

## Guide For the Perplexed

### BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: PEACEBUILDING IN THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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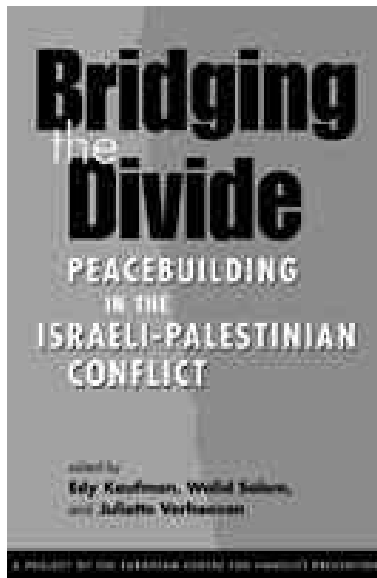
Reviewed by Reuven Shultz

The literature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict abounds with accounts of misunderstanding, violence, victimization, antagonism, hatred, armed conflict and war. Yet it would be a grievous error to believe that such accounts represent the entire reality.

*Bridging the Divide* offers a welcome counterweight to the war-centred narratives espoused by both Arabs and Israelis. It is an extensive introduction to the many civil society organizations that have sprung up in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. This 21<sup>st</sup> century "Guide for the Perplexed" is comprised of two parts: (1) interpretive essays, and (2) a directory of active organizations.

The volume, a project of the European Centre for Conflict Prevention, is a truly collaborative effort of academics and activists. It provides symmetrical treatment wherever possible, balancing Israeli and Palestinian voices. After some historical background, the main focus is on the rise (1993-2000) and fall (2000-pre-

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sent) of peace-building efforts. The empirical and anecdotal are blended here, and attempts are also made to apply and create theoretical constructs with a view to understanding how the stalled peace process might best be revived. The approach is one of drawing "best practices" and "lessons learned" from the rich experience of a decade of activity.

Before proceeding, some explanation is required. The special role played by individuals in peace building in the Middle East has been tremendous. Before the emergence of the NGOs, the field was left to lone trail-blazers whose forays into the *terra incognita*—meetings with the "other"—between Israeli and Palestinian, were often acts of individual initiative. Besides individuals such as Uri Avneri, Matti Peled, Lova Eliav and Abbie Nathan, to name a few, who rejected and were rejected by the mainstream politicians (mainly Mapai), *Moked* and *Rakah*—the Jewish and Arab Communist parties—supported such meetings, as did the kibbutz-affiliated Mapam and its associated publications, *New Outlook* and *Al Hamishmar*.

Over the decades, non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations (NGOs and CSOs) emerged as influential forces, serving as an expression of those democratic forces which sought to hold governments accountable in areas where politi-

cal parties and the press had failed or were insufficiently persistent. They arose to address specific issues: human rights in the occupied territories, civil rights and equality in Israel, and to provide social or medical assistance. In the 80's and early 90's, the NGOs opened the way for contacts between Israelis and Palestinians, making it possible for meetings to become mainstream. These meetings were one aspect of what is referred to as Track II diplomacy.

The Oslo Peace Accords of 1993, which began with meetings between individuals who had linkages to decision-makers, gave definition and impetus to the idea of Track II diplomacy. Efforts to find a solution to impasses in the peace process became decentralized, as contacts between Israelis and Palestinians multiplied. This first wave of efforts after Oslo brought forth a flood of creative thinking and problem solving.

The early successes also inspired opponents to new levels of violence and incitement. The massacre by a Jewish fanatic in the Hebron mosque, and numerous suicide bombings claimed by Hamas, were direct assaults on the peace process which shook public confidence. The assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin further destabilized the process. With the election of Benjamin Netanyahu, an outspoken opponent of the peace process, the Track II efforts still persevered, partly because of what had already been achieved, partly because of international support, and partly because of the engagement of U.S. President Bill Clinton. The dramatic breakthroughs of the first meetings and agreements imparted a sense that there was no turning back.

Menachem Klein, an Israeli, and Palestinian Riad Malki, both having been involved in Track II efforts, provide insights in their essay into Track II diplomacy. Mohammed Abu-Nimer's essay, "Nonviolent Action in Israel and Palestine: A Growing Force," examines the role of non-violence in both the Palestinian and Israeli political cultures. His essay is

partly a response to the often asked question, "Where is the Palestinian Peace Now?" It is also an attempt to place organizations like Peace Now in the Israeli context, and anticipates questions about the efficacy of the politics of non-violence. His essay includes an erudite reflection on the place of non-violence in Islamic political thought, and the semantics that practitioners of non-violence in Islam must use to be persuasive.

Tamar Herman's essay, "Civil Society and NGOs Building Peace in Israel," is followed by Manuel Hassassian's parallel contribution for Palestine. These essays take pains to explain the political background informing the operation of the NGOs and tie the activities chronologically to political events from the 1970s to the present.

## **Civil Equality, Acceptance and Their Relations to Peace-Building**

Israel's Declaration of Independence guarantees complete equality for all its citizens<sup>1</sup>, but such promises are easier to make than to fulfill. This is obvious from reading "Two Peoples, One Civil Society" by Shalom (Shuli) Dichter and Khaled Abu-Asba, who provide a sociological examination of the relationship between Arabs and Jews living in Israel. Dichter and Abu-Asba are with Sikkuy, an organization that promotes civic equality—an often overlooked area of activity, but one which will be the testing ground for the future.

The authors demonstrate that there is a distinct relationship between foreign policy priorities and domestic policy in Israel. Arabs in Israel<sup>2</sup> have often been accused of disloyalty and being a "fifth column," an enemy that will strike from within. The general distrust toward them, exclusion from the civil service, lack of recognition of their towns and

cities, inferior services in return for taxation, restrictions on building, etc., have fed their alienation from the Jewish state. Many Israeli Jews believe this alienation is endemic, regardless of circumstance.

The empirical evidence, according to the authors, contradicts this stereotypical belief. From 1993 to 1995, surveys of the Arab sector reflected growing acceptance of Israel as a Jewish Zionist state. Besides engagement in the peace process, the Labour government of Yitzhak Rabin adopted measures toward the Arab sector which inspired confidence, such as consulting with community leaders, so much so that when a few years later Labour's Ehud Barak ran for Prime Minister against Benjamin Netanyahu, he received 99 per cent of the Arab vote.

After 2000, however, with the crash of the peace process, social antagonisms and suspicions between the Israeli Jewish majority and the Arab Palestinian minority re-emerged and even sharpened. The sense of war and threat which followed translated into greater intolerance toward the Arab minority. According to a 2003 survey of the Israel Democracy Institute:

- 53% of Israeli Jews oppose equality between Jews and Arabs in Israel
- 57% support the government's encouraging of Arab emigration out of Israel
- 69% oppose Arab participation in coalition governments
- 77% feel that only Jewish majorities should count for crucial national decisions.

Shuli Dichter and Khaled Abu-Asba are concerned with the implications of this survey, and the authors spotlight the problems that will result from the non-

resolution of longstanding underlying inequalities between ethnic groups in Israel.

Civic equality in the Israeli context should not be, but is, a radical program. Israel is not Canada, but Canada's cultural mosaic, however imperfect, provides a compelling model. The authors of the *Sikkuy* study suggest that if there was a shift in Israel towards embracing the Palestinian minority and recognizing their contribution, in other words "a celebration of differences," the change would have a positive ripple effect that would be felt throughout the Middle East.

The chapter "Looking Back, Looking Forward," by the editors of *Bridging the Divide*, presents an overview of recent peace-building efforts and places them within the present political context. Unfortunately in the last seven years the best intentions and the best considered plans have failed for lack of political support. While it is inspiring to read about the efforts at 2<sup>nd</sup> track diplomacy, the Geneva initiative, which was the most comprehensive effort at formulating a solution, failed because it did not have the support of the U.S. government. Yet the authors feel that working for understanding and peace locally must continue despite the prevailing power relationships in the world.

## **The Directory**

Part Two is a directory of some 101 active organizations which in various ways are striving for human dignity for Jew and Arab, Israeli and Palestinian, alike.

More than a mere listing of internet addresses, this most valuable section is a well-organized data bank of civil society organizations, their main goals, leadership, the number of staff, major publications and ways that they may be contacted. The editors must have done a lot of leg work to compile this list.

The majority of organizations described in this book are not well known to the public; merely to list the existence and describe the

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<sup>1</sup> "The State of Israel ... will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants .... it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations."

<sup>2</sup> "Palestinian citizens of Israel" is the preferred current description of the 1.3 million Israeli citizens once described as "Israeli Arabs."

variety of these groupings fulfills an important need. Peace Now is perhaps the best known, followed by the New Israel Fund, B'tselem, Gush Shalom, Neve Shalom, etc., but beyond these, it is unlikely that Ta'ayush, Sikkuy, Givat Haviva, Machsom Watch, Ir Shalem, etc., or any of the Palestinian organizations are widely known. This volume will probably not circulate widely enough to make them better known, but its availability will open up the possibility that anyone interested will get an idea of the wide range of organizations involved in peace building.

*Bridging the Divide* is not an uncritical or self-satisfied study of efforts at peace building. The book and its various chapters are not without their faults. The essays in

this collection are frank in pointing out the weaknesses and mistaken assumptions of the civil society organizations, and in assessing their failings and limitations.

That being said, the overall impact of the book is positive and hopeful. If ever a Nobel Prize is awarded for the achievement of peace in the Middle East, the organizations featured in this volume, and the thousands of determined activists and members, should be considered as prime contenders ahead of any elected politician. It is the many grassroots custodians of this "Track II" diplomacy who are keeping the spark of hope alive while the "Track I" political leaders stall, posture and flounder, waiting for someone else

to take risks and make the first move.

The historian of science, Thomas Kuhn, posited that change in science comes first from questioning at the margins. The questions are not merely concerned with the details, but with conceptions, such as the belief in a geocentric universe, which are a challenge to an entire world view. As a critical mass of agreement is built up, a new paradigm emerges which better fits the available knowledge, and is adopted. Are we in transition from an ethnocentric existence—an age of nationalisms—to one which is more conscious of interdependence as a strategy for survival? If so, then the organizations described in this book reflect this new paradigm. ♦

## In/Out Basket ... Continued from page 9

least. (Taser Int. has even paid for Ontario Deputy Chief Coroner James Cairns—a staunch advocate of Taser use—to lecture at their conferences.)

After Dziekanski's death, the RCMP arbitrarily impounded Pritchard's video—without warrant or court order—worming it out of him through a series of broken promises. When they finally returned it, after Pritchard went to court to obtain its release, Cpl. Carr had the *chutzpah* to state that the video "was obtained legally through a process known as informed consent."

The RCMP's excuse for impounding the video was that, if viewed publicly before a proper investigation was held, it could "contaminate" the recollections of potential witnesses. But right after the incident itself, RCMP spokesman Sgt. Pierre Lemaitre put forth their version of the events (contradicted by the video when it was finally released), indicating that the Mounties weren't worried about "contamination of witness testimony" or hasty, premature judgements as long as they were in defense of their actions.

The RCMP's unsuccessful

attempts to suppress the video seem to have been motivated by the same chilling sentiment uttered by RCMP Staff Sgt. John Ward in the investigation of another death in custody (the shooting death of Ian Bush): "The public doesn't have a right to know anything." If Pritchard hadn't had the presence of mind to make the video in the first place, we would have only the police version of this event.

The death of Dziekanski, and the duplicity and authoritarianism of the RCMP in trying to cover up their actions, is only one of several sordid incidents involving the RCMP in past years, from its complicity in the "rendition" of Maher Arar to other deaths in police custody, such as those of Ian Bush and Frank Paul. As Brian Price put it in a letter to the editor (*Vancouver Sun*, Dec. 20), "Put these and all the other RCMP misdeeds together and you have a new and more sinister meaning for the phrase, 'Help! Police!'"

Nor is the RCMP's impounding of Pritchard's video the only incident of its kind. There were two incidents, in the same week in December, in which police detained journalists and tried to confiscate their cameras or film. In Vancouver, Channel M TV cameraman Ricky Tong, filming at the

scene of a shoot-out at a gas station in Vancouver, was detained by police and held aboard a Coast Mountain Bus to force him to surrender his footage; in Winnipeg, CBC cameraman Don Scott, after filming a police standoff, was arrested, held for four hours, his camera confiscated and then charged with obstructing a police officer.

The police, in Canada or elsewhere, are not reducible to their worst abuses. There are legitimate police functions in a democracy which would be necessary whatever kind of society we lived in (capitalist, socialist, etc.). There are also dedicated officers who do "serve and protect," sometimes at the cost of their own lives (as in the tragic death of RCMP Constable Douglas Scott in Nunavut). But the legal monopoly of force on the part of the police imposes high standards of accountability, even more than other government agencies. Given the record of the police (especially, but not only, the RCMP) in recent years, we need thorough changes, and in particular genuine, independent civilian oversight (not just Paul Kennedy's pathetic "Commission for Public Complaints") so that we don't end up with our own version of Franco Spain's *Guardia Civil*. ♦