The intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict and possible pathways to peace

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**The Path to Reconciliation in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Psychological Dynamics and Specific Strategies**

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Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has lasted over a century and has caused enormous bloodshed and suffering to involved societies. The conflict, while caused by multiple factors, is driven by psychological dynamics within and between the societies. In order to psychologically deal with the conflict and its destructive consequences, both societies have developed psychosocial coping strategies. This chapter describes the psychological dynamics of the two societies, and various coping strategies, aimed at overcoming any negative effects of these dynamics in order to promote the well-being of both societies and enable them to reach peace and reconciliation.

The chapter begins with introducing the background and nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an intractable conflict; then describes the psychological dynamics and coping strategies that have evolved in order to meet the challenges of the conflict; and finally, presents ways to achieve the reconciliation and collective self-healing that are necessary for lasting peace.

Nature of the Israeli-Palestinian Intractable Conflict

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which constitutes the core of the Israeli-Arab conflict, began at the beginning of the 20th century and is centered on contested territory by two national movements: the Palestinian national movement and the Jewish national movement (Zionism). This conflict has had all the characteristics of an intractable conflict in that it is protracted (lasting almost a century); violent (causing thousands of casualties in both societies); central, (on the main public agenda); total (focused on

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1 The presented conceptual framework is general and can be applied to the analysis of other intractable conflicts as well.
fundamental goals such as identity and territory); and demanding *extensive psychological and material investments* by the parties, in order to cope with - and win - the conflict. It has also been considered of *zero sum nature* and *irresolvable peacefully*; (Kriesberg, 1993; Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005) As a result, the conflict has inflicted upon both societies threat, stress, pain, exhaustion, and costs, in human and material terms (Abu-Zayyad & Bar-Tal, 2003). Both societies have had to live with this harsh and violent reality, and therefore both have had to psychologically adapt to the ongoing situation.

As is generally prevalent among societies involved in intractable conflicts, this adaptation to this ongoing conflict is necessary on both the individual and collective level (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). With regard to the *individual* level, it is necessary to satisfy basic needs such as needs for mastery, safety, positive identity, and/or for a meaningful understanding of the conflict that can provide a coherent and predictable picture of the situation. With regard to the *collective* level, the parties in the conflict have to be prepared for a long struggle. This requires recruitment of human and material resources such as patriotism, ability to cope with physical and psychological stress, solidarity, and maintenance of the societies' objectives, courage, and endurance. Coping successfully on a psychological level with the challenges posed by intractable conflicts requires that the involved societies develop effective psychosocial strategies (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005).

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² It is recognized that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lost its intractability with time. The process began with the peace agreement with Egypt and continued with the Oslo accord. But, since 2000 there has been a regression in this process.
Psychological Dynamics of the Conflict

The psychological dynamics of the individual societies – and of the conflict itself -- are formed gradually over time, from the beginning of the conflict, and are based on three interrelated elements: collective memory of the conflict, ethos of the conflict and collective emotional orientation of the conflict. They help to meet the challenges of the conflict that were noted before.

Collective Memory of Conflict

Collective memory is the collective representations of past events involved in the conflict that are shared by the vast majority of the members of the society, and seen by them as valid accounts (Kansteiner, 2002). Israelis and Palestinians have formed their own collective memories of the conflict, each representing a black and white picture that portrays their own society in a positive light and as being the sole victim, while de-legitimizing the rival, presenting that party in a very negative light (Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998; Podeh, 2002).

Ethos of Conflict

Ethos, in general, is defined as the configuration of central shared societal beliefs in a society\(^3\) that provide particular dominant meaning and orientation to a particular society (Bar-Tal, 2000a). The ethos of conflict consists of societal beliefs in a society relating to eight themes: the justness of one's goals; security; patriotism; unity; positive collective in-group images; one’s own victimization; de-legitimizing the opponent; and peace. (Bar-Tal, 2000a). Both the Israeli and Palestinian societies have developed ethos on all these levels, which also all perpetuate the conflict.(Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998).

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\(^3\) Societal beliefs are cognitions shared by society members on topics and issues that are of special concern for their society and contribute to their sense of uniqueness (Bar-Tal, 2000a).
Collective Emotional Orientation of Conflict

Collective emotional orientation, in general, is defined as shared emotions by the members of the society. Both the Israeli and Palestinian societies can be seen as being dominated by fear on a collective level (Bar-Tal, 2001). This fear further stimulates emotions of anger and hatred directed inwardly as well as towards each other.

Negative Consequences of the Psychological Dynamics

Since the described psychological repertoire was functional during the climax of the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, helping to meet its challenges, special attempts were made by the societies to institutionalize it, for example, by transmitting it in cultural products and disseminating it via the educational system (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005; Podeh, 2002).

But, the psychological dynamics of the Israelis and Palestinians as reflected in the above three aspects provided a foundation on which members of each society constructed their respective reality and then have only served to widen the divide between them. The specific positions that result from these dynamics in each society inhibits de-escalation of the conflict and peaceful resolution and reconciliation between the parties (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2004; Bar-Tal, 2001), because adhering to each of their respective goals results in the de-legitimization, distrust, and hatred of the rival, and therefore does not provide any grounds for the peace process. (Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). This situation causes a vicious cycle of intractable or ongoing and irresolvable conflict, and serves as a catalyst for continuation of the conflict. In addition, these dynamics interfere with the well-being of members of society since living with dynamics as societal beliefs of self-victimization and de-legitimization of the other, emotions of fear, hatred and anger, have negative
consequences, for example, causing stress in daily life, perpetuating negative images of the other party, and damaging relations with third parties in the conflict. (Nets, 2005).

**The Need to Improve the Psychological Dynamics In the Conflict**

Generally speaking it is of vital necessity, under the appropriate circumstances, to alter and improve the described psychological dynamics operating in each party in a conflict in order to overcome the above noted negative consequences.

What are these “appropriate circumstances”? Timing matters, with the best time to intervene effectively being when signs signal prospects for peaceful resolution, for example, when violence is greatly reduced and/or when a negotiation for a peace agreement begins. In the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict, these 'appropriate circumstances' existed after the nomination of Abu Mazen as Head of the Palestinian Authority in the end of 2004, at the time of the Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip in September 2005, as well as recently when a political reshuffling in Israel was necessitated. These events bring new hope for the possibility to renew the peace process that can be accepted by the Israelis and the Palestinians.

**Nature of the Improvement**

The three elements of the psychological dynamics of the two societies as described above need to be changed and improved for peace to be possible (Bar-Tal, 2000a):

(a) *Collective memory:* At the most minimal level, it is necessary to recognize that there are two collective memories of the conflict -- that of the Israelis and of the Palestinians (Salomon, 2004). But more substantial change demands that through the process of negotiation, each party will critically revise his own past and synchronize it with that of the other party and so a new mutual narrative of the conflict will emerge and
substitute the previously dominant and collective memories of both societies. In this new narrative, mutual de-legitimization of the other and self-glorification disappears, and both groups can be perceived as victims of the conflict because of their suffering (Kriesberg, 1993).

(b) Ethos: The peace process requires major changes in at least four themes of the ethos (Bar-Tal, 2000b): to change the goals of the two societies from ones that caused the conflict to goals that center on maintaining peaceful relations; to change each society’s rigid adherence to its own positive image in relation to the other, to more objective and self-critical views that acknowledge one’s own wrong doing; to stop de-legitimizing the opponent and instead to humanize the members of the rival party; and to incorporate more realistic and multidimensional concepts of peace that outline the costs and benefits, specify conditions and mechanisms for its achievement, and clarify the meaning of living in peace.

(c) Collective emotional orientation: Change in this dimension requires a reduction of collective fear, anger and hatred on one hand, and on the other hand, the evolution of collective trust, and mutual acceptance and hope for peace (Bar-Tal, 2001).

Two processes – namely, reconciliation and collective self-healing -- facilitate positive changes in the psychological dynamics in the societies that experience intractable conflict, as is the case for the Israelis and Palestinians. Both processes depend on changes in the members of the societies as well as in their leaders

Reconciliation Process

Reconciliation requires the formation or restoration of genuine and lasting, peaceful relationships between societies that have been involved in an intractable conflict
(Bar-Tal, 2000b; Kriesberg, 1998). It consists of establishing mutual recognition and acceptance, investing interests and goals in developing peaceful relations, building mutual trust and positive attitudes, as well as sensitivity and consideration in the other party’s needs and interests (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004). Reconciliation requires joint efforts of both sides; in other words, both rivals must coordinate and cooperate with each other in order to effect change. Strategies to carry out this process include:

**Publicized meetings between Israeli and Palestinian representatives.** Meetings between Israelis and Palestinians can trigger change in the psychological dynamics of each society (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004). These meetings provide an example to members of society of how a past enemy should be treated differently in the new peace-oriented climate. Holding such meetings serves to legitimize, equalize and specifically personalize the rival party members and emphasize their humanity by demonstrating that it is possible to talk with them, to treat them as partners in agreements, and to trust them and consider their needs. Meetings between leaders is especially important in this regard, where they treat each other with respect and trust, since the leaders serve as authority figures to at least some members of the society. For example, the negotiations, meetings and eventually symbolic handshakes between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat in the Wye River Plantation in 1998 had significant positive influence on Israeli supporters of the hawkish parties, increasing their support for the peace process with the Palestinians (Hermann & Yuchtman-Yaar, 2002).

**Presentations in the Mass media.** Mass media (newspapers, television and radio stations, the internet) constructs public reality by framing the news and commentaries, thereby presenting a powerful tool for promoting change in the psychological dynamics
within and between the conflicting societies (Kriesberg, 1998). As a result, the resources of mass media should be harnessed in early efforts at changing the society’s dynamics and strategies with regard to the rival. Media can be used to transmit information to a wide public, including, for example, new peaceful goals, positive aspects of the rival party and encouragement to develop relations with it. For example, after the Oslo agreement in 1993, the media played an important role in promoting the theme to “give peace a chance.” Also at this time, PLO leaders were interviewed for the first time on Israeli TV, giving the public an opportunity to hear their views, and to personalize them. (Wolfsfeld, 1997).

**Peace education.** Education constitutes one of the most important methods for promoting reconciliation. This mostly involves using the school system for peace education since this system is often the only institution of which the society can make formal, intentional, and extensive use to change the psychological repertoire of society members. Peace education aims at constructing the students’ worldview (i.e., their values, beliefs, attitudes, motivations, skills and patterns of behavior) in a way that reflects the reality of the peace process and prepares them to live in an era of peace and reconciliation. An attempt to implement peace education was carried in the Israeli schools following Oslo agreement when the Ministry of Education declared Peace and Coexistence as a central learning theme in schools for 1994.

**Writing a common history.** This method involves jointly recreating a new version of the events of the conflict that can be endorsed by both parties involved in the conflict (Bar-On, & Adwan, in press). This process usually involves a joint committee of historians who work together to collect and select materials, and finally negotiate in order
to come up with an agreed-upon version of the past events of the conflict. Such work requires exposure of both parties to the untold past of one’s own party, which often includes admission of one’s own misdeeds, acknowledgment of these unheard pasts, and adhering to agreed-upon facts while rejecting myths and unfounded stories. One effective project of this nature has been accomplished by the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME) in which Israelis and Palestinians cooperated to produce booklets presenting Israeli and Palestinian students with two narratives of the history of the conflict (Bar-On, & Adwan, in press).

**Carrying out joint projects.** Joint projects of various content and format in different areas, such as health, media, academia, tourism, can be carried out by individual members (either professionals or grassroots) or initiated by leaders of both parties, or by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These projects can foster links between different levels of society, create interdependence through common goals, and provide benefits for the members of the society. For example, during the period of 1994-1998, 148 joint health-projects involving about 4,000 Israeli and Palestinian participants took place. These have made a substantive contribution in changing the dynamics and emotions among members of both parties towards the members of the other party (Barnea & Abdeen, 2002).

**NGOs.** Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can contribute to positive changes in the dynamics of a society by spreading messages about new goals that stress the importance of constructing peaceful relations with the other party and discarding delegitimizing views. Wide-scale cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian NGOs started after the 1993 Oslo Agreements, but have been drastically diminished since the
2000 outbreak of the second intifada (Yes, 2002). Of special importance are NGOs that serve as peace movements; for example, Israeli NGOs Peace Now and Gush Shalom which propagated ideas of conflict resolution and peace.

**Cultural exchanges.** Cultural exchanges, such as translations of books, visits of artists, or exchanges of films, TV programs or exhibitions, provide the opportunity for each party to learn about the rival from a cultural perspective that can be neutral, and to contribute to the personalize the rival by presenting their needs, aspirations and concerns in a humane light. People involved in these exchanges find similarities and commonalties with the members of the other party.

In summary, there are various approaches to implement the reconciliation process, as described above. No single method is exclusive; what is required is a combination of these methods. The reconciliation process between the Israelis and Palestinians began after the 1993 Oslo Agreements, with positive results. But some of these efforts were implemented by only one party, or only partly. The expansion of programs was intensive until the eruption of the Al-Aqsa second Intifada in September 2000, at which time progress was largely diminished. All the above methods have been implemented in programs today, with varying success. While some have been scaled back or interrupted due to political tensions and limited funding, fortunately others are flourishing. Stepping up these efforts and developing new programs would be valuable to facilitate reconciliation.

Further, the process of reconciliation requires the establishment of well-defined and unequivocal policies that are supported and implemented by governmental and private sector institutions, as well as by professional and grassroots sectors of the
societies. To be effective, the reconciliation process must always proceed top-down and bottom-up simultaneously. This means that the leaders take positions to influence the psychological perceptions and dynamics of the public, on the one hand, and on the other hand, members of civil society can initiate movements and positions that influence the governing bodies and affect policy.

**The Collective Self Healing Process**

Besides reconciliation, collective self-healing is also necessary to attend the aftermath of an intractable conflict such as is the case between the Israelis and Palestinians. This is defined as a process by which a party repairs the damage incurred over the course of conflict, independent of the other party in the conflict (Nets, 2005).

Little has been said in the psychological literature about collective self-healing and its role in relation to intractable conflicts (Nets, 2005). Collective self-healing involves two concepts: the concept of “healing” and of the “self.” The term ‘healing’ relates to restoring the object of the healing to a sound and healthy condition. From a psychological perspective, healing aims at least partly, to reduce pain and suffering caused by the conflict (Frankel, 1998). Collective self-healing refers to healing on the level of the society considered as an entity, and implies that the healing takes place by the party itself, without collaborating with the other party in the conflict – in contrast to reconciliation where the two parties interact.

Both reconciliation and collective self-healing evolves from the same fundamental assumption that peace agreements cannot guarantee genuine peaceful relations between the parties unless the psychological dynamics of the conflict are fully addressed. While reconciliation deals mainly and *directly* with changes in the strategies
regarding the other party and with relations between the parties, collective self-healing occurs at a more basic psychological level and can trigger negative psychological conditions, such as Post Trauma Stress Disorders, Learned Helplessness symptom, and rage that further fuel the conflict. These consequences must be addressed in order to maintain the well-being of the involved societies and to prevent future outbursts of the conflict. The basic premise of the collective self-healing process is that it is difficult for the parties to heal their relations with each other, while they themselves are not healed. According to this premise, collective self-healing can directly improve the well-being of the party that works on this process, as well as indirectly facilitate improvement of psychological dynamics among members of the party and consequently their relations with the other party.

Several methods can be used by the Israelis and Palestinians to achieve collective self-healing.

**Taking control over one's life and destiny.** Generally in conflicts, members of the weaker party especially suffer from syndromes like Learned Helplessness, which results from losing the sense of control over one’s life as the stronger party has power to control many aspects of the weaker party’s life (Herman, 1992, Cemalcilar, Canbeyli & Sunar, 2003). This causes anger and hatred among the weaker party towards the rival party. In the process of collective self-healing, the weaker party reasserts control over its own destiny, allowing for a reduction in anger and hatred that were the outcome of the learned helplessness, and consequently enhancing the likelihood for improvement in collective memory, ethos, and collective emotional orientation.
For example, the Palestinian minority in Israel is becoming more aware and self-critical about their passive behavior in not taking control over their lives and the conditions of their society, and is increasingly recognizing the need to be more active in this regard (Rabinovitch & Abu-Baker, 2002).

**Establishing a network of psychological services.** Israelis and Palestinians can establish a network of psychological services within each society to help alleviate the traumatic effects of the conflict. Several such projects have already proven successful in various support groups or communities (Lerner, 2003).

**Commemoration projects.** The parties can conduct various commemoration projects for their loved ones who perished as a result of the conflict. Such projects help families and friends of the victims, as well as the society as a whole, to deal more effectively with their losses. For example, the Israelis have been involved in such activities such as monuments, museums and books (IMOD, 2005).

**Pilgrimage.** Members of society can take organized and purposeful trips to regions that are meaningful in relation to the conflict. Such visits can be a profound experience allowing the pilgrims to confront their past, release their emotional pain, affirm their identity and heal themselves. For example, Palestinians living in Israel have visited the ruins of villages where their families lived before 1948 war (Ben-Zeev, 2003).

**Time.** Time can have a healing effect on members of a society in several ways. Members of the older generations which were directly involved or harmed by the conflict and who suffer from psychological wounds need time to go through the stages of healing from shock associated with denial, to protest with realization of losses, to despair, accompanied with somatic and emotional upset; to ultimate recovery, marked by
increased well-being and acceptance of loss (Stroebe, Schut & Stroebe, 1998). Also, as time passes, these older generations die, reducing their relatively greater impact on the party in the conflict to which they belong. In addition, as time passes, new generations join the world; these younger generations may not be as in touch with, harmed by, or invested in the conflict, reducing their intention to continue the conflict.

The influence of time is usually relevant in the period after both parties have made some agreements about peace or better yet, signed a peace agreement.

In summary, successful collective self-healing can be accomplished by a combination of the above-mentioned methods. Some of the above-described methods can be implemented immediately, even in the current pre-resolution phase of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example, establishing a network of psychological services and organizing commemoration projects.

Conclusions

The processes of reconciliation and collective self-healing should be attempted by the parties entrenched in an intractable conflict, in order to heal the effects of the conflict and to achieve peace and reconciliation. These processes are complementary, and facilitate each other. In order to achieve substantial positive results, both processes require that the parties involved in a conflict have realistic expectations, implement good planning and exercise patience as well as persistence. Optimism in the psychological outlook, alterations in the psychological dynamics and consideration of various strategies are all necessary and helpful in achieving peace and reconciliation. These approaches should be applied in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for a successful roadmap to peace.
References


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