

Middle East Dialogue...Glorious Past, Uncertain Future

INSTILLING HOPE FOR RESOLUTION IN THE CONTEXT OF INTRACTABLE INTERGROUP CONFLICTS

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My presentation will focus on the perceived “irresolvability” of prolonged intergroup conflicts and the extent to which this perception is malleable. Focusing on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, I describe the processes that created the lack of hope for a solution among both Israelis and Palestinians and present possible strategies by which hope for a solution can be instilled. Allowing rival parties to escape the psychological structures that frame the conflict as irresolvable offers a pathway out of intractable conflicts and consequently contributes to peace.

Many of the world's most detrimental conflicts can be defined as “intractable.” Intractable conflicts are violent, involve existential issues and persist for a long time (Bar-Tal, 2013; Kriesberg, 1998). Intractable conflicts, which are commonly identity-based, also share a more subjective quality: the parties perceive the conflict to be *irresolvable*. Put differently, group members embroiled in intractable conflicts are pessimistic about the likelihood of resolution to the extent that they simply take the conflict as a “given.” For example, 47% of Palestinians and 48% of Israelis don't believe that a peace agreement will ever be reached, not even in the distant future (Telhami & Kull, 2013). From a socio-psychological point of view, the perceived unlikelihood of a solution (and resulting lack of hope) is a central obstacle in achieving progress toward resolution because it generates passiveness. There is indeed little reason to engage in any action towards resolving a conflict when one does not believe that a solution was possible in the first place. Tragically, one of the reasons prolonged intergroup conflicts are so difficult to resolve is that they are perceived to be irresolvable.

But pessimism regarding a possible solution of the conflict, though grounded in reality, is ultimately a matter of perception, not fact (Peterson, 2000). Can we then induce optimism in collectives immersed in violent intergroup conflicts? Results from a study my colleagues and I conducted in 2013 suggests that the answer is a cautious YES. The findings reveal that while Jewish-Israelis *did not* raise their belief in the possibility of resolution after reading an article arguing that a solution was feasible, they *did* raise their belief in the possibility of resolution after viewing a Palestinian (their perceived “enemy”) express his belief that achieving peace is hard but possible (Leshem, Klar & Flores, Working Paper). The positive change in attitude was observed across gender, age, and, most importantly, across political orientation.

Utilizing specially designed video-messaging our study demonstrated the possibility to devise interventions that increase optimism among group-members mired in intractable conflicts. A direct product of this research will be a set of message-conveying strategies that may increase optimism for resolution amongst individuals and groups experiencing violent intergroup conflict. Policy makers working

on intergroup conflict can embed these strategies into their policies and campaigns. This is especially important in Israeli-Palestine where chances of violent confrontation seem to be increasing.

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