A New Psychology of Hope in Palestine?

by Warren Spielberg

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Ten years ago as a consultant for a dialogue project designed to promote understanding between young Palestinians and Israelis, I witnessed the following exchange during a dialogue in Ramallah:

Shaul, one of the Israeli participants in the Peace Now/Palestinian Authority Dialogue Project, had been lecturing the Palestinians in the room on how they should conduct themselves to "earn peace." This enraged a number of the Palestinians.

In defiance, Sabri, one of the Palestinian youths, praised the work of "The Engineer," the premier suicide bomber of the era, who had, according to Abu, "been effective in waking the Israelis up to the plight of Palestinians."

In response, Motti, a husky twenty-five-year-old Israeli, angrily replied, drawing on the famed sarcasm of twentieth-century Israeli diplomat-politician Abba Eban: "You Palestinians will always lose an opportunity to make final peace."

Another young man, Taisir, angrily shouted, "You Israelis think you are so smart — you brag that you created a state out of nothing … with your hands, yet you have had the money of the rich Jews around the whole world who have helped you."

This exchange occurred within a larger verbal battle that had erupted earlier, highlighting Israeli disrespect of Palestinian competence and Palestinian resentment toward Israeli assertions of intellectual and moral superiority. The interaction, taken as a whole, represents what I have termed as an "identity enactment," a psychological impasse blocking dialogue and human interaction. Enactments play out negatively, often via unconscious feelings or attitudes such as cultural identity, trauma, and shame. Embedded in the outbreak was the expression of insecurity, envy, and shame felt by many Palestinians.

Ten years later, as I traveled the land, I heard no such "bitter lemons" from Palestinian young people living on the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem). Instead, I witnessed a new generation of young people displaying cautious confidence and optimism. Take, for example, the students I met in Nablus: a group of fifteen-to-twenty-year-old Palestinians busy setting up their own Internet company to provide advanced technical tutoring for a new generation of computer users. Maha, a keen
fifteen-year-old girl whose eyes conveyed a strong sense of purpose, remarked: “I do not know when there will be peace. This will be up to our leaders and Allah. But I don’t care in the long run; I am intent on educating myself and developing our minds to build a new state.”

Faisal, a seventeen-year-old honors student who has experienced the worst of the Israeli Occupation, echoed similar sentiments. Both he and his father have been taken from their home several times in the cold of winter to stand all night for interrogation.

“Who do you know that is working against the Israeli state?” This was the question they heard over and over again on many cold nights from 2 a.m. until they saw the hues of the rising sun. They were released because they had no information. But the humiliation of having their hands tied behind their backs and being forced to stand all night embittered Faisal. “Still,” he asserted, “I can only fight through education, through bettering my people.”

To be sure, the changes in the Palestinian infrastructure and economy have increased confidence and optimism. According to Dr. Samir Abdullah, Director for Economic Research for the Palestinian Authority, there have been huge strides: increased tax revenues and growth in investment, both privately and by donor countries, have spurred the economy. Productivity grew by 9 percent in 2009, and the government deficit was cut by $1.2 billion. The stock market average grew by 11 percent. New schools, more trained police, new roads, and new health centers have been built as improvements have been made to the water systems. With the addition of new schools, the school day is now down to a single shift, and teachers are receiving more training.

Ghassan Khatib, spokesman for Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, noted in an interview, “the sense of hope is also tied to increased security — work brings hope and hope brings work. And with increasing employment, political radicalization has decreased.” A calculated message of self-empowerment is also part of the overall economic program. According to Khatib, the message of “self-reliance and state-building” is passed along by the media, in the mosques, and through the education system (by teachers and in textbook material that emphasizes personal initiative).

But other factors are spurring self-reliance and optimism, supplanting the negativism of decades of despair and victimization. Based on my interviews with students, policy makers, and intellectuals, I have come to the conclusion that even as the Separation Wall constructed by Israel has restricted Palestinians’ ability to travel freely within their communities (the wall cuts substantially into the West Bank, sometimes dividing Palestinian farmland and towns, rather than tracing the pre-1967 borders), and even as it has generated feelings of imprisonment, threat, and outrage, provoking some Palestinians to angrily describe it as an “Apartheid Wall,” it has also inspired many toward self-reliance and improvement.

This observation about the Wall’s unexpected silver lining is not meant to undercut legitimate criticisms of the Wall or foreclose debates over the ethics of its construction. Nonetheless, in my interviews with West Bank Palestinians I found that the Israeli security barrier has provoked many Palestinians to turn inward, to focus on their own hopes and dreams, and to build the infrastructure of their own lives complementing the work being done by the government on the community level. It has also diminished the intruding psychological specter of the threatening “Israeli in mind” who are now seen as living “behind the Wall.” This has given many young Palestinians some emotional respite and more internal space to imagine their own futures.

The Wall has also changed the major reference group of comparison for Palestinians. A Palestinian psychologist and policy expert confided to me: “Before the Wall we compared ourselves to Israelis. Now most Palestinians have begun to compare themselves with other Arabs, particularly Jordanians. Before the barrier we felt ‘we can’t do’; now, we feel we can be successful and we can acknowledge our achievements, especially our survival.”
The sense of invidious comparison used by Israelis and others to dismiss Palestinian humanity, which has been so injurious to Palestinian self-esteem, has been reduced. As a result, positive identifications of competence already existent in Palestinian identity have risen to the surface.

Optimism and confidence among West Bank Palestinians has also increased with the growing democratization of the West Bank. The rule of law, the building of a judicial system, the removal of suppression, and the encouragement of free speech have all helped young people to feel that they have a future imbued with the possibilities of free expression. This is usually understood as involving political and economic freedoms, but religious choice must also be clearly included. The hunger for free expression in Palestine must include respect for all religious aspirations, even if they offend secular sensibilities.

Previous failed talks sponsored by the Egyptians between Fatah and Hamas had given hope to many Palestinians that a reconciliation government can be formed to represent all beliefs. Further challenges to Palestinian democracy are also reflected in the recent backlash by Fatah old timers against Fayyad in his attempts to open the society. Curbs to democratic institution-building and free expression are most likely to impact the young. And without them, the optimism revolution on the West Bank will likely come to a standstill.

The challenges for Palestinian society remain great in other areas. The society is a youth culture. More than 53 percent of Palestinians are below the age of eighteen, and close to one-quarter of all Palestinian children live below the poverty line. Almost 90 percent of Palestinian families do not have a computer at home. Most alarming, however, is the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among these children — close to 40 percent in many areas of the West Bank. More than 50 percent have either directly witnessed political violence or been subject to it. Trauma undermines children’s ability to learn, impairs their emotional development and symbolic thinking, and defines their attitudes toward war and peace.
Close to 40 percent of children in many areas of the West Bank struggle with PTSD, the author writes. Here, a child perches in a car destroyed by an August 2006 Israeli military incursion into the Askar Refugee Camp, during which two homes were bulldozed. Credit: Creative Commons/Michael.Loadenthal.

Added to all these effects of violence is the problem of special populations. In my research it has become clear that the young men of East Jerusalem are among the most traumatized and impaired Palestinians. Under total Israeli sovereignty, outside the reach of the Palestinian Authority, and harassed daily by Israeli soldiers and police, they are suffering a loss of identity. They are continually faced with negative comparisons to their Israeli counterparts, as well as with corruption of their own culture. Overcrowding in local schools, poverty, and clan conflict add to the negative effect. Like the young Palestinian men who have been held in Israeli jails, they have suffered from political violence and are beset by PTSD and depression.

The history of the twentieth century reveals a pattern of domination of the Palestinian people by many foreign powers. Palestinians have suffered repeated evictions from their homeland, including displacement of 50 percent of their population in 1948. They have endured two generations of harsh occupation by Israel. These legacies and humiliations bred by many decades of conflict present an array of problematic national identifications that are slow to change. The traumas and their sequelae of helplessness, despair, and rage are deeply imbedded in the young Palestinians of today, as they have been transmitted from one generation to the next. Also deeply rooted is the constant invidious comparison between themselves and the Israeli “superman” who has conquered both the land and all opposing Arab armies. This perception is only compounded by the Palestinian failure to achieve statehood. For their survival as a people, Palestinians require recognition and appreciation of their real accomplishments under the harshest of circumstances; instead, they are subjected to a constant echoing of Eban’s comment: “The Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.” A new generation is attempting to establish a new Palestinian identity, but it will take time.
Facts on the ground also continue to undermine the psychology of optimism. The ever-present checkpoints, essentially the only places where Israelis and Palestinians interact, exacerbate the wounds of domination and undermine the Palestinian will, imagination, and solidarity. The day I arrived at Al-Quds University I waited three hours for my Palestinian colleague to arrive. He had been stuck all that time at the Kalandya checkpoint, a sun-drenched installation just outside Jerusalem. When he finally reached the university after three hours in the blazing sun, he was spent, both physically and emotionally.

The background to all of this is the failure of the negotiations. A fair peace deal would surely have been a boost to Palestinian hope and confidence. But few people on the West Bank ever expected it. As early as the summer of 2010, surveys conducted by the Near East Consulting Group placed optimism about a future Palestinian state based on the recent negotiations, at only 40 percent. Nevertheless, over 60 percent of those polled approve of the current Fayyad government, noting their satisfaction and indicating optimism about their own lives.

The psychology of optimism and self-reliance among many Palestinians is a fragile movement. It will be sensitive to events on the ground, to the changing landscape of the negotiation process and to the economy. But the dynamism of hope and optimism among the young of Palestine is one that could potentially withstand the moment. This optimism could lead to greater hope and confidence, which in turn could inspire greater imagination, creativity and productivity.

This movement is small at the moment, but it has been activated by a prime minister who calls for an independent declaration of statehood whether or not the Israelis come to the table. Then at least 130 other countries will likely recognize the new state of Palestine. At that point, both Israel and the United States will face a test of their own courage and identity in the face of those who wish to continue the Occupation.

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