) Control of the historical land of Israel and maintenance of the state's Jewish character are connected and indispensable to the nation's existence." *The Sour Taste of Success*, in Gidron et. al., *Mobilizing for Peace*, pp. 106-107.

else mattered. With its emphasis on non-military cooperation, P2P was unable to offer an alternative discourse.

On the Palestinian side, the newly-established PA had an overriding interest in establishing itself as the central authority and this trumped its stated commitment to participatory citizen action. Once its leaders arrived in the West Bank and Gaza from PLO headquarters in Tunis, the PA clashed with numerous NGOs it had earlier encouraged as beachheads for its political interests. Now, the PA had little use for organizations that had developed local roots in the community over three decades of Israeli occupation, and it expected them to subsume their activities into its centralized structure. In Arafat's (and the PLO leadership's) centralized system, citizen engagement was considered redundant or suspect (especially when political issues and/or foreign funding were involved), and he tended to resist the trickle-down effect of dialogue and of Oslo's benefits generally. Dialogue with Israel became a prime casualty of these tensions.¹⁸

Moreover, on both sides there were forces that opposed legitimization of the "other" to protect their vested interests in the "occupier-occupied" pattern of interaction. These included the IDF commanders' security agenda, Hamas' opposition to the two-state solution and the ideological settlers' commitment to a "Greater Israel." For different reasons, these opposition voices all resisted P2P's inherent goal of widening an exclusivist view of the rights of only one side to an inclusive one that

18. The tensions stemmed from divergent agendas in several areas: The PLO saw itself as a liberation organization, while NGOs were committed to community development, democracy and nation-building; the PA sought to monopolize the political discourse, while the NGOs were pluralistic; and the PA and NGOs competed for control of international funds allocated to nation-building, development and civil society. Accusations of "unpatriotic" behavior in promoting P2P work were a convenient weapon in this deeper conflict. For analyses of PA-NGO relations see, for example, Brown Nathan J., *Palestinian Politics After the Oslo Accords – Resuming Arab Palestine*, 2003, chapter 5, *Civil Society in Theory and Practice*, and Hammami Rima, *NGOs: The Professionalization of Politics*, in *Race and Class*, Volume 37, 1995.

made room for both.

Taken together, these different but related obstacles created a *disabling* rather than an *enabling* environment for legitimization processes, including P2P efforts.

This disabling environment had a dialectic effect on P2P throughout the nineties. For example, inclusion of the institutionalized P2P program in the 1995 Interim Agreement and the subsequent perception that all Israeli-Palestinian civil society interactions were a “byproduct of Oslo” became both a blessing and curse. On the one hand, P2P activities benefited from a *de-jure* framework of mutual recognition, supportive formal clauses and a degree of international support. On the other hand, because much of the formal framework wasn’t *de-facto* implemented and political support for cooperation was withheld, P2P activities were held hostage to Oslo’s weaknesses. As the practical and political “peace dividends” were increasingly questioned, P2P’s value was increasingly dismissed.

On the Palestinian side, P2P was disparagingly labeled as “normalization.” The issue of “normalization” (*Tadbiye*) as a negative term was central to internal Palestinian (and Arab) discourse on Oslo generally and on P2P efforts specifically. Essentially, the “normalization” argument claimed that by entering into dialogue and cooperation projects not directly opposed to the occupation, the weak (Palestinian) side implied occupation had ended and thereby legitimized ongoing Israeli practices. The fact that P2P took place while practical measures (e.g. economic development, Israeli redeployment, etc.) did not, confirmed Palestinian fears that Oslo had no “political horizon” and that P2P activities promoted neither peace, justice nor Palestinian liberation. Because of

the two governments' stated backing for the program, opponents of Oslo also became opponents of the program.¹⁹ In various Palestinian circles, the stigma of "normalization" was as good as killing P2P's chances.²⁰

In yet another manifestation of the impact of Oslo's "unfulfilled nature" on P2P, P2P organizations gradually began to fill the vacuum created by the lack of inter-governmental cooperation. As formal bodies remained reluctant to cooperate, informal civil society organizations often stepped in and acted as catalysts and "umbrellas" for cooperation between (for example) the two ministries of education, anti-drug authorities and even police forces. Obviously, however, NGOs could neither fill that vacuum nor substitute for the absence of political will.

The funders:

The quantity and quality of foreign governments' funding²¹ for P2P also had a dialectic effect. Here, too, the P2P field was held to task for something not really in its control. Following the formal launch of the Oslo process, foreign governments, academic institutions and activist organizations offered new funds and technical and political support for P2P activities. The funding quickly became a target for critics who claimed that expedient projects and ineffective organizations mushroomed to match unprecedented, generous support. The criticism was magnified when contrasted with the limited impact that cooperative efforts had

19. For a more detailed discussion of P2P and normalization see Andoni Ghassan, *The People to People Programs – Peace Making or Normalization?*, February 2002. In his paper, Andoni refers both to the "official" Norwegian program and to the wider field of Israeli-Palestinian civil society cooperation under Oslo.

20. For example, in the spring of 2000, the Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO) distributed a letter in which it called on Palestinian organizations to cease cooperative projects with Israeli organizations that did not accept political preconditions (such as an end to occupation and a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital).

21. In addition, numerous private funders supported P2P projects. Information on these funds is largely kept private. We estimate that the sum total of grants from private funders in the 1990s equaled that of foreign governments.

on the overall negative environment. Increasingly (especially after the outbreak of the 2000 Intifada), P2P was criticized as a waste of money.

In reality, however, the criticism was largely unfounded. Although demand in the field quickly expanded to meet the supply of funds and abuses did exist, a closer analysis of international funding for P2P reveals a complex and problematic picture. In spite of sincerely good intentions, the funders themselves contributed to the disabling environment. Their funding was too modest to enable serious impact and it was usually given in an uncoordinated and short-term manner.

“All of us talked a good game when it came to people-to-people programs. Yet our investment...of time, money and efforts was far too limited. We focused far too much on the leaders and negotiators and far too little on the publics on each side.”

Dennis Ross. (The Missing Peace, p. 770)

Along with the Israeli and Palestinian political establishments, the seminal international players (the United States and the European Union) also lacked significant, civil-society legitimization efforts (and P2P projects) in their peace process policies. The EU only institutionalized a substantial budget line for supporting such efforts in 1998,²² and the first US funds allocated specifically for civil society cooperation under the 1998 Wye River Memorandum were

22. Until 1998, EU support for Israeli-Palestinian cooperation projects came from various existing budget lines, such as Micro-Projects. The EU "People-to-People Program" (today called the "Partnership for Peace Program") was institutionalized as part of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Following the first allocation of funds (≈ 5 million in 1998), internal EU corruption scandals delayed funding for the second round of proposals, which only became available in 2001.

only released after the second Intifada began.²³ Even the Norwegian P2P program supported only small NGO projects until 1999.²⁴

It is difficult to specify the precise sum of money allocated throughout the 1990s for P2P projects. This is due partly to the diverse sources of funds and their choice of different definitions for projects, and partly to the donors' lack of coordination. Generally, estimates refer to between USD 25- 35 million.²⁵ If divided by the number of Israelis and

"The international community did not do enough on the people-to-people level, the bottom-up level."

Christian Berger, EU Political Advisor on the Middle East. (Interview, March 2003)

Palestinians between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, this amounted to no more than a few dollars per capita. (In contrast, in 1994 alone, the EU allocated £ 250 million for peace building and reconstruction efforts in Northern Ireland.)²⁶

A second serious problem was the ad-hoc, short-term nature of most of the funding and the absence of adequate, constructive follow-up by

23. Throughout the 1990s, the US government supported only small joint projects through various budget lines in its Tel-Aviv Embassy and Jerusalem Consulate. In 1998, as part of the Wye River Memorandum, \$10 million were allocated for support of Israeli-Palestinian cooperation. These funds were harshly criticized on the Palestinian side because they came from the "Palestinian envelope" of the Wye package -- which in any case was much smaller than the support package promised to Israel for its "security needs." On the Palestinian side, this crisis further de-legitimized cooperation with Israel. Palestinians felt that again, P2P was supported at the expense of Palestinian development and was a fig-leaf for shortcomings of the political process.

24. Lena Endersen lists three "larger projects" that were supported by the P2P program in 1999: "Cross Border Classrooms: A School-to-School Program", "The Palestinian Israeli Business Exchange" and "Peace Index." In *Contact and Cooperation*, 2001, pp. 48-9. A list of additional projects supported by the program as well as a list of donor countries and projects supported by them can be found in the program's website: www.people-to-people.org

25. In one of the most extensive evaluation projects of the P2P field, The Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI) estimates that, "The total amount of money the international donor community put into these peace building activities over ten years was equivalent to about half a Merkava tank" IPCRI, "YES PM" – *Years of Experience in Strategies for Peace Making*, p. 57.

26. Mari Fitzduff, a central figure in the Northern Ireland "Community-building/Community-Relations" Program, specifically mentions the importance of this external assistance as well as the fact that these funds included incentives for joint, budgetary decision-making. *Changing History – Peace Building in Northern Ireland*, in *People Building Peace – 35 Inspiring Stories from Around the World*, 1999.

the donors. In many cases, foreign governments and foundations launched their support for P2P projects with little thought either to guidelines or expected outcomes. In the process, precious time and dollars were lost. Moreover, donor countries tended to allocate funds to suit domestic political agendas that were often at odds with those of the local recipient organizations. For example, the need to support “uninational” (internal Israel and internal Palestinian) legitimization activities was not recognized by the donors and therefore, funding for such efforts was virtually non-existent. As well, foreign donors sometimes required prior approval of Israeli or Palestinian politicians for projects they wanted to support, without understanding how this could jeopardize politically-oriented activities (especially track II).

With the notable exception of the Norwegian-led P2P Secretariat, most foreign donors also lacked local officers trained to manage and evaluate P2P projects. These shortcomings were compounded by the short-term nature of funding. Programs addressing public opinion, political change, education, reconciliation and civil society mobilization require long-term funding, but grants for P2P projects were rarely given for terms of more than a year or two. The short-term grant cycles affected both P2P organizations’ ability to promote strategic, long-term and wide-reaching programs, and also compromised the viability of institutions supported (or created) by foreign funding.

Evaluating P2P under Oslo:

To those immersed inside the P2P “bubble,” activities in the 1990s seemed to be thriving. But to those looking in from outside, the picture was filled with contradictions. On several counts, P2P was blamed for not fulfilling something it never had: On paper, P2P had political backing but in reality, it operated without political support and was hobbled by

Oslo's weakness. It was blamed for abusing excessive international support and funding but in fact, the available dollars were insufficient and often ineffectively managed by the donors themselves. P2P activists defended their work as authentic, necessary and valuable, while critics dismissed it as irrelevant, opportunistic and money-driven.

More important, in reality, the intense debate over what was or wasn't useful missed the heart of the matter: Hundreds of projects, millions of dollars and even tens of thousands of Israelis and Palestinian participants were merely a fraction of what was altogether missing -- a large-scale, locally- and internationally-supported legitimization strategy, embraced by a committed leadership, to help bolster the "top-down" political process. None of these ingredients were in place.

Looking back at the 1990s, no matter how successful on an ad-hoc, individual basis, P2P's limited efforts were dwarfed by stronger political, social and economic forces that ultimately led to the breakdown of the peace process. Throughout the Oslo years, legitimization activities remained the exception to the rule of continued mistrust, hostility and mutual recriminations. P2P remained incidental and was unable to mobilize the masses, influence policy makers or counter larger negative trends.

P2P players have reflected on the experience of the nineties and believe their efforts fell into two major traps. The first was the burden of unrealistic expectations -- first, a belief that P2P could have and should have "undone" the protracted nature of the conflict, regardless of developments in the formal process; and second, a belief that P2P would reach beyond the "usual suspects" to mobilize wide segments of the two societies. In fact, the disabling environment created by Oslo's

“unfulfilled potential”, internal trends and lack of political support rendered P2P a small, mostly elitist endeavor.

The second trap P2P actors sometimes fell into was their uncritical commitment to Oslo as a meaningful peace process while they minimized the impact of oppositional forces and of negative developments on the ground (especially the “settlements vs. terror equation”). In retrospect, they recognize the resulting “double jeopardy”: P2P was relegated to the margins but was also blamed for not “preventing” or “stopping” the violence. It was only natural then that for many critics on both sides, the eruption of violence was final proof positive of P2P’s futility. The growing toll of casualties reinforced the familiar conflict repertoire. Israelis and Palestinians retreated to their respective beliefs that only force could influence the other side.

IV. P2P Today:

By now, nearly five bloody years later, P2P activists are surrounded by a resurgent conflict repertoire and an environment that believes neither in the possibility of bilateral negotiations nor in meaningful cooperation. Cynics claim that P2P today is naïve, counterproductive, driven by institutional survival interests and even unpatriotic. However, our assessment of activity in the field belies such cynicism.

The Intifada was a brutal blow to civil-society cooperative efforts. Both peace camps, which had been on the front line of cooperation, were a prime casualty of the renewed violence and felt naturally betrayed. For those P2P players and organizations committed to persevering, daunting substantive and technical obstacles tested their rationale, commitment and capacity. This two-pronged challenge cannot be overstated: The

technical difficulties of arranging meetings between Israelis and Palestinians were virtually insurmountable; and maintaining partnerships and credibility vis-à-vis the other side was a Herculean task. Understandably, numerous individuals and organizations terminated their activities or shifted their focus to internal challenges within each of the societies. In a way, the literal test of fire acted as a filter -- only committed individuals and organizations who succeeded in preserving partnerships made it “to the other side.”²⁷ As a result, the P2P field today is characterized by more professionalism and improved methodology.

“The cooperation is especially important at this time... Even if our project is 1% of the 100% effort needed, it is a statement that there are NGOs on both sides dedicated to a better future.”

Lili Faidi, MIFTAH.
(Interview, June 2005)

The activists themselves are consistent in describing their role and rationale.²⁸ They argue that on either side, “the mood of the street” remains locked in the “conflict repertoire.” Conscious of criticism, the activists nevertheless see building ties and cooperative relations as the most effective means to counter this repertoire of demonization and delegitimization. Today, some also see themselves as deliberately challenging the post-2000, “there’s no one to talk to” discourse.

In practical terms, the dramatically changed universe surrounding the P2P “bubble” has only intensified familiar, long-standing challenges

27. According to data collected by the writers in 2002, between 1993-2000, close to 200 Israeli, Palestinian and joint NGOs were involved in hundreds of P2P-type activities. Some of these organizations remain active in dozens of joint programs and projects. As well, new organizations have joined the field and some current projects were initiated during the violence.

28. In June-July 2005, we interviewed players representing a sample of activities currently underway, chosen to illustrate various aspects of the field's typology. As in the past, P2P activities today vary widely from educational dialogue among students and teachers to joint sports activities among children; from political dialogue and joint protest activities to professional training of medical personnel, media cooperation and “dialogue-oriented” encounters.

and dilemmas. Permits were always hard to get; travel closures were always an obstacle; politics were always an impediment; anti-normalization discourse existed throughout the 1990s; and the gaping socio-economic asymmetry between the sides was always there.

“We were always working through the cracks in the system and today it is even more the case.” Ron Pundak, Director General, Peres Center for Peace. (Peace NGOs meeting, July 2004)

As in the 1990s, existing projects reflect diverse approaches to the “what” and “how” of P2P. They include coordinated unilateral activities within each society to influence attitudes and practices related to the other side; track II forums aimed at influencing the bilateral political arena and maintaining open channels among officials; political solidarity activities; professional cooperation and religious dialogue programs that are intentionally a-political; joint work aimed primarily at Palestinian capacity-building; and dialogue-oriented encounters aimed at humanizing the other side. Some programs invest in potential leaders and “change agents” who can influence wider circles, while others reach out to the grassroots. Activities are initiated and implemented by joint Israeli-Palestinian organizations or independent Israeli and Palestinian organizations, and are supported by foreign governments, international organizations and foundations. For the most part, each organization continues to champion its “brand” of P2P as most effective. Although there seems to be more respect for the value of diversity in this field, P2P players openly admit they work in a competitive environment. Ultimately, they all seek funds, recognition and publicity from a limited range of financial and media sources.

Notwithstanding their continuous commitment, most of today’s P2P players have engaged in introspective analysis that has yielded key

insights. In the post-Intifada P2P discourse, the familiar plurality of views still prevails but several distinct themes and dilemmas are apparent

Political or a-political? The pointed debate among P2P players on the need for a joint political platform is not new. Some believe that an unequivocal, common anti-occupation stance is essential to meaningful cooperation. After Oslo's breakdown, some traditionally a-political activists also adopted this position and redesigned their programs accordingly.²⁹ In contrast, other P2P activists see politics as a constraint that detracts from their efforts to break down human barriers. They argue that P2P's strength is its a-political nature, which enables it to attract more diverse constituencies and to address deeper ontological issues.

"We are not popular, and this was true even before the second Intifada. Many people assume that we do cooperation with Israelis in the framework of occupation. This is not true. We do political work with Israeli women to end occupation and build a just peace between equals." Amne Badran, Jerusalem Center for Women. (Interview, August 2002)

The June 2005 "Open Letter by Palestinian Health Organizations" regarding "Palestinian-Israeli Cooperation in Health" is a telling example of this debate. In the widely-circulated letter, a number of leading health organizations in the Palestinian NGO network (PNGO) wrote: "[We] register our protest and deep concern over the increasing pressure exerted upon us [by donors] to enter into Palestinian-Israeli cooperation schemes in the sphere of health." The signatory NGOs wrote that such projects do not respond to Palestinian needs and "ignore the vastly

29. The post-Oslo violence also spawned a new cluster of "political solidarity activities" by Israelis and Palestinians who jointly sponsor demonstrations and legal battles against the security barrier, house demolitions and the occupation in general.

unequal relationship between the two parties: one is an occupier and the other is occupied...[the projects] reflect an unacceptable politicization of health research and other activities, and claim to be a-political when a political agenda is in fact the driving force for such forced cooperation.” The signatory organizations argue that “while there may be reasons to believe that such cooperative ventures may contribute to reconciliation in a post-conflict setting...[so far] such ventures have in fact contributed to hindering the path to just peace, as their role has been limited to enhancing Israeli institutional reputation and legitimacy, without restoring justice to Palestinians.”³⁰

“The political discourse is by its very nature shallow and dividing... What is important is creating a relationship between the two peoples.”
Yehuda Stolov, Interfaith Encounter Association.
(Interview, July 2005)

The statement has sparked a lively debate in the so-called “peace NGOs” and “IPCRI-News” email networks. While PNGO believes any Israeli-Palestinian cooperation is only legitimate if based on a joint platform against the occupation, many respondents have stressed the intrinsic advantages of such cooperation. Their reactions range from general statements like “the one place where we can be equal is in human relationships” or “equality begins with face-to-face, sustained human contact,”³¹ to specific defense of the added value of health cooperation in capacity-building and life-saving. One respondent vehemently argued that such a “ban practically turns Palestinian children hostage to a political agenda of those who should know better.”³²

30. Open Letter to the Palestinian and International Community, June 13, 2005.

31. Reply to the Open Letter by Libby and Len Traubman, June 13, 2005.

32. Reply to the Open Letter by Dr. Dan Shanit, Director of Medicine & Healthcare Unit, Peres Center for Peace, June 16, 2005.

The importance of "coordinated uninational" action: Today, more P2P organizations believe that working internally, within their domestic constituencies, is an important element in influencing public opinion. This recognition stems from frustration with first, their inability to influence the Israeli and Palestinian publics during the nineties and second, the dramatic negative shift in public opinion once violence erupted. P2P players believe cooperation vehicles have added value as a platform for exposing uninational activities to the other side. Moreover, they believe that uninational work also helps bridge the distance and isolation they sometimes sense in relation to their respective communities. They describe this new emphasis as “coordinated uninational activities.”³³

Capacity building or dialogue? The built-in, socio-economic asymmetry between Israelis and Palestinians has always constrained joint activities.

P2P players now widely acknowledge the need to consciously address this gap. In response, some organizations emphasize the inclusion of practical, “capacity-building dividends” for Palestinians as a means to “level the playing field.” Others believe that the P2P field can be more effective through an emphasis on dialogue that challenges conflict mentalities and encourages personal relations.

“There need to be clear gains in addition to peace making – joint activities that have clear outputs and that contribute to the Palestinian (and sometimes to Israeli) development.” Dan Bitan, Israeli-Palestinian Science Organization (IPSO). (Interview, June 2005)

Proactive Use of Media: Throughout the 1990s, there was growing realization of the need to actively create visibility for P2P work through

33. This approach is valuable in the Israeli-Palestinian protracted conflict, where perception of the “other” forms a key component of each side’s own identity. Herbert Kelman describes this as the “negative interdependence of Israeli and Palestinian identities.” In *The Interdependence of Israeli and Palestinian National Identities: the Role of the Other in Existential Conflicts*, Journal of Social Issues, Fall 1999.

outreach to media. Today, P2P activists have more experience and sophistication in obtaining such coverage by utilizing alternative media channels (e.g. the internet and documentary films). They are also prepared to buy PR expertise and media space and time.

The need for more and better funding: P2P activists are encouraged by the renewed interest of donors in their field,³⁴ but are concerned that new dollars will not be backed by informed strategies and practices that incorporate the lessons of the 1990s. These lessons include not only more funds but also better follow up, longer-term budgets, greater donor coordination and constructive donor-recipient rapport. P2P players are especially critical of what they describe as the funders' "disappearance" during the Intifada -- precisely when the field needed them most. They worry that renewed violence might scare donors away once again.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations:

Fundamentally, we question the viability of the "back-to-back" approach to Israeli-Palestinian relations. Without underestimating the difficulties of reaching, implementing and sustaining a negotiated solution to this conflict, and while recognizing that unilateral actions might have a tactical benefit, we believe that the realities of space, demography and economics belie the logic of unilaterally imposed solutions and uncooperative separation.

34. See above regarding new funds allocated by the EU and the US. The EU has delegated more responsibility to its local representative offices (Israel, East Jerusalem and Jordan) and the program guidelines modestly promise that "At least one seminar over a three year period is foreseen to support operationally and contractually the EU Partnership for Peace Program and to allow for intensive networking opportunities between the participating organizations." European Union, Partnership for Peace Program, Guidelines for the 2004 Call for Proposals, p. 4.

Moreover, we believe that for anyone working to keep alive the notion of a negotiated, mutually-acceptable, two-state resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the nineties offer an important lesson: It's a mistake to address only "transactional" elements; attention must also be devoted to "transformational" efforts, such as P2P activities. In working to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, initiatives that demonstrate the potential of cooperation are valuable; projects that fight ignorance, denial and blindness are helpful; and contacts that help both

"It's easy to ignore each other and wait until the occupation and killing stop. [But] in the meantime we can build bridges to the future of two states with two people living side by side." Rafi Benvenisti, Chairman, Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI) (Response to "Open Letter by Palestinian Health NGOs", June, 2005).

sides come to grips with the existence of the other and that challenge the reality of occupation and hatred -- should be politically supported and encouraged.

In an ideal model for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian protracted conflict, P2P work is just one element of a multi-pronged legitimization effort that bridges top-down transactional and bottom-up transformational efforts. But admittedly, this model is purely theoretical: No such strategy existed even during Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in the 1990s, and one is unlikely to be developed in the absence of a negotiating framework. In such circumstances, all P2P can do is influence a relatively small number of individuals -- not enough of a critical mass to carry the burden of powerful change. Given the overpowering reality of a protracted conflict, this leaves P2P isolated at the margins of the stronger collective conflict mentality.

Admittedly, as long as P2P cannot reach a critical mass, it can neither counter nor defeat larger, negative socio-economic and political forces. But making such impact the central yardstick for its success or failure misses the point: P2P cannot be burdened either with excessive expectations or with excessive blame for all that remains undone. Israelis cannot measure its impact just by its failure to eliminate terrorism or incitement, and Palestinians cannot measure it just by its failure to end the occupation. Rather, P2P should be seen realistically -- as an important vehicle for reframing discourse and challenging existing perceptions.³⁵

Whatever the circumstances, there have always been Israelis and Palestinian committed to working together. And by and large, those on either side who have “seen the other” no longer automatically reflect the majority’s closed conflict repertoire. Even if all they do is “differentiate” the enemy, they will have taken a giant step forward along the rocky road of peace-building. Therefore, whatever the environment, P2P has a role to play.

There are some practical steps that can help maximize P2P’s potential in the current circumstances:

International players should incorporate funding for P2P into their policy goals for resolution of this conflict and provide it with meaningful political and financial support. Such support needn’t depend on the agreement of local political leaders, nor should it falter in the face of extremist violence. Instead, it should take advantage of the entrepreneurship and flexibility of civil society-based endeavors. In addition, funders should respond to the improved professionalism in

35. For analysis regarding the different levels of influence that peace and conflict resolutions organizations can have on political processes, see Gidron et. al., *Mobilizing for Peace*, Chapter 9, *The Efficacy of the Peace and Conflict-Resolution Organizations: A Comparative Perspective*, p. 202

the P2P field with more strategic guidelines that reflect their own learnings from the last decade. Creation of a forum to coordinate donors' activities would be a valuable, concrete step. This would likely result in less redundancy of programs and grants and more effective use of resources.

Private funders (largely foundations) have other strengths. They are more independent than governments and can develop longer-term horizons -- all important assets for P2P players. If invested wisely and carefully, private funds can leverage public budgets; if done thoughtfully, private funders can mediate among governments and P2P players. Private funders missed some of these opportunities in the nineties because they, too, were uncoordinated. An affinity group of foundations committed to peace-building grants would be a second valuable, concrete step.

In turn, P2P players need to be tenacious in their commitment, clear about their goals, realistic about their limitations and honest about their weaknesses. Indeed, many of them acknowledge the gradual learning process of the 1990s. Some players have already informally adopted more thoughtful, professional "rules of engagement" to address the vexing questions that plague their field. Creation of a network for discussion of issues such as asymmetry, conflicting agendas and even competitiveness would be a third valuable, concrete step. A common position on these questions would strengthen the field internally and buttress it against external criticism.

In short, funders and activists need to talk more and better amongst themselves as well as to one another. The 1990s clearly demonstrated the need for institutionalization of such inter-sectoral dialogue. This would help them all meet the overarching challenge -- to neither ignore

nor underestimate larger opposing forces (e.g. unilateralism and violence). Only by speaking with a stronger and clearer voice will the P2P field create any kind of counterweight to these negative trends. There's a fine line between constructive competition and uncoordinated, duplicative action that further weakens the field. This line should be tread cautiously.

Even if better coordinated, individual P2P players will continue to claim greater significance and input for their particular "brand" of activity. However, we believe in the value of diverse approaches. It's important to encourage activities at different levels of interaction and engagement -- to meet the needs, expectations and capacities of different constituencies. A plurality of programs draws in different audiences, addresses various needs and challenges different aspects of the conflict environment. At their most basic level, encounters offer wider constituencies a more nuanced understanding of the conflict, the other side's humanity and possible solutions. On other levels, encounters enable the development of professional and personal relations, the creation of common political platforms, the promotion of capacity building, etc.

There remains the controversial issue of "normalization." Our position is that as long as P2P players knowingly address the blatant asymmetry built into the reality of occupation, their efforts should not be branded "normalization." In a world devoid of P2P, the occupation wouldn't end any faster. By their very nature, P2P activities challenge the reality of occupation and the status quo of conflict by stressing mutual recognition, respect and a common search for an alternative future. This is true even if a given activity does not explicitly protest against the occupation's wrongs and does not include a common political platform. Moreover, there's a simple trade-off: The more explicit a joint political

platform is, the smaller its constituency will be; the more open a framework is, the more people it can reach.

The Power of Possibility:

In hundreds of conversations, we've seen the strengths and flaws of a small community of dedicated individuals. We've come away reinforced in our belief that when people jointly confront the status quo of conflict, a positive dynamic gingerly emerges. The Israelis and Palestinians we've spoken to don't minimize the burden of changing the "herd-like" dynamic of conflict. They try to challenge it and know they can only do this "one by one." Whether involved in track II meetings to support transactional diplomacy or whether they leave the complexities of political negotiations to others, they believe that what they do is a meaningful -- if tentative -- step on the path towards a different future.

They are probably correct. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, each generation has fought, but some in each generation have also moved towards accepting the imperatives of compromise and mutual recognition. The vanguard for peace has usually toiled in the margins, where it has been ignored, disparaged and sometimes fatally attacked. But it's only in the margins, away from the weight of negative "societal beliefs," that risk-takers and visionaries have the freedom to dare and dream.

"If people are not directly in touch and are not talking to each other, then they only hear what their leaders are saying about the other side. If we allow such a gap [in communication] to be created among the peoples – this will lead to violence."

Rada Issa, Hope Flower School (Interview, July 2005)

As always, Israeli-Palestinian relations today are fluid and multi-dimensional. Nobody knows what new reality will dawn following Israel's Gaza pullout. If the optimists are right and Gaza leads to renewed negotiations, serious attention should be given to the role P2P and a larger legitimization strategy can play in supporting the challenges of transactional diplomacy. If the pessimists are right and the situation deteriorates into renewed violence, P2P should be supported as offering a meaningful channel for citizens' participation in charting the course of their future. No one can tell where and when the winds will shift. There's power in the possibility of an alternative.

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