

The Unknown Heroes of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict.¹

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When the media reports on a "peace plan for Palestinians and Israelis" they usually refer to a deal between politicians in suits and ties negotiated in cities like Oslo, Washington, Sharm al-Sheikh, Madrid, Riyadh or New York and announced with great fanfare in the mainstream media.

After the photographs and very smiling handshakes, what's left? At most some reference to those same politicians and the selfish satisfaction of those who do not live the conflict of going home with a clear conscience.

One could argue here about the peace signed between Egypt and Jordan with Israel or about the Oslo negotiations, the Camp David or Roadmaps and they would be right, those negotiations were important. However, I will try to show that these high-profile meetings and processes would not

¹ This insight is based on my article titled: "Los movimientos pacifistas en el conflicto palestino-israeli" (Peacefull Movements in the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict) published as part of the book "El conflicto en Gaza e Israel 2008-2009. Una visi n latinoamericana" (Gaza and Israel Conflict 2008-2009. A Latinamerican Vision. Mexican Senate (2010).

be possible without the work and popular support that is created and sustained by the real heroes in this tragic conflict.

While there are politicians who profit from the conflict and presume electorally to know how to protect their citizens from a violence that is often created and applauded by them; while there are indolent academic "analysts" who believe that because they know how to cite the parameters discussed in negotiations and read the news about Israel and Palestine from their armchairs they are experts and their voices should be heard, there are heroes for peace who anonymously live the conflict and seek real solutions to it.



To these heroes, who do not usually appear on television and for whom no monuments will be built, nor will we see them beating up Israeli soldiers to gain international fame or insulting and verbally attacking Arabs from the stands of a football stadium, are these words addressed, the true heroes of this story, by way of homage.

As dawn breaks in Israel and Palestine, and at Israeli army checkpoints, those who connect and sometimes disconnect Israel from the West Ban, are already at work. I am talking about the Israeli women of Machsom Watch, a non-governmental organization that since 2001, in response to press reports of human rights abuses of Palestinians entering and leaving Israel every day, monitor the behavior of Israeli soldiers and police, report cases of abuse, and train and advise those Palestinians on their rights.

At 9am, Jeff Halper, the Director of the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions, will arrive at their offices in Jerusalem. This Israeli NGO founded in 1996 is an organization that through non-violent means, opposes the demolition of Palestinian homes by the Israeli armed forces. The group also works to rebuild those Palestinian homes that have already been demolished, sometimes with the support of Rabbis for Human Rights, a group founded in 1988 during the Palestinian Intifadah

and which, from its base of operations in Jerusalem, seeks to give voice to the Jewish religious tradition on human rights, as its executive director, Rabbi Ascherman, says: "the rabbi members of our organization, who come from Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed Judaism, seek to participate in non-violent actions, in demonstrations of solidarity with victims of abuse and to work in inter-religious dialogue, we also encourage the Jewish tradition of defending victims in the Yeshivot and helping in the reconstruction of demolished houses.



Perhaps the same day, in the afternoon, some Palestinian and Jewish families from the Families Forum, an association that includes hundreds of people who have lost a close family member as a result of the conflict, will meet on Hayasmin Street in Ramat Efal, Israel. The Forum was officially founded in 1998 and aims to raise awareness of the damage caused by the occupation, the search for a fair solution and an end to the terrorism and violence that kills innocent people like their murdered relatives by impacting public opinion and the Palestinian and Israeli governments to take steps towards reconciliation and understanding.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel, civil society has played a very active and decisive role in the very shaping of the nation and the State, an example of which is the broad participation of citizens in social movements, NGOs, cultural and recreational associations as well as (formerly) membership in political parties.

The daily relations between Palestinians and Israelis have been marked by different circumstances and events. It could be said that from 1948 to 1967 the Palestinian population lived under Arab leadership (Jordan and Egypt) and therefore only spontaneously and coincidentally had contact with Israeli civilians.

These sporadic interactions intensified (positively and negatively) after the 1967 war, especially along the so-called "Green Line", when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza. In parallel to this increased contact between Palestinians and Israelis, the occupation of the Sinai and the Golan Heights as well as the Arab sectors of Jerusalem produced a polarization of the Jewish population into two camps that are still recognizable in Israeli society today.

On the one hand we have what we will call "Eretz Israel Hashlema" which resulted from the union of nationalist religious Jewish groups and secular organizations that promoted the annexation and colonization of the conquered territory. On the other, we have the "Peace and Security Movement" which is mostly secular and which understood that the outcome of the 1967 war gave an opportunity to solve the problem of Arab-Israeli relations with the formula "peace for territory".



As mentioned by the academics Walid Salem and Edy Kaufman, between both groups there is a silent majority, politically undecided and, given certain circumstances, supportive of particular leaderships. Hence, the sudden changes that are registered in the elections.

There is no doubt that the creation of the State of Israel meant a milestone in the history of the Middle East, the same could be said of the creation of each and every one of the nation states in

the area, however the case of Israel and Palestine has occupied the attention of the media and a large part of Latin American and European academia dedicated to the Middle East.

It is therefore surprising to witness the very little interest shown in Palestinian groups, civil associations and non-governmental organizations which, as a result of the conflict with Israel, have evolved in a way that is unique in the Arab world.

Professor Edy Kaufman in his book "Bridging the Divide: Peace building in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict of 2006" offers us not only a valuable list of Israeli, Palestinian and mixed NGOs and civil associations (those with activities in both Israel and Palestine), but also a reflection on the development, importance and influence of this type of organized civil society manifestations.

The history of the Palestinian peace movement is very different from that of Israel, although it has been influenced by it, since it would be until the beginning of the First Intifada (1987) that one can find organized civil demonstrations with a wide impact within Palestinian society that proposed some solutions to the national conflict, fighting for their political and human rights not by means of weapons, but by non-violent means. It should be noted that the Palestinian peace movement throughout its still short history has been influenced and helped by two actors: the European Union (both at the Union level and as individual member countries) and, perhaps as an unintended consequence, Israeli civil society, mainly the peace movements.



The 1987 Intifada exposed not only the Israeli government and its disastrous policy of occupation and administration of the Palestinian territories and population, as well as its contradictions towards the Israeli Arab citizens, but also the corrupt and ineffective leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Let us remember that this gap left by the PLO in Palestinian society would be filled in a few months by Hamas.

Academic studies on Palestinian NGOs agree that the two Intifadas (1987 and 2000) as well as the Oslo Accords of 1993 laid the foundations for the development of these movements within Palestinian society, with an increase in the number of such associations being recorded towards the mid-1990s.

Although cases and initiatives of Palestinian civil society organizations have been documented since the 1930s and 1940s in parallel with the construction and definition of Palestinian national consciousness, most researchers and academics, such as Walid Salem, Juliette Verhoeven, Manuel Hassasian and the aforementioned Edy Kaufman, agree that the Intifada of '87 could be declared the founding event of organized civil society in Palestine (with wide and deep differences between Gaza and the West Bank) as well as of Palestinian peace movements.

When talking about peace movements in Israel and Palestine, their activity can be divided into three categories taking as a reference the population towards which their efforts are directed: the Israeli peace movement with actions inside Israel; the Palestinian peace movement targeting the Palestinian civil population and the joint peace movement, these would be those actions that, in terms of an Israeli/Palestinian partnership, aim to promote peace, good will, trust and mutual understanding between ordinary Palestinians and Israelis, while putting pressure on the ruling elites.



Informal contacts and mutually dependent activities between Palestinian and Israeli associations started to be established as early as the first days of the Intifada of '87, with the 1990s being the most fruitful in terms of the number of organizations founded, the intensity of contacts between them and the degree of pressure they achieved towards the formal political apparatus.

Non-governmental organizations that promote peace sometimes have an upward pressure capacity, that is, they manage to influence the politicians who make the big decisions; at the same time they have a downward effect on public opinion, which has motivated organized mass demonstrations, which also have their effect on the political class and parliamentary decisions, without forgetting their horizontal effect which is the impact and influence that the organizations have on each other.

The main fields in which these groups have achieved a certain degree of success are: bicultural and inter-religious education; legal advice and defense (the film "The Lemon Trees" by Eran Riklis reflects this dynamic very well); joint academic research; the struggle for human rights and democracy as well as economic development through cooperatives, without forgetting the alternative proposals to the territorial conflict (the Oslo process does not come out of nowhere).

Some historical successes of the Peace Camp are: the pressure they generated both inside Israel and abroad which led to the decision of the Israeli government to withdraw from Southern Lebanon in 2000. The already mentioned Intifada of 87, the pressure that Palestinian civil organizations put on Arafat and the XIX Palestinian National Congress to approve the proposals of two states and the recognition of Israel. The famous Oslo Accords of 1993 that enjoyed unprecedented popular support although later politicians made them fail, even Sharon's plan for the disengagement of the Gaza Strip in 2005 can be attributed in part to the work of these civil groups.

In our days, when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has lost its centrality as a result of a Middle East convulsed by wars, invasions and violence that seems to have no end, it would be good to turn our attention to these anonymous heroes who go out every day to do the right thing: set up bridges and build a better future for their own people, without expecting our applause, a prize or a picture in the newspaper.

