Abstract

Peaceful negotiations have long been sought for between Israeli government and Palestinian authority. However, due to the complex interactions of history, culture, and religion, both sides refuse to give way. Non-profit organizations (NPOs) are found to take up the role to starting up peace talks. This paper documented four (NPOs) that are working towards enhancing Arab-Jewish relations. The programs are similar in nature in a sense that they act as the mediator to provide an environment for Arabs and Jews to build personal relationships and understanding in replacement of stereotypes. Emphasis is placed in nurturing youths in that regard. The philosophy is to inspire youths who went through the programs and have them be the change in their own community. However, the process is slow and it requires parental participation in order for the programs to succeed and have an effect.

Introduction

I am always interested in the conflicts in the Middle East and have been hoping that I could bring shalom to the region. I have read about Israel’s Independence and, perhaps, had a brief idea on the origin of the conflict before this class. There is nothing much I could do to change history but I can do something at present to change the future. I began asking myself, “Where can I start?”

Media reports on the Gaza war, Israeli settlements in the West Bank gave me the impression that in order to achieve peace and reconciliation, the Israeli
government has to step up and make a change, as they seemed to have started the conflict. And the articles that I read in class, such as the General Assembly Resolution and the 'Proclamation of Independence' article, further affirms my theory. In preparation for this class and the trip, I tried to find whether there are government policies that are working towards promoting coexistence between Arabs and Jews. I could hardly find any. Moreover, after the war in November, I felt rather hopeless that there would ever be peace in Israel; the Israeli government does not seem to be making an effort.

In sight of the situation, I started looking into non-profit organizations (NPOs), which usually step-in to provide for a needy community when government fails to fulfill such role. That was one of the reasons why I come to look into NPOs and their efforts in promoting peace between Arabs and Jews in Israel.

**Method**

The most direct way to get information is to contact local NPOs. I emailed several organizations before coming to Israel and set up meetings with them to learn more about their respective programs. I had some questions in mind to ask the NPOs, but they were too general, in hindsight. Moreover, I did not quite know what questions to ask as I had not known enough about the intricacies of the matter to access whether NPO’s programs are effective or not. Nonetheless, the meetings with the NPOs were helpful.

**Experiences**

Observation Exercises
I had not made good use of the first two observation exercises to better my understanding on the conflict between Arabs and Jews as I was too focused on NPOs. My thoughts changed after speaking with the Director of Development in YMCA (Y). The Y organizes different programs, which I will explain further in the next section, that aim at providing a platform for Arabic and Jewish youths to nurture understanding and respect for each other. If I would like to start a program of such nature in the future, I need to know, at least, what the conflict is about and how people feel about it. Especially after visiting the school in Wadi Ara and learning about the faculty’s struggles, I feel even stronger that what happened in history cannot be just forgotten. It is with the people. And it is important for me to understand where people’s perspective comes from; to avoid falling into stereotypes and premature judgment. Fortunately, other classmates’ sharing on their interviews was insightful. I had expected, that more people would want peace, as a decent amount of stability usually comes with peace, but concluding from the interview results, people hold strong opinions on their side of the story and seemed to want to keep it this way.

**NPOs/Programs Promoting Arab-Jewish Relations**

1) Finland Evangelic Lutheran Missionary (FELM)

FELM has been around for 62 years. It is one of the foreign Christian groups that receive Israeli government’s approval to serve the community. It mostly relies on volunteers from Finland or other Evangelic Lutheran divisions around the world to run the different programs and maintain the compound. When I visited, there were groups from Thailand, America and
Finland. The center itself is very multicultural. Arabs and Jews work
together. There are also worship groups for Ethiopians, Chinese and
Russians. It is entirely funded by the Finland Evangelic Lutheran Church in
Finland. Out of the many services provided by FELM, there are 3 that target
on Arab-Jewish relations and helping Arab children adapt to the community:
a) There used to be a motorcycle-riding program started by one of the
pastors at FELM, who was a motorcycle fanatic. He gathered Arabs and
Jews with motorcycles to go on riding trips and through the trips,
participants created friendship and understanding about each other. Now,
the center is thinking of using the same idea, but replace motorcycles with
sports.
b) Another program is named 'Kings Kids’. It was started by a Finnish lady.
She would bring Jewish kids in Jerusalem to Jordon to meet with Arab
Christians there. The manager that I talked to does not know too much
about the trip but he described it as a very powerful experience for both
the Arabs and Jews.
c) The third program is called ‘The Decan Project’. Finnish volunteers come
to the Jerusalem center to help Palestinian children with their education.
Sometimes Palestinian families do not want their children to receive help
from Israeli government, but since FELM is a Finnish organization, the
political neutrality allows FELM to help communities like this.

The manager emphasized throughout the interview that everyone who
works at the center do their job out of love for the community and for God. He
had a Chinese-character keychain that says ‘love’ to remind him the purpose of his work. This experience, to me, is really touching. A guy from Finland are willing to come all the way to Israel, not because he is a Jew, but because he love the people living here. Being a Christian myself, one of the biases that I carry with, I see the power of religion to unite people from all different cultural background to serve one another. Yet, at the same time, I understand that religion is also the start of conflicts; or even a leverage for some people to attain personal interests.

2) YMCA

The Y has been present in Jerusalem since 1878. It is mainly funded by the YMCA in the States. Despite the Christian affiliation of the Y, it remains secular in all its programs and people seldom even correlate the two. The mission of the Y in Jerusalem is – “Contribute to the wellbeing of society by uniting people, bringing conflicting narratives and sect together where they can actually realize the humanity of the other”. CEO, Forsan Hussein, lives the mission. He is an Israeli-Arab, a Palestinian, working in a Jewish dominant society, within a Christian organization. There are 3 programs that work on bridging the gap between Arabs and Jews:

a) The first program in its kindergarten. Two teachers, one Arab and one Jew, are teaching the class. Children of diplomats also attend this kindergarten and the program is highly regarded amongst parents. The Y will provide financial assistance to needy families. The actual purpose of the program is to bring parents of both groups together. This Arab-Jewish
education model was adopted as the Hand-in-Hand program, which expands to elementary and high schools in Israel – the school in Wadi Ara is one of them.

One of the challenges, apart from funding, the kindergarten is facing relates to the new education law – the first three years of education is provided by the government. Parents can choose better Jewish schools instead.

b) The second program is a youth choir, which comprised of 28 teenagers from Jewish and Arab high schools in the area. There are 14 Arabs and 14 Jews and the group is highly selective. There were 80 auditions and only 30 were selected; some dropped out of the program. The program director, Micah, was thrilled by the high number of auditions. This program has just started. I attended one of the practice sessions and had the opportunity to speak with Micah, who is also the founder of the project.

_He was inspired by his experience with the Seeds of Peace, a US-based NPO founded in 1993 that holds an annual 3-week summer camp in Maine, where youths from Jordon, Egypt, Palestine, Israel and the United States come together to nurture cultural understanding._ Micah has always loved singing. _After the camp, he had this idea of using music to unite people. The youth choir was born. He stressed in the interview that a dialogue is not enough. There must be something that connects the two group; in this case it is music._
At the choir practice session, a camp facilitator from Seeds of Peace USA was also present and I got to interview her as well. In the camp, all campers are given t-shirts of one color – green. This is a symbolic meaning that everyone at the camp is the same no matter where you come from. Campers will be in the same group throughout the camp. Every day campers will play all kind of sports, do art-and-craft, cook, and engage in a 2-hour dialogue to discuss controversial issues. The discussion sessions are conducted in English. Every now and then, campers will break from their group during discussion sessions into Hebrew and Arabic groups to express their ideas more fluently. The next day, they will go back to their group and share their thoughts. The last day of the camp is the highlight – Color Game. The entire camp is divided into Team Blue and Team Green. Each team will put on t-shirts of the respective color and compete on everything they have done in the camp, from soccer to making a peanut butter-jelly sandwich. The camp facilitator described the day as a powerful and touching occasion as teammates fight for either Team Blue or Green instead of Team Israel, Team Jordon, etc.

In every practice session, there is a 45-minute vocal practice, followed by a dialogue session which lasts for 1.5 hours. After that, there is another 45 minutes of vocal practice before the session ends. During the dialogue, there are two trained facilitators from Seeds of Peace to moderate two small group discussions. Sometimes they will have group games as well.
Micah gave an example: each person is given 5 cards with 'Wealth', 'Nationality', 'Health', 'Family', and 'Success'. The students were asked to throw away one card at a time; whichever characteristic is least important to the person. Afterwards, there were discussions on why each person chose his/her card. It was interesting to see a pattern amongst the students. However, the dialogue sessions are not open, not even to Micah. It is up to the facilitator to plan the topics. This program has just started and they have not dealt with the controversial issues yet. But Micah foresees a certain degree of resistance when those topics are discussed, before acceptance sets in. During the 5-minute break, I saw Arabs and Jews hanging out together, pouring tea for each other. Their friendships extend beyond choir practice according to Micah, observable through Facebook interactions. One of the future plans is to fundraise for the choir to tour around Israel to spread the idea of peaceful co-existence between Arabs and Jews.

c) The third program is a media project that has just started a week before I visited. 32 youths are enrolled, with 50-50 Arabs and Jews. They are divided into groups and go out to Jerusalem to make short documentaries on issues that concern the community. The topics to film are still under development.

d) Last but not least, there is a gym center and a swimming pool beneath the Y. Both Arabs and Jews in the community are welcome to use the facilities. The manager described that she saw Jewish and Arab women came in,
taking off their wigs and hijabs respectively, enjoying themselves with the facilities.

My experience with the Y was encouraging, especially attending the choir practice. All the programs facilitate the creation of a common ground between the two groups, be it music or technology. Having a dialogue is not enough as there is nothing that ties the two groups together. At the same time, having a choir is not enough. It will just be any other acapella group as people have not really dealt with the fundamental issues that started the choir in the first place. The dialogue and choir complements each other. This helps the two groups understand that they are not that different after all. This also ‘forces’ the other party to listen to the other side of the story before making judgments. Culture, religion and history might have set them apart, but students are there to learn respect, acceptance and appreciation.

As for the Seeds of Peace, it acts as an agent to raise awareness on the conflict in countries that are not directly related to the problem. Micah is a great example. He did not only understand more about what is happening in Israel, but also chose to come to Israel to help alleviate the problem. Sometimes a third party is needed to start conversations for the conflicted groups because of its ‘neutrality’ in the issue. This could be one of the roles of non-profits.

3) Bridge Over the Wadi School

The school was founded in 2004. It is governed by an Arab and a Jew and is one of the three schools in the Hand-in-Hand project. There are a total of 5
Arab-Jewish schools in Israel, but this one in Wadi is the only one in Israel, probably the world, where Jewish kids come to an Arab town for school. When I first heard about it in class, I did not know the significance. Yet, after listening to the challenges that the two principals have to deal with on a daily basis, the reality of the conflict between Arabs and Jews began to sink in. The two main challenges are, firstly, recruiting Jewish students. Jewish schools usually have a higher quality of education and the closest Jewish town from Wadi Ara is 15km away. Jewish parents have to decide whether it is worthwhile to send their children to the Wadi school instead of a local one. The principals recalled that at the very beginning, parents simply think that the school was just an ideology. But in the past 3 years, the school has proven great academic achievements and that attracts more Jewish parents to consider the school.

The second challenge faced by the teaching faculty is how history should be taught. I understand more about the struggles between teachers through the documentary ‘Bridge Over the Wadi’. The documentary captured the Independence Day for Jews, known as the Nakbar by Arabs. Before separating the students in two groups to celebrate or commemorate the occasion, the two teachers tried to explain what exactly happened in history. Later in the staff meeting, the Arab teacher expressed that she felt uncomfortable having to carefully word her story in order not to offend the Jews and to show the students that even though it was a day of catastrophe for Palestinians,
Palestinians still respect the Jews. The principal did not directly answer the question of how history is taught at present.

Apart from the argument on history, celebrating different religious holidays is problematic as well, according to the documentary. During Ramadan, an Islam religious activity, all the kids, including Jews and Arabs, gave a performance on how the event is celebrated – all children recited a prayer to Allah. While it is good to have the Jewish children learn about the tradition of Arabs, parents on both sides expressed great concern. Arab parents feel insulted, as Allah was not accepted as the God the Jewish families believed in. Jewish parents simply thought that it was not right for their children to bow down to another name for God other than their own. If I had seen the documentary earlier, I would have asked the principals how the holidays are celebrated to see if there has been a change since. If not, this issue is deem problematic and would drive parents away from the school.

There is no doubt that this school is really an inspiration in enhancing Arab-Jewish relation. The model that they use are quite similar to other NPOs that I have spoken with – promote understanding by developing personal relationships with each other; thus finding a common ground which both groups can identify with.

However, what is different about this school and any other NPOs’ projects is that Arab and Jewish kids are going through the same education approach, given the same course materials and trainings in how to think; where as NPOs’ programs unite kids from different schools. What surprised me most is
that the identities of the students are actually enhanced. They are more aware of their identity and background instead of losing themselves because of the ‘integration’. This is a great reminder for myself if I do start an NPO/NGO engaging in conflict resolution in the future. It is crucial to make both parties feel equally respected of their past. Moreover, it is not up to the NPO/NGO to decide which side should subdue to the other. NPOs/NGOs are there to provide different sides of the story, which hopefully can break the stereotypes.

4) Triangle Research and Development Regional Center

The Research Center was founded by Dr. Ibrahim Yehia in an Arab community. There are around 13-14 research scientists working on around 7 projects in the center, ranging from solar energy to medical and genetics research. These project ideas stemmed from the need within the community. Some projects in the past were patented and could potentially solve the same problem in other regions. For instance, the Center is working on a project that deals with olive flies, which has been destroying 20-40% of olives in the community annually. This project is a concerted effort amongst US, Israel and Italian researchers and there have been positive results; up to 90% of the flies are reduced through an infertility method.

This NPO uses another approach to unite Arabs and Jews – innovations. Dr. Ibrahim is a Palestinian with strong political views. Yet, he is able to put them behind and proactively engage with Jewish scientists to better the community. This is also a great testimony to people in the area that
something good and positive can come out when Arabs and Jews meet. Wars and confrontation could be and was the outcome in the past but the Research Center prove otherwise.

Apart from promoting an understanding of each other’s culture and perspective, innovations create a pathway for development of society and can give people hope about the future. Nonetheless, as much as scientific development seems to create a win-win situation, it occurs to me that the root of the conflict has not been dealt with. Science seemed to be a ‘prescription’ that gets people to ‘forget’ the past and move forward. It tends to neglect emotions as emotions often lead to judgments. Then I begin asking myself is it really necessary to cling on to the past that much to a point where it limits ourselves? Visiting Weizmen Institute gave me another perspective.

Dr. Oved Kedem’s contribution in science education is remarkable. Hearing about how lives are turned around through the science programs made me realize that science simply offers a different lens for people to look at the world and, perhaps, into themselves. How one reacts to what he/she sees through the lens is entirely up to the person. He/she can choose to embrace the past and move on with it or simply just move on. Science and history are not mutually exclusive.

These two encounters relates back to my project on NPOs by showing me that NPOs of such kind not only unite Arabs and Jews, they also give people a chance to look at the present in terms of the future instead of the past.
Scientific innovations look into the future. The ability to look ahead give people hope and confidence to build a path not limited by history.

**What I have learned**

Two weeks in Israel is barely enough to grasp the complexity of what is happening here. Through interviews, observations in different neighborhoods and visiting municipalities and schools, I have a better understanding of how history, religion, culture and Zionism are affecting this place and why it is difficult for the Israeli government and the Palestinian authority to engage in peace talks. Walking through the Holocaust Museum and listening to Ashod’s Welfare Department made me more empathetic towards why Jews desired to have a land of their own. Empathy, however, does not mean that I agree with or that Israel’s acts are justified. Because of the political ambiguity and the constant struggle of both governments to give way, a miracle is required for Arabs and Jews to achieve reconciliation. Yet, people’s life is affected by this conflict. NPOs seem to the way out for peace.

After my experiences with the four organizations, a mixture of local and international initiatives, I realized a common phenomenon: international NPOs, in general, focus more on long-term solutions. They are the initiators of convincing people that there are other perspectives to the same issue or society. More importantly, it is worthwhile to explore those perspectives. Those perspectives can come in forms of music, art, food, education, science and technology, or innovations. NPOs provide a platform for both parties to build personal relationships and trust with each other; driving away stereotypes from their own experiences. Nonetheless, the process is slow.
International NPOs, like FELM, the Y and Seeds of Peace tends to engage in dialogue programs and cultural exchanges, especially with youths. Most adults already had their opinions formed and it is hard to have them see the other side of the story. Yet, young adults are still forming their identity and perception of the world, it would be easier to install the notion of mutual respect within them. International NPOs have the advantage of being ‘neutral’ in the Arab-Jewish conflict, and thus able to create an open environment for both groups to talk. Most programs are relatively new and the effects are yet to be seen. Their philosophy is to spread peace drop by drop. Young adults who graduated from those programs are, hopefully, inspired to carry the same mentality back to their own community and carry-on the ‘legacy’.

Another limiting factor of these dialogue programs, as well as the Wadi School, is the openness of parents. The ‘Bridge Over the Wadi’ documentary interviewed a parent at school where she mentioned she grew up being taught to hate Arabs but she wanted her son to explore otherwise. A little boy in the documentary told the reporter that he made Arab friends at school but he was worried that one day, he will have to fight his friends. Will the personal relationships between Arab and Jewish youths through these dialogue programs be a great-enough force to bring peace in the future?

There are local initiatives as well, such as the Triangle Research Center and the Davidson Institute of Science Education under the Weizmann Institute, which focus more on short-term solution. The Abraham Fund Foundation and Sikkui deal with municipalities to spread awareness of Arabs’ rights. These initiatives are more
directed towards tackling local problems. With the background of the scientists about the community, they are able to bring their expertise and develop the village. The work that the scientists do is great testimonies to people in the community that constructive ideas can be created between Arabs and Jews.

Researching on non-profit initiatives brought me to remarkably inspiring people who showed me that a person can make a difference with vision, motivation and perseverance. Government does not always hold the answer to social issues. People in society who envision a possible solution should take the initiative to make it happen.