

Critical partnerships, Forward-looking debates:

Building support for a ceasefire and for the transformation of Israeli/Palestinian relations

Written evidence submitted by Giuliana Tiripelli and Jon Simons (IPC0038)

1. The current destruction of Palestinian socio-political structures in the ongoing Israeli war on Gaza prevents the ceasefire from holding and puts civilians – and Israel – at the mercy of new, unforeseen, and uncontrollable forces and dynamics. This builds on a context of unbalanced conflict and oppression which has lasted many decades.

We believe that political pressure alone is not sufficient, and that the UK Government has to play a double-track role to rectify law and human rights violations, in order to enhance success of its diplomatic efforts.

This double-track role consists of

- a) promoting the critical partnership approach in the dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, and
- b) enhancing public support for a forward-looking debate about conflict transformation, in which to prefigure rebalanced relations.

Jon Simons - I am a UK and Israeli citizen who lived in Jerusalem 1985-95. During the first intifada, while studying at the Hebrew University for an MA and PhD in Politics, I was active in grassroots organisations opposing the Occupation and was one of the organisers of an ongoing Israeli-Palestinian dialogue group between Jews from West Jerusalem and the town of Beit Sahour in the West Bank. I retained family, personal and academic connections, visiting fairly often. In 2011 I began a research project about the Israeli peace (or anti-Occupation) movement in which I focused on images of peace. I made a four-month research trip in the autumn of 2012, and shorter ones in 2014 and 2016, during which I conducted participant observation with some groups, interviewed 23 activists as well as cultural producers in theatre, film and graphic art, as well as consulting with academic colleagues. I thus believe that I have both personal experience and academic expertise pertinent to the work of the Committee, especially to the question of how the UK can assure the resilience of efforts to bring about a lasting peace.

Giuliana Tiripelli - I am an Italian-born sociologist specialising in the role of the media in conflict transformation, and I have been working in the British academic sector since 2014. In early summer 1993, I participated in a three-week dialogue programme in Tuscany, Italy, bringing together Israeli, Palestinian, and Italian school pupils to foster dialogue and international friendship. This initiative was organised by local institutions and organisations from Italy, Palestine, and Israel, coinciding with the secret negotiations of the Oslo Accords. In December 1993, all participants reunited in Israel/Palestine for a second round of grassroots activities at the start of the Oslo peace process. Over time, I watched with concern as my friends became drawn back into the conflict. This motivated me, in 2006, to move to Glasgow to undertake a PhD exploring the role of the media in promoting peace in Israel/Palestine. Since then, my research has focused on news and informational media and how discourse, public debate, and digital media influence social, political, and institutional change in the context of conflict transformation. In 2008, I returned to Israel/Palestine for my research, conducting interviews with approximately 30 professional journalists from a range of news outlets, including The New York Times and The Guardian, as well as activists and experts. I also undertook extensive analysis of news coverage and diplomatic materials from the Oslo peace process. In 2021, I authored the policy report *The Role of the Media in Times of Crisis* for the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. My recommendations were subsequently incorporated into the Assembly's Resolution 2419 (2022).

- a) Strengthening Israeli/Palestinian support for change: the critical partnership approach
2. Over the course of our research and experience we have come to the conclusion that only some activist peace groups have been able to establish and sustain themselves since the enormous disappointment of the Oslo process and through the armed violence of the Gaza wars. The successful ones are joint Palestinian-Israeli Jewish groups which have adopted **a critical partnership approach that takes into account the power imbalance and different socio-political positions and historical experience** of their bi-national membership. For example, the founding cohort of Combatants for Peace spent a year before their launch working through their differences to find common ground. The Bereaved Families Forum uses a “two narratives” approach to bring each side to understand the trauma of the other. The less well-known Ta’ayush began during the second intifada as a combination of Jewish Israelis and Palestinians citizens of Israel providing practical solidarity to West Bank Palestinians. Without having carried out internal work on themselves, the group became frustrating for the Palestinian Israelis, who left. Yet, Ta’ayush continued for many years and built a good reputation among the West Bank Palestinians it supported because the Jewish activists always took the lead of the local people who called on their help. One of the leading voices in opposition to the current war in Israel is Standing Together, a grassroots social justice movement which is based on deliberate equalisation of leadership from its Jewish Israeli and Palestinian Israeli membership. The model followed by these successful groups is also known as a “coresistance” to occupation and is analysed by other scholars as the grounds for certain groups success and resilience (Fleischmann, Leonie. “The Israeli Peace Movement Anti-Occupation Activism and Human Rights since the Al-Aqsa Intifada.” London, England: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2019. Web). Groups which did not adopt this critical partnership approach such as the long-established Peace Now still survive but have lost relevance and active support. Their approach advocated a model of “peace as separation” between the two peoples, which was also the predominant way in which the Oslo process towards two states was perceived at its inception (Tiripelli G. 2016 *Media and peace in the Middle East. The Role of Journalism in Israel-Palestine*, Palgrave).
 3. The critical partnership approach of these successful groups is based on two key factors.
 4. Firstly, the critical partnership approach works because in it **Israeli and Palestinians are working together as equals**, instead of being treated as equal when they are not.
 5. Secondly, the relative success of these groups should be understood not in terms of ending the occupation and achieving just, sustainable peace, or even as the prevention of settlement expansion and settler violence, but as prefiguring in their practice the relationship of mutuality and partnership, which we call “**prefiguring peaceful relations**”, and which will constitute peace between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians (Kelman, H.C., 1999. The interdependence of Israeli and Palestinian national identities: The role of the other in existential conflicts. *Journal of Social Issues*, 55(3), pp.581-600; Gawerc, M., 2016. Constructing a collective identity across conflict lines: Joint Israeli-Palestinian peace movement organizations. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 21(2), pp.193-212, <https://doi.org/10.17813/1086-671X-20-2-193>). The point is to avoid attempts to define and agree on forms of peace before peace identities and roles are built, and focusing on building those identities, attitudes, and roles that are needed to build it in the forms that Israelis and Palestinians will decide to pursue. This is particularly important for those who international audience and institution most often define as the perpetrator or stronger party, i.e. Israeli government policies and its supporters.
- b) Strengthening public support for change in Israeli-Palestinian relations

6. The evidence from section a) above points to ways in which efforts for change and justice can be developed into public support for a ceasefire and conflict transformation without dehumanising the other, weakening polarising effects and the use of violence. Their critical partnership approach where Israeli/Jews and Palestinians are working together as equals offers more fertile ground to build internal (Israeli-Palestinian) and external public support for a ceasefire, end of violence, improved relations, and conflict transformation. Below, we explain what does not work in building such support, and how the critical partnership approach can be applied to public support formation.
7. In the absence of strong internal and external public support, diplomacy efforts do not work in promoting an end to the violence, and without cultural work enhancing public support and drawing from successful local initiatives, top-down initiatives crumble at the first sign of difficulty. Secret channels fail to build support for change (Tiripelli 2016), because they can be appropriated by local interests of factions and governments, and they do not let the public develop new roles to support change at the higher level.
8. Public support and media narratives about Israel/Palestine and ceasefire are very strong at the moment, but they mostly support one of the two sides against the other - discourse polarisation - weakening diplomatic efforts at ceasefires and reconciliation. Polarisation is damaging because it dehumanises the opposite group, and dehumanisation legitimises more violence against the less-than-human enemy, and also justifies more defensive violence by the perpetrators.
9. Political and group pressure alone does not work in bringing Israel-Palestine peace. In such a highly polarised conflict and hypermediated context, legitimate forms of pressure tend to reinforce polarisation, as the two sides' narratives develop in new ways to counter each other and defend themselves instead of promoting negotiations.
10. Western-based human rights discourse are extremely important but in its mainstream forms it tends to emphasise the accountability of perpetrators instead of the systems and structures which oppress and create the oppressors, and is therefore linked to polarisation dynamics (Seaga Shaw, I. 2011 "Human Rights Journalism": A Critical Conceptual Framework of a Complementary Strand of Peace Journalism', in I. Seaga Shaw, J. Lynch and R.A. Hackett, *Expanding Peace Journalism: Comparative and Critical Approaches*, Sydney: Sydney University Press).
11. Narratives that focus exclusively on Palestinian rights and civilian suffering are not always successful in triggering support for change among the supporters of Israel's attacks that harm civilians.
12. Narratives which victimise perpetrators are powerful in justifying extreme violence against civilians among large population (Adshead G. 2024 Aren't they all evil? The Reith Lectures, BBC Radio 4 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m002514d>). These narratives are powerful in polarised and tense contexts of crisis, and we believe that they are particularly strengthened when there is an absence of an alternative and positive identity role for the powerful people and community in coexisting with their "enemy", i.e., a sustainable critical narrative of change.
13. In addition, Israel/Palestine polarised conflict narratives are often appropriated by external political discourses of foreign interest groups or by individuals who use them to strengthen a sense of identity, which further nourish polarisation and weakens the efficacy of diplomacy efforts.
14. Opposite to polarisation, but equally damaging, is the false balance approach in the debate about this conflict. This approach is prevalent in diplomacy, public discourse, and particularly in informational and broadcast media, where narratives portray both parties as acting equally and possessing equal power in driving negotiations or perpetuating violence. False balance reinforces existing conflict dynamics by failing to address power imbalances. This not only undermines Palestinians' trust and that of their supporters in external mediators, but also leaves pro-Israel supporters questioning why Palestinians do not simply choose to make peace.

15. **Public support and working together as equals:** in the public debate, “working together as equals” can be promoted by using a more accurate terminology in institutional and public debates, in media literacy and informational materials, which clearly identify the imbalance of power, the context, and analysis, against established, conflict-legitimising narratives (see Philo, G. and Berry, M., 2004. *Bad news from Israel* London: Pluto Press; Tiripelli G. 2022 *The language of peace in conflict transformation: a critical analysis of the New York Times’ coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement and its role in the discursive context of the Oslo negotiations*, in Chiluya I. *Discourse, Media & Conflict*, Cambridge University Press). Such an approach can be promoted to repair false balance narratives. While false balance puts on the same level two unequal parties, the partnership model approach of critically balanced interaction relies on clear acknowledgment of the power imbalance, making it effective in promoting understanding and change to build internal public support towards a ceasefire and conflict transformation.
16. **Public support and prefiguring peace:** “prefiguring peace” in public debates means giving space to reconciliation narratives. Forwarding narratives of peace are essential for diplomatic advancements towards peace. They are based on acknowledging the power imbalances while leaving space for different narratives, which makes them very different from superficial encouragements at ending visible violence and achieving peace. This “prefiguring peace” exercise can start with a focus on rediscovering Israelis’ links with Arab and Muslim communities and cultures, (where 45% of Jewish Israelis have heritage), and with open discussions about the relational nature of both identities in this conflict.
17. To be effective in developing public support, “prefiguring peace” approaches need to include a new terminology for **future-facing, positive identities and roles** for both victims and perpetrators in coexisting with the other side in positive ways. These reorganised identities acknowledge existing experiences and beliefs of each side (hence, sustainable by each side), in order to build ground for change, nourishing support among publics unsupportive of transformative developments (Tiripelli G. 2021 *The role of the Media in Times of Crisis*, report for the Assembly of the Council of Europe, Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, Happer, C., 2024. *The construction of public opinion in a digital age*. Manchester University Press). Sustainable reorganised identities are a basis for future-facing debates about the role of the Jewish and Palestinian identity in the post-conflict age, open discussions about how Israelis can lead peaceful diplomacy in the area together with the Palestinians, revisiting trauma on both sides to help other people living through conflict and oppression, promoting Israel/Palestine peace tourism, discussing joint Israeli/Palestinian experiences of crisis to support local communities living new and old crises (climate change, economic, political crises). Emphasis should be on building a new positive identity for perpetrators while imbalance and oppression is acknowledged; by projecting the debate towards the future identity of Israelis in the world and welcoming Israelis into a global world with an enlightening role linked to the future, the UK government can trigger involvement of Israeli citizens and disentangles the discourse about rights and international law from the discourse about anti-Semitism, weakening the dynamic according to which any pressure on Israel is antisemitic. The new future facing framing of reconciliation narratives is essential to promote a non-polarised external support and debate, defusing the triggers of polarisation in public debate and digital media.
18. **Media visibility:** such a debate should be public, and the government should seek intense media coverage, in order to show the complexity of the conflict vis-à-vis polarising narratives.

Conclusions & main recommendations

19. It is significant that current initiatives which have revised and reinvigorated advocacy for the two states solution are Israeli-Palestinian partnerships: A Land for All (for whom there is one shared homeland); and the Holy Land Confederation, which proposes a cohabitation rather than divorce (or a forced fusion) for the two peoples. It is by confronting the violence, trauma and injustice inherent in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that civil society groups can work towards sustainable peace, rather than by assuming a false balance between the two-sides or by putting these difficulties aside in the

hope that they will fade away after a peace deal has been agreed. The final and sustainable forms of peace will be decided by Israelis and Palestinians only once the constructive support for change is strengthened.

20. We therefore recommend that the UK government support financially and diplomatically the emergence of joint Israeli-Palestinian civil society groups that embody in their practice peace as partnership and sharing of space. Fortunately, there is already a vehicle (which this committee has already heard about) through which to do that, the Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP), which represents a network of over 160 organizations engaged in civil society peacebuilding between Israelis and Palestinians.
21. We also recommend that the UK work to reorganise the current polarising discourse of conflict and superficial ideas of conflict, violence, and peace, in collaborations with these Israeli/Palestinian movements, other national and international institutions, the news media, media experts, and the general public. This public dialogue should aim at acknowledging power imbalances and reshaping identities at work in this conflict, promoting alternative and positive identity roles for Israelis who currently support violence against civilians so they can coexist with their “enemy”.
22. Building external public support for change in Israel/Palestine is essential and should engage foreign and British audiences, as well as the Israeli and Palestinian diaspora, Jewish communities worldwide, and polarised activist groups, along with their digital presences. Evidence suggests that such support already exists among peace activists, intellectuals, practitioners, and critical religious networks (e.g., in the UK: UK Friends of Standing Together, Yachad, Na’amod, Christians for Palestine UK). These organisations are capable of advocating for justice for individuals and communities in non-violent and dignified ways that avoid dehumanising the oppressor. They have already undertaken substantial work in fostering critical dialogue and acknowledging power imbalances. Moreover, they possess excellent skills in supporting communities to manage change at both individual and group levels, with new aims and purposes in mind. In light of this, the UK government should consider these groups as **allies in its diplomatic efforts towards peacebuilding** in the Middle East, particularly in the next critical phase: reshaping the identities involved in this conflict.

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