

TEAM TEACHING OUR OWN CONFLICT ACROSS THE DIVIDE – The Israeli/Palestinian Experience *

Abstract: In 1992, two academics - one an Israeli from Jerusalem and the other a Palestinian from Bethlehem -- began team-teaching a course at the University of Maryland, College Park. The course's original title, "the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict," has evolved over the years into a more forward-looking and open-ended title, "Conflict Resolution: the Israeli/Palestinian Experiment." Based on this unusual and successful teaching experience, several lessons have been derived that readers will find illuminating given the prevalence of one-sided and mutually antagonistic ways of approaching and understanding the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Colleagues often wonder how is it possible to teach the same course twenty years without being routinized. The truth is that the bonding between both of us, Israeli and Palestinian sharing by now a US citizenship, the bonding is so strong that can overcome the many unanticipated and predicted moments of crisis. Our getting to know in Jerusalem several year earlier around the outbreak of the First Intifada [Palestinian Uprising in the late 1980's is a story worth sharing, and we can add it at the end, if readers will first become acquainted with the pedagogic strategy that we both developed based on our rather unique and sustained experience. Team-teaching at the College Park, with many colleagues providing us with a stimulating atmosphere has made us inseparable life friends, notwithstanding the asymmetries of our conflict – our nations being the occupier and occupied. Such macro sad situation does not affect the care we put in all our working as equals- selecting together the bibliography, drafting the syllabus, dividing the time and lectures' subjects in the classroom, participating in simulations with reverse role playing, commenting on often dramatic real time events and more. Our summers at College Park have provided us also quality time outside the classroom, and why not mentioning? living together for such a long time 6 weeks x 20), has been we believe an unbeatable record that has consolidated our friendship so that we can transcend the many difficult moments that our people and ourselves have been living through. People around us are often asking how is it that we survived the building of fences and walls by Israel, the violent clashes, the fear and the growing separation that has also occurred among academics.

Team-teaching our own conflicts, in addition to the educational effect of such idea involved also additional psychologic and political concerns that require analysis and treatment. The moments of exhilaration at times of peace negotiations have been less frequent than the more sustained patterns of violence, human rights violations, underground and state terror. Here are a couple of examples. In the year 2000 Manuel at the same time of our class was busy in the Office of Negotiations of the Palestine Liberation Organization, as head of the team on Jerusalem, and was asked to stay there as a back up to the imminent negotiation process that took place at Camp David, President Bill Clinton convening both PM Ehud Barak and President Arafat. But the more prevailing news from back home were ranging from bad to worse

For many years, until we move from the Tydings building, , stuck to the door of the office we share at the University of Maryland you could find two photos: One taken from Newsweek, with Manuel looking through a huge hole in the wall of his home in Bet Jala, after being shelled by an Israeli tank- three days after returning from College Park. His family and him were on the other side of the house and miraculously saved; hanging next to it, a second picture, the memorial built at the Nancy Reagan Plaza on Mont Scopus of the nine students and staff killed a few months earlier by a bomb hidden by a Hamas member in a backpack left in the Frank Sinatra cafeteria, a few steps away from Edy's Truman Institute at Hebrew University. The macro conflict is tinted by our own concerns of survival, our families, friends and colleagues. At times of despair, when the bad news keep coming, it seems that the uphill battle to change the course of action is only a kind of "occupational therapy", Edy says in the double meaning of military and time-spending sense, with very meager results. But some inner voice, yet not clearly identified, tell us not to give up.

Manuel's family tragic episode called for immediate action. Edy, long distance was not certain about the house's shape, let alone if the family survived the shelling unharmed. HE was not sure how best to express concern. Would an e-mail or a FAX to his office at Bethlehem University reach him? It can enable to write a more carefully thought statement about sharing the grief. On the other hand, would a telephone call find the family at a difficult time? Or would they be too upset to talk about an incident provoked by his own people?. What finally brought Edy to use this last option was the sudden recollection of a similar case in the recent past, when a missile also partially destroyed the newly built house of Akram, a Palestinian working in the Ramallah office of the Norwegian FAFO [the same trade-union NGO that convened the Oslo process leading to the Peace Accords). At that time, some of his Israeli contacts offered to collect money to cover at least partially the expenses of repairing the damage. The idea of restorative justice was appealing to us. But Akram gave a courteous "no thanks" answer. But it was, nonetheless, an entry point to break the ice in a practical way. So Edy called Manuel, express his concern about their wellbeing, and made a similar suggestion. The Hassassians had many Jewish friends that would feel somehow relieved if they could participate, if not physically, at least financially in the

rebuilding effort. His answer was also a firm “no thanks”, and after reassuring Edy that they were physically OK and that was what counted most, he then said that he is angry but not negatively affected in his determination that this senseless violence has to come to an end

And last summer of 2014, after being both here in Washington DC together Manuel was summoned back to his post in London when after the third Gaza War between Hamas vs IDF started. We did not give up, and through videoconferencing and Skype Manuel was present every single class, answer questions and provided the sense of reality of our conflict.,

We have been for a while keen in sharing our experience with colleagues from across the divide in so many of the current ethno-political or identity driven conflicts [e.g. Greeks and Turks in Cyprus, Muslim/Hindu in Kashmir, Ukraine/Russia, Sinhalese and Tamil in Sri Lanka, Muslim and Christians in Nigeria, Turks and Kurds in Turkey, Dominican and Haitians in the Hispaniola Island, etc.]. To replicate, adapt and improve and multiply our own “learning by doing” has made us reflect that if it works in practice over longitudinal axis, it may be of theoretical significance. Hence we wish to bring up some of the main considerations.

Looking back at nearly two decades of joint classroom experience, we have developed a fifteen-point approach to team-teaching our conflict. While presentation of an antagonistic black-and-white picture might sharpen readers’ grasp of the differences that divide us, it does not highlight the common ground, an understanding of which we hope will move readers not only to understand the Israeli–Palestinian conflict but also to consider alternative solutions. Briefly, our “rules of engagement” are as follows:

1. *Don’t get locked into conventional zero/sum and deterministic interpretations of our conflict.* Our approach is to take a more imaginative and analytical view of the past, present, and future. While official narratives of the past are adversarial, solutions discussed at present often between governments and academics are pointing to win/win outcomes, including when dealing with finite resources such as land and water

2. *Periodization is a matter of choice.* A significant decision must be made when presenting our common history: Shall it be offered in the context of struggle between two national movements at loggerheads for the same piece of land, Palestine/*Eretz Israel*, or shall we opt for a retrospective on encounters between Arabs and Jews or between Islam and Judaism fourteen centuries ago? If we choose the first option, then conflict epitomizes our relationship. However, if we opt to teach our common heritage and ignore the previous century, one can infer that the interaction throughout the ages in the Middle East and the Iberian Peninsula was a history of coexistence, even in asymmetrical situations in which Jews comprised a minority in the lands of Islam. Surely the Jewish community under Islam enjoyed better privileges and treatment than under Christendom. While courses like ours normally focus only on the era of conflict, we are prompted to salvage the longer historical trajectory to remind ourselves that confrontation is not a permanent feature in our relationship. Since we have had a record of coexistence in the past, a fashionable deterministic prediction that we cannot live in peace in the future is not substantiated when envisioning the long-term perspective. Hence, the main challenge lies in knowing how we can bring it forward without leaving a legacy of violence and denial for future generations.

3. *Historical events are a genuine part of the collective memory of both Arabs and Jews, and we should present both narratives as they are predominantly taught in Israeli and in Palestinian schools.* To understand with empathy the other's subjective perception of realities, it is important to be familiar with both sides of the story. Looking back into our respective nation-building processes, the tendency is to glorify our own role and explain the conflict as an outcome of the adversary's misdeeds or bad conduct. Seeing the other's parallel history can be an important eye opening experience. We need to respect each other's narratives and, whenever we differ, to include both versions in our analysis. Once we have acknowledged our differences, we have a better hope of affirming our common ground and discovering a shared vision of the future.

4. *In presenting a respective of our own past, we must frame each of the two distinct narratives in their own staged approach.* When introducing the phases of our conflict, we address the prevailing historiography of each side and present it as such, even if the periods and events that marked the Palestinian and Jewish developments at times do not converge. For instance, the periodization of the creation of the State of Israel was

preceded by the imprint of six distinct migratory waves (*Aliyah*, in the singular), each with different origins, characteristics, and idiosyncrasies. After the “War of Liberation” in 1948, the “wars of Israel” (1948, 1956, 1967, 1982, 1991, 2006, 2008) with established Arab countries (even if triggered or affected by hostile behavior by Palestinians) are often recognized as turning points. From the other perspective, the pre-1948 *Al Nakba* (The Catastrophe) is characterized as the transition of an overall Arab national movement toward a distinct Palestinian patriotism. By and large, from 1948 until the Oslo process, the movement was transformed from a leaderless people through its formative stages of armed strategy to the establishment of the PLO, which was the culminating response to the failures of inter-Arab politics. The process of democratization and moderation can be seen through landmarks not only related to Israel but also in its quest for independence from Arab states’ tutelage. Even if the causality of events presented in different sequences contradict each other’s official narratives, we contrive to present it with a sense of respect for each other’s truth.

5. *As with many other parts of our teamwork we want to respect the terms for references used by both Palestinians and Jews.* One matter over which we have had lengthy deliberations and negotiations is how to name incidents, territories, and

wars. In the preparation of the syllabus we have made ad hoc decisions to use both sides’ formulations. For example, we consider the 1948 war as both Israel’s *Milhemet ha Atzma’ut* (War of Independence) and the Palestinians’ *Al Nakba*. And we address a more current controversy as the Palestinians’ categorical condemnation of the “Apartheid Wall” in the West Bank and Israel’s official support of the “Security Barrier.” Sometimes we use parallel nomenclature, separated by a dash, as in “Israel–Palestine.” In other cases, we have accepted the vocabulary in common usage by most of the world—for example, West Bank of the Jordan River, rather than the Jewish biblical names Judea and Samaria. We have chosen to relate to all these territories as “occupied,” using the language of international institutions, rather than the Jewish settlers’ reference to “liberated” lands or the official Israeli term “administered” territories. On the other hand, we have related to the Jewish state as “Israel”—its official name as a recognized member of the United Nations (U.N.)—rather than “Occupied Palestine” or the “Zionist entity,” terms expressing the reluctance of many in the Arab world to recognize Israel’s existence.

6. We use the tools of social history so that the focus is not only on leadership and elites but also on social and political movements as they developed on the ground. This is not to say that leaders such as David Ben-Gurion, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, Menachem Begin, or Yasser Arafat have not played critical roles in determining crucial decisions about our two peoples, but we must recognize that this is a protracted, identity-driven, and ethno-political conflict with deep roots. Through the years of prolonged violence and fear, it is not so much a government-versus-government border dispute as a classic protracted communal people-versus-people conflict. It is when focusing on our own communities rather than talking only about governments and leaders that we are able to find, in both camps, individuals and civil society organizations that have reached a high level of agreement about concrete ways of resolving our conflict.

Whereas it seems to be that track II or citizens diplomacy is less policy relevant, it may well be that over a longer period of time, such ‘outside the box,’ innovative ideas will reach decision makers. This is the case of the overwhelming support of the “two-state solution” and more specific recommendations on how to solve complex issues such as the future of Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees that have been incorporated into the “Clinton parameters”

7. An important challenge in co-teaching and co-authoring is how to stress common interests and avoid confrontational discourse. In many cases, for the sake of simplification the tendency is often to show a black and-white picture of confrontational positions to audiences who learn more about what separates us than about our common ground. Such a version of history is justified when Israeli and Palestinian leaders have shown adversarial tendencies, failed to build trust, and have continued to point to the other’s failures rather than opting for introspection and addressing their own inadequacies. In the pictures that we present, we do not ignore the alternative historic narrative, but we also present the voices of moderation and compromise. Even when such voices represented minority opinions, their insights were sometimes vindicated, often decades later, when leaderships endorse their views. For example, until 1977 Israel’s Labor governments stressed the “Jordanian option,” which viewed the Hashemite dynasty as partners and ignored the distinctive voices of the Palestinians, despite the fact that important Israeli voices called for dialogue with the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people; it was this approach that was duly formalized with the Oslo Accords in 1993. By now even Likud’s leader, PM Netanyahu’s has been calling for negotiations with the

head of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. Likewise, Palestinians advocating a two-state solution were ostracized and often assassinated, only to be vindicated in 1998 when the Palestinian National Council convened in Algiers and adopted the very same policy. Likewise, the vociferous opposition of the Likud leadership—led then by General Ariel Sharon—to the suggested pullout from Gaza and Jericho (in the east and center of the West Bank) in the Oslo process in 1993. However, this idea became compatible with the 2005 unilateral disengagement plan of then-PM Sharon, which included Gaza and three settlements in “Samaria” (in the north of the West Bank).

8. *Understanding the asymmetries between us is an essential element of judgment.* Ugly atrocities, missed opportunities, and leadership mishaps have occurred on both sides, but we must avoid promoting a false parallelism. We must stress the difference in status between the Palestinians (the weaker party, living as an occupied people) and the Israelis (the stronger party, which occupies large parts of Palestinian territory). Although the case is in many ways an example of top-dog Israelis versus underdog Palestinians, we also must be aware of the perceptions of many Jews who see the conflict as little “David” (Israel) facing threatening “Goliath” (the Arab and Muslim worlds).

9. *In sharing our contending stories, the point is not to score debating points, or to*

argue with selective facts about who came first or who is acting or reacting, or to determine who has more rights. In reality, we often face a conflict of right versus right. Judging from the stubbornness of both nations to remain on the land in spite of adverse circumstances, it can be agreed that both nations have enough claims and rights. We sense, and rather should emphasize, a common destiny: our nations are “doomed” to live together. And if there is a nuclear threat from Iran, we are also “doomed” to die together. Hence making peace with its neighbor may be for Israel a meaningful additional security guarantee to pre-empt a strike from Teheran “in solidarity with the Palestinian people”.

10. In a conflict situation, the natural tendency is to highlight the positive features of each society’s history. However, *we do not need to balance the pluses or equally share the blame all through the process, as long as the picture we present recognizes change over time.* For instance, it is clear to us that in the years that preceded Israel’s 1948 independence, the Zionist leadership was mostly supportive of moderate options and difficult compromises with the Palestinians, whose leadership was overwhelmingly

rejectionist to all plans of reconciliation. At the same time, the peace forces in Jewish society, though insignificant, were more proactive than those well-intentioned individuals within the Arab community. In fact, an opposite trend can be discerned after 1967, when Palestinian official institutions increasingly and dramatically changed their policies toward the acceptance of “the other” while fanaticism based on religious and expansionist premises developed intensively within Israeli society, and political leadership. As Yeoshafat Harkabi mentioned in his landmark *Fateful Decisions*, in the first fifty years it had been the Zionists who knew to differentiate between grand design and practical reality, opting as a small minority in Palestine for incremental and moderate policies. However, with time as the relative strength of Israel over its Arab neighbors became self-evident, it was the weakening Palestinian side that conceded its grand design vision of a state from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea, in favor of more pragmatic realities.

11. *When the contradictory claims to tangible and intangible needs are expressed, the*

issue of a real conflict of rights calls for innovative ideas of conflict transformation...

We consider this to be not just a slogan but rather a doable approach that leads to alternatives to resolving the core issues (called the final or “permanent status” issues in the Oslo peace process), such as underground water aquifers or Jerusalem or generating new future scenarios. We have used with our students, a consensus building framework that starts with simulating Palestinians and Israelis in an adversarial stage of mutual recrimination through a phase of reverse role playing, and ends with joint, functional team-based brainstorming of ideas suitable for the Old City in Jerusalem.

12. *While the dimensions of the larger Arab–Israeli or “Middle East” conflict have fluctuated over time, we both recognize in our narratives the centrality of the Israeli–Palestinian issue.* Over time, many additional layers have been added (regional Arab involvement, the Cold War and even nuclear threats) to the original and continuous strife of the protracted communal conflict of two peoples who consider the same land to be their own. As a result, addressing the core of the issue in depth is an essential way to minimize the added complications created by other state and non-state actors such as Hamas.

13. *While we recognize the importance of foreign powers in the conflict (nowadays, chiefly the United States), these outside powers have usually been unable to prevent war or impose peace.* The United States was at times able to

stop armed struggle and channel such efforts into diplomacy. Yet both in the case of the 1977–1979 Begin–Sadat negotiations (Camp David I) and the 1993 Oslo peace process between Palestinians and Israelis, the main initiative was bilateral, and only later did the White House plays a key role. Hence, we stress that in addition to high level presidential diplomacy, the Quartet's (USA, European Union, United Nations and Russia) envoys need not only to shuttle between government officials but invest soft power in peace-building from the bottom up in both societies.

14. *Putting our conflict in a comparative perspective is necessary to understand that the uniqueness of its tenants is composed of similarities and differences. Using lateral thinking and learning from the costly lessons and best practices for the transformation*

of other disputes into peaceful coexistence (such as Northern Ireland or South Africa), has an inherent value that also needs to be integrated.

15. *Understanding the historical circumstances that in the past brought about either cooperation or confrontation can be helpful in understanding the future course that the relations between these two nations may take - a forward-looking approach is the best guarantee for resolution.* If we can agree and determine that confrontations between Arabs and Jews are a product of historical circumstances rather than a result of deterministic inherent contradictions between the two cultural systems, then we know that future relations can, to some degree, be controlled and managed by human decisions. Stressing our common heritage as Abrahamic religions is now more relevant than ever when the main obstacle for peace comes from fundamentalist Jewish settlers and political Islamists groups such as Jihad Al Islam or Hamas.

Obviously, *scholars committed to search for common ground in a protracted and violent conflict cannot maintain strict neutrality towards the issues at stake.* Even if at times in the social sciences one tends to hide personal values under the quantitative results, or public opinion pools, it may often be better to express at the outset what our personal views are. At the same time, there should be a deep commitment to impartiality, namely, to present the diversity of views that are formulated by each side, and weigh their importance-regardless of whether they are contrary to one own views.

In short, team teaching and co-authoring provides students and readers with a better perspective, not only on the history that separates us (which is mostly

the ultimate responsibility of our leadership) but also the shared understanding of reality shaped by an epistemic community of academics and intellectuals that has evolved through years of working together. With modesty, this rather unique experience could be replicated by academics in many other ethnopolitical conflicts, hence contributing to highlighting the fact that with systematic and innovative thinking, there is a way out.

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*** For more information: 1) ask for the syllabus of the course "Conflict Resolution – The Israeli/Palestinian Experiment- Dept. of Government and Politics, University of Maryland- (kaufmane@umd.edu); 2) look up the five segments in Youtube, Google – 'Israeli Palestinian Team Teaching'.*

There is no better way to be introduced into this often surrealistic but real, indeed very real, experiment than by joining us and be trained to do so. This would be a wonderful legacy. Israelis and Palestinians we have been often pampered with the attention of the international community while there are many other identity driven conflicts that have been forgotten or not being the focus of attention. Our wish is now more than ever to be of service and provide guidance and assistance to other “partners in conflict” to be able to co-teach, co-author and show by their perseverance and dedication that we can live together. In our Palestine/Israel case, perhaps as neighbors- citizens of two sovereign states,. In other conflicts, as sharing one hyphenated identity in one state or any other solution. At times of violent conflict, we as academics, being blessed by the highest levels of education in our own societies, have the social responsibility of showing that peacebuilding is possible even at the most difficult times. In all cases, we should internalize what we know and become scholar/practitioners . As our dear colleague Prof. Stanley Cohen wrote , the word “acknowledgement” involves the concept of act-upon-knowledge. With this in mind, we are happy to have contributed to this book our shared experience with each other as teachers.

Even to replicate and multiply the experience, our legacy to people in other conflicts is of great importance not only for us but for the multiplication of this kind of making peace among academics from both sides. Both patriotic but convinced that at the intellectual and pragmatic level, peace is not only desirable but possible.

Reflect on all this rather unique experience we have already summarized what we think is important in the pedagogic aspects, the drawing of the syllabus and the involvement of students, some of them often passionate with the arguments of one side. So the attachment provides the recommendations,