



A summary of research findings: Conflict resolution and asymmetric conflict: Planned contact interventions in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory'

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Introduction

Numerous conflict resolution organizations facilitate contact between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians through reconciliation and healing sessions, joint schooling and training, dialogue and micro-negotiations, exposure tours, friendship building, social events, sports and culture, summer camping, and economic and development cooperation. Many of these initiatives promote intergroup dialogues, which often feature facilitated structured conversations in protected environments where individuals and groups build relationships, gain knowledge, and explore divisive social issues.

However, organizations facilitating contact interventions in Israel and the oPt have faced widespread resistance in regards to these activities. This resistance has been articulated in an organized fashion by the anti-normalization and Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movements. Disruptions to contact events have ground many local-level conflict resolution projects to a halt, and dialogue initiatives between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians have become quite rare at the current juncture. This situation points to a growing crisis within the Israeli and Palestinian conflict resolution community over contact-based conflict resolution practices. In response, this research examines this controversy and ultimately demonstrates how this highly dichotomous debate might be transformed through an emergent proposal for integrating conflicting viewpoints about the nature and effectiveness of planned contact interventions in Israel and the oPt.

Methodology

This research relies upon data gathered through a series of 40 face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted with leaders from 17 Israeli, 16 Palestinian and seven international organizations, which included a variety of international donors, local and international NGOs, educational institutions, civil society groups and research organizations. Interview data was gathered (in Arabic, English or Hebrew) during 2014 and 2015. Interview

data was complemented by a variety of secondary documentary sources including research reports, published interview transcripts, project evaluations, and other evidence-based commentaries on planned contact interventions.

Advocates: The constructive potential of planned contact interventions

A subset of the interview narratives and research literature we reviewed advocate for contact-based conflict resolution strategies inside the asymmetric conflict between the State of Israel and the Palestinians. It is worth noting that approximately two-thirds of the coded references from our interview data in this section are from respondents working for organizations based in Israel and that international and Palestinian organizations evidenced more limited reflection on these themes. Responses are summarized below:

Table 1: The constructive potential of planned contact interventions

Personal awakening	Communal change	Political transformation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allow information sharing and reduce ignorance. - Create emotional experiences and reduce fear. - Humanize ‘the other’. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Power relations are equalized in insulated and controlled environments. - Model constructive interactions. - Build trust and confidence. - Facilitate the exploration of contentious issues, competing narratives, and new solutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bypass self-interested elite actors and allow a local turn in political action and impact. - Impact official peace processes. - Involve political leaders in building relationships and trust.

Critics: The failure of planned contact interventions

The viewpoints summarized in the preceding section were fundamentally critiqued by other respondents who cautioned against the use of contact-based strategies at the current juncture and justified the growing resistance to planned contact interventions in Israel and the oPt. Approximately 40% of the coded references from the interview data in this section are from respondents working for Palestinian organizations, with the remaining references divided almost equally between international and Israeli organizations.

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- Table 2: The shortcomings of planned contact interventions Bypass the needs of oppressed grassroots populations and primarily address the self-interests of other actors including international donors, the ‘dialogue industry’, and the state of Israel.
 - Hold little potential to level power asymmetry – both in controlled groups and in broader society and politics.
 - Unable to impact beyond the personal- psychological level and explore solutions to the conflict’s root causes.
 - Contribute to the ‘normalization’ of the ongoing occupation
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Discussion: A proposal for integrating conflicting viewpoints

Our goal is to make sense of the disagreement between advocates and critics of planned contact interventions and outline a grounded proposal for interpreting, integrating and debating competing stances in a manner that avoids the exclusion of either viewpoint. Our proposal is structured around three contentious themes:

Table 3 – A proposal for integrating conflicting findings

Conflict Resolution Strategy	Agency and conflict resolution	Scope of influence
Transformative conflict resolution strategies should prioritize the levelling of power asymmetry and structural injustice by attending to the historical and structural drivers of asymmetric conflict	Conflict resolution action should be designed and controlled at local levels and maintain clear independence from the self-interests of upper-level actors in order to dislodge the status quo of entrenched power asymmetry.	While important, individual identity revision is distinctly inadequate as a mode of change inside asymmetric conflict. Instead, strategic conflict resolution decision-making should prioritize methods that evidence a direct effect on both oppressive asymmetric power structures and elite-level peace processes

Conclusions

The above integrative proposal points to at least three avenues of conflict resolution practice in Israel and the oPt.

Table 4 – Avenues of conflict resolution logic

Exclusionary	Integrative 1	Integrative 2
Planned contact interventions are propped up as the primary route of grassroots action in the face of asymmetric conflict.	Parallel processes of planned contact interventions and more direct forms of conflict-intensifying action.	Phased approach of conflict-intensifying action focused on the structural and historical drivers of violence followed by planned contact interventions, which are conditioned upon transformed power differentials.

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