

Local Mediation with Religious Actors in Israel-Palestine

Israeli-Palestinian peace talks have failed thus far, for numerous reasons. One specific challenge has been how to address the concerns of religious actors. Local mediators' engagement with religious actors highlight some ways forward, with insights relevant beyond the specific Israeli-Palestinian context.

By Simon J. A. Mason

The religious-secular divide that crosses the Israeli-Palestinian divide is not the only or main reason for blockage of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. There are many reasons for the failure of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks to date, including the power asymmetry between Palestinians and Israelis, and the US' favoring of Israel. Another factor has been the lack of a common objective for peace talks, acceptable to a majority of Israelis and Palestinians. There has also not been a consensus so far on the minimal parameters an agreement would have to fulfill, such as those related to the civil and political rights for people who see their home in the territory situated between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.

Nevertheless, the specific challenges of the religious-secular divide and how to engage with religiously motivated political actors, needs to be addressed. Non-liberal religious actors tend to be a minority in their societies. Yet, through alliances with secular, nationalist political parties, their influence can expand beyond their communities. Many peace processes, especially those in the 1990s, primarily involved secular elites from both sides. The assassination of Israel Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 by a national religious Israeli Jew opposed to the Oslo Accords nourished a major rift between the secular left and the religious right within Israel. This rift emerged against the backdrop of Israeli territorial compromises,



Gate to the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif. Ammar Awad / Reuters

such as those related to areas in the West Bank during the Oslo process in the 1990s and the Gaza Strip in 2005. On the Palestinian side, the cleavage between secular and religious political actors has been as deep, illustrated by tensions between the secular-based Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Islamic-based Hamas, with its objective of a more Islamic Palestinian society. A secular Palestinian who participated in the informal Geneva

Accords allegedly said that they would put the Imams in the mosques, shut and lock the doors, and throw away the key. Yet, religious communities and their Rabbis, Imams, and Priests will neither be silenced nor locked away.

Local mediators from the Israeli-Palestinian context highlight insightful ways to engage with religious-political actors, such as exploring flexibility between religious

Swiss Peace Promotion in Israel-Palestine

The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) supports peace promotion in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories that seeks to reflect the legitimate interests of both Israelis and Palestinians, and complies with international law. In this context, Switzerland also supports different local mediators and peacebuilders working with religious-political actors and secular ones on both sides, including from the Herbert Kelman Institute for Interactive Conflict Transformation and the NGO *Siach Shalom* (Talking Peace).

worldviews and politics, visioning, and focusing on practical actions. Furthermore, focusing on peace talks at times prevents us from seeing what is being done at the local level to avoid crises from escalating. The following attempts to contribute to a better understanding of religiously motivated political actors in the Israeli-Palestinian context and to explore how local mediators engage with them to address short-term crises, as well as prepare for longer-term prospects of peace. These experiences do not only give hope for peace in this context, but are also insightful for other conflicts involving both secular and religiously motivated political actors.

Understanding the ‘Other’

One insight from local mediators in the Israeli-Palestinian context is the need for all people, and in particular mediators, to try to understand and respect the ‘other’s’ worldviews, narratives and more tangible needs and concerns in a non-judgmental

Visioning is a very powerful tool for opening up conversations and interactions.

manner. One possible understanding of worldview is that it entails ‘shared understandings of reality orienting social and political life’, related to what are seen as the most important matters of life and death (see further readings on page 4). No actor is neutral when it comes to worldviews, be these religious – for example related to *Halacha* (Jewish law) or *Shar’ia* (Islamic law) – or non-religious, for instance related to humanism or communism. It is generally easier to address conflicts if actors are embedded in similar worldviews, as it is easier to understand each other and assess what is seen as a legitimate outcome of a mediation process. For actors that have different worldviews understanding others’ concerns is often more challenging and the criteria for assessing whether the outcome is legitimate are likely to differ. Yet, worldviews and their narratives, that is meaning

making stories, are not deterministic in prescribing political action. Moreover, a focus on worldviews and narratives does not replace the need to analyze more tangible economic, political, legal, and security concerns of all actors. Rather, the purpose of trying to understand worldviews and narratives is to see how they interact with more tangible issues and to explore the flexibility between worldviews, narratives, and specific choices of political action. Actor groups entail multiple worldviews, narratives, and diverse political objectives. It is important to understand the nuances, some of which are summarized here, albeit superficially.

Jewish Actors

According to Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS) 2020 records, the population of Israel (approximately 9.2 million) can be divided into 74 per cent Jewish, 21 per cent Arab/Palestinian, and 5 per cent other. Jewish Israelis are not a homogenous group. The majority of the Jewish Israeli political parties are secular-based. Of the Jewish Israeli actors, the worldviews of two communities, the ultra-orthodox (approximately 12 per cent of Israel’s population) and national religious (approximately 12 per cent of Israel’s population), strongly shape political behavior. Yet, they do so in very different ways.

The ultra-orthodox have traditionally stayed out of national politics and viewed the state critically. In this worldview, redemption and peace come from prayer, religious study, and living according to the laws of the Torah. The primary purpose of engaging in politics is to protect their secluded way of life, their distinct education system, avoid intermarriages, uphold their gender norms, maintain social welfare, and avoid secularization in military service. Ultra-orthodox women have on average six children. This means that the community is growing demographically, and potentially also politically. The ultra-orthodox hold no unified position in relation to Palestinians.

They stay away from accessing the Temple Mount / *Haram al-Sharif*, Judaism’s holiest site, believing that the Temple has to be built someday by God, not by humans, and that entry to it is forbidden until then. If they live in the settlements in the West Bank (in religious terms, Judea and Samaria), it is generally for economic rather than religious reasons, as housing is subsidized. Indeed, ultra-orthodox rabbinic authorities habitually rule that territorial concessions are permissible in order to save the lives of Jews: the sanctity of life has primacy over the sanctity of the land. Thus, for some Rabbis, there is religious legitimacy to hand over territories if this move brings true peace.

By contrast, in the national religious perspective, a predominant idea is that redemption comes from political action by human beings (even by secular Jews, as when they built the state of Israel in 1948) as part of God’s plan regarding the future of the Jews. Religion and politics are intertwined, with the religious reading of the Torah leading to political action. In relation to Palestinians, politics tend to be antagonistic, as some of the followers of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935) see it as their religious duty to actively work towards creating the conditions that would enable full redemption, such as by settling the land or making the state Jewish. National religious settlers in the West Bank are often there also for religious reasons. The belief that the Temple Mount / *Haram al-Sharif* is the site where the Third Jewish Temple will be rebuilt in the future (at the present site of the Dome of the Rock), animates the attitudes of many in the national religious community. Some national religious Jews demonstrate this by visibly praying on the Temple Mount / *Haram al-Sharif*, which Palestinians see as a provocation. The national religious’ alliance with the Jewish secular right means they have political influence far beyond their community, especially on questions of settlement policies.

Palestinian Actors

About half of the world’s Palestinian population live as refugees in Jordan and other countries, while the other half live in Israel proper (approximately 2 million), according to the ICBS in 2020, and the West Bank (approximately 3 million) and Gaza strip (approximately 2 million), according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in 2020. A small elite benefits from the *status quo*, but the large majority of Palestinians are marginalized in all fields of life.

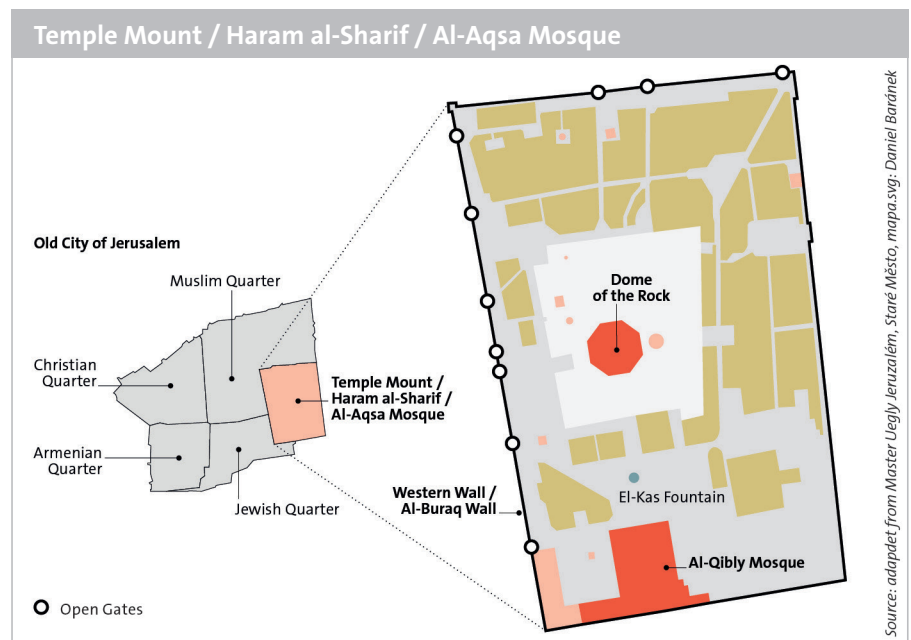
Amongst other things, they lack freedom of movement, jobs, education, and health care. What unites most Palestinians is the struggle for civil rights in Israel, ending Israeli occupation in the West Bank – including East Jerusalem –, ending the blockade of Gaza, gaining full self-determination, and the right of the Palestinians to return. Moreover, Palestinians deem one of their national missions to be defending the *al-Aqsa* Mosque, Islam’s third most holy site, after Mecca and Medina. Due to its paramount national importance for them and its importance to Muslims worldwide, they consider it unthinkable to relinquish it in a peace agreement.

Palestinians are not a homogenous group: they include secular-based leftists, secular-based nationalists (*Fatah*), and Islamic-based parties, such as Hamas, as well as Northern and Southern Branch in Israel. The majority of Palestinians are Muslim, but there are also Christian, Druze, Jewish, and Samaritans. Most secular Palestinians – who can be religious, though this does not directly affect their political choices – refer to international law such as UN Security Council Resolutions and human rights, leading to political actions focused on civil rights, the two-state solution, and ending Israeli occupation. By contrast, in some understandings of Islamic-based parties, the land of Palestine is deemed a form of Islamic *waqf* (endowment) consecrated for future Muslim generations until Judgment Day. Accordingly, land seized by Israel from the Palestinians cannot legitimately belong to Israel.

Exploring Hermeneutic Flexibility

Even if held by a minority, certain actors’ readings of Judaism and Islam see each party’s control of the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River as being necessary for religious reasons – independently of other political, economic, or security factors. Yet, the religions of all actors also entail ideas for peaceful co-existence. The Jewish idea of ‘unity of opposites’, for example, maintains that all people – be they Jews or Arabs – are creations of the divine. Similarly, God says in the *Qur’an*: “Now, indeed, we have conferred dignity on the children of Adam” (*Surah* 17:70). The scriptures also show that both Jews and Muslims are literally from the same family, decedents of Abraham.

Many local mediators have thus explored the flexibility between religious worldviews and political actions. Accordingly, full exclusive political sovereignty is not the only



solution to the actors’ religious concerns. Explorations of flexibility require creating environments in which it is possible to listen to diversity peacefully, even if it may be painful. One approach, developed by the NGO *Siach Shalom*, is to go beyond the specifics of the conflict into the even bigger picture of what peace is in each worldview. Visioning is a very powerful tool for opening up conversations and interactions that inevitably address specifics of the conflict as well. Intra-group preparatory meetings prior to meetings with actors holding different worldviews is often necessary. Visioning within and involving different communities is also one way to prepare for a possible common objective for Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Local mediators often work in mediation teams that include Jewish secular, Jewish religious, Palestinian secular, and Palestinian religious mediators. This enhances their understanding of, and outreach to, actors from different worldviews. It also increases their impartiality, legitimacy, and acceptability. Local mediators working with the other side need to build trust with them, while also being careful to avoid being seen within their own camps as compromised as a result of contact with the ‘other’.

Multiple ‘Victory Speeches’

One method local mediators have used is to avoid talking about final status agreements, which seek to end the conflict once and for all, by demanding the parties to ex-

PLICITLY state they have no further claims, such as negotiated at the Camp David Summit in 2000 and the Annapolis process of 2007–2008. This pursuit can cause a backlash amongst those religious actors who see their ultimate dream being made impossible by such an agreement. Instead, one idea is to work towards a long-lasting (rather than permanent) agreement that allows for peaceful co-existence and fulfills the core aspirations of all sides, yet which also leaves space for future generations to deal with religious-political goals that currently seem incompatible. A process leading to such an agreement would require a common objective and consensus on minimal parameters. A related idea is to make the preamble of a peace agreement thin, allowing for heterogeneous actors to justify the agreement in disparate ways so that it would cohere with their worldviews. Along with the above-mentioned ideas, Ofer Zaslberg, from the Herbert Kelman Institute, suggests negotiating an agreement in a manner allowing for developing different ‘victory speeches’: members of different constituencies need to be able to root the agreement in their respective communities’ worldviews and narratives (see further readings on page 4).

Focusing on Practical Action

Another approach local mediators have used is to focus on managing conflicts related to daily questions of co-existence. For example, different local mediators were involved in addressing a crisis in 2017 involv-

Further Reading

Abbas Aroua, “**Transforming Religious-Political Conflicts: Decoding-Recoding Positions and Goals**”, *Politorbis* 52, 2011.

CARIM (CSS ETH Zürich and Swiss FDFA), University of Vancouver, Seton Hall University, **Mediating Conflicts between Groups with Different Worldviews: Approaches and Methods**, see CSS website.

Dezha Ib Abdi, Simon Mason, **Mediation and Governance in Fragile Contexts: Small Steps to Peace**, Lynne Rienner 2019.

Ofer Zalberg, “**Beyond Liberal Peacemaking: Lessons from Israeli-Palestinian Diplomatic Peacemaking**”, *Review of Middle East Studies*, 53(1), 2019.

ing installation of metal detectors at the gates to the *Haram al-Sharif* / Temple Mount. After two Israeli police guards were shot at the site, Israeli authorities had installed these for security reasons to prevent this from reoccurring. Yet, this had led to large-scale mobilization by Palestinian worshippers who saw this move as signaling a violation of an Islamic prohibition regarding non-Muslim control over the mosque and change in the historic *status quo* of the place. They, therefore, refused to enter the mosque, instead holding mass prayers around its gates. Through local mediation efforts, as well as the involvement of the Jordanian authorities, the metal detectors were removed and inconspicuous security measures were placed further away from the holy site. The mediators, including religious leaders from Mosaica and Adam Center, had been engaged for many years in a reli-

gious peace initiative, so they had strong preexisting trust with the Israeli police. Further mediation was needed in the last stages of the same crisis, when Israeli authorities planned to keep the gate at which the deaths occurred temporarily closed, fearing some Palestinians would conduct victory celebrations there. Islamic worldview sanctifies the mosque’s wholeness, and this partial measure was seen as violating the mosque’s integrity. Masses started to accumulate at all the gates. At this point, the understandings reached so far were about to unravel and the threat of riots grew. A Palestinian mediator explained the problem to a Jewish mediator, who contacted a senior adviser to Israel’s prime minister. The gate was opened with Muslim authorities ensuring celebrations would not take place at the gate. There are many such crisis mediations taking place on an ongoing basis. Incidents can flare up if appropriate steps are not taken. Efforts that respect the parties’ worldviews and needs, taken jointly by Jews and Palestinians, help to avoid escalation, and can sometimes even be leveraged for longer-term policy changes.

Supporting Space for Dialogue

International actors can play a role in supporting local mediators, who can work across conflict divides. This also requires self-reflection on the side of the donor, to work with actors who may have very different worldviews. It requires building trust with local mediators, which takes time. Examples of such work supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) is summarized in the box on page 2. For citizens of donor countries, there is a need for understanding that peace promotion does not only mean working for a final

peace agreement, but can also imply supporting small steps toward peace. These may be unspectacular, but necessary for people to continue to co-exist more or less peacefully in the short term. Without this, long-term prospects for peace may also decrease.

As long as ‘peace’ is equated with secularization, it will be rejected by some religious actors in the Israeli-Palestinian context. This has been the premise behind the work of *Siach Shalom*. Religious actors may be open to peace and supportive of practical steps towards peaceful co-existence, as long as such steps make sense in their respective religious worldviews and narrative framing of the situation. Such efforts must also make sense in secular worldviews and framings; and it must consider tangible security, economic, legal, and political needs of all actors; or else they will not be viable. Thus, space for dialogue is needed within and between both Israeli and Palestinian societies, involving actors with religious and non-religious worldviews. Local mediators can facilitate respectful relations across different communities and develop visions of peace that make sense according to different secular and religious understandings of reality.

For more on Mediation and Peace Promotion, see [CSS core theme page](#).

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