



The Program for Learning in Partnership

Building Empathy Across Fault Lines of Conflict: An Israeli-Palestinian Pilot with Regional Implications



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Israeli author Yossi Klein Halevi's 2018 book, [Letters to my Palestinian Neighbor](#), combined an earnest, introspective and sometimes self-critical narration of Israelis' shared identity with a message of curiosity and empathy for Palestinians. Through the vehicle of the internet, thousands of Arabs were able to download an Arabic translation of the book, and hundreds of Palestinians responded directly to Halevi with letters of their own.

Some of the letters, though occasionally harsh, featured an equivalent mixture of pride in their own national narrative and openness to the other. These exchanges developed into personal friendships, a social media platform, and an ongoing series of public events that initiated a new kind of engagement between the two societies.

So the question arises: Can the Letters phenomenon serve as a template for generating and sustaining empathic dialogue in other regional conflict zones? On July 6, 2021, to explore this question, the Center for Peace Communications convened its first webinar—an online hour-long encounter with Halevi and four civic actors from the region, moderated by CPC President Joseph Braude. The four were:

Hussain Abdul-Hussain, an Iraqi-Lebanese journalist and the Washington Bureau Chief of the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-Rai*.

Roya Hakakian, a Jewish Iranian-American poet, journalist, and writer who is the author of four books, including [Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary](#)

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[Iran](#) (Penguin/Random House, 2004)

Rebar Salahaddin Abdallah, a senior fellow at the Center for Peace Communications who aims to promote social healing in post-conflict environments, with a special focus on his native Iraqi Kurdistan.

Nervana Mahmoud, an independent commentator on Middle East issues with a special interest in Egypt, religious reform, and women's rights.

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Halevi drew a picture of where he was—on French Hill in Jerusalem, in the last row of houses before the security fence rises to separate Jerusalem from the West Bank. The *Letters* were meant metaphorically as personal missives to his neighbors across the security fence to the “hills beyond the wall,” as he put it, which he could see through the south-facing windows of his home.

His aim, he explained, was modest: to use a writer's skill to create a possibility for curiosity, openness, and creativity in a situation where two national movements had, and likely will always have, irreconcilable narratives. Empathetic dialogue strives to place human dignity above political identity, to create mutual respect even in disagreement, not to solve the insolvable. It

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strives to replace the zero-sum mentality common to political conflict with a positive-sum attitude more amenable to personal relationships.

Halevi described his decision in the second edition of the book, which includes a 50—page addenda of some of the 500 letters he received from Palestinians. He wondered whether he should give the Palestinian voice represented by those letters the last word, even if that might weaken his argument on behalf of Jewish historical rights in the Land of Israel. He concluded that, if he were to be serious, he would have to do that, and he did.

The key is that after seventy years of each side trying to discredit the narrative of the other, to deny the honor due a set of lived histories, it is past time to listen empathetically to one another, and to accept the sincerity of each other's view. That also means listening to and accepting the power of faith on all sides—Muslim, Christian, and Jewish—that deeply shapes political and social reality in this part of the world.

Finally, Halevi noted that to make peace one has to be peace, and to be at peace in and with oneself. He referred to the rage, and to the demons, that creep from the recesses of Jewish history to stalk the contemporary Israeli psyche, and intimated that self-honesty requires reflection on how those demons may get projected inadvertently onto others in contemporary conflicts. The same is true, obviously, on the other side of the wall, for trauma, disappointment, and humiliation are no strangers to modern Arab history either.

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CPC President Joseph Braude then opened the discussion to the four panelists from across the region, his charge being to explore the realities and possibilities of fostering empathic exchanges of narratives across borders of conflict elsewhere in the region.

Rebar Salahuddin began the responses to Halevi by noting that cases of empathic exchanges elsewhere in the region have been rare and wanting. The reason was not so much physical barriers, as with the security wall Halevi referred to, but metaphorical fences erected by years of politically enforced social separation. In Salahuddin's case, the metaphorical walls between Arabs and Kurds in Iraq, and between Sunni and Shi'a, and between large groups and smaller populations of Christian and other minorities like the Yazidis, have been reinforced in the modern period by politically motivated physical separation.

In addition, longstanding educational deficiencies that shy away from emphasizing the tools of critical thinking and deliberative discourse, which empathic exchanges tend to require, have hampered efforts to de-stigmatize empathetic dialogue. Even financial factors tied to political patronage structures have sometimes made it hard for different communities to cooperate and engage one another.

Politicians have regularly deployed differences in identity, and the anxieties that have arisen because of them, to solidify their authoritarian tendencies and hold on power. That in turn has led to entrenched attitudes that have enabled horrible tragedy, such as the ruthless attacks by

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the Islamic State on the Yazidis in Iraq—no less barbarous than the repeated, deadly persecution of the Hazara in Afghanistan by the Taliban.

Nervana Mahmoud added that the patterns of separation have been reinforced in most Middle Eastern countries by “social Islamism,” the use of Sunni fundamentalism to stigmatize all other faiths as threats to the unity, and even to the corporate survival, of the *umma*—the larger “community of the faithful.” In this way, she explained, the majority manages to see itself as victims on the defensive in the face of efforts, likely directed or manipulated from without in their often conspiracy-theory inflected narratives, to harm them. In Egypt, for example, at the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi, Egyptian Islamists accused Copts of hiding weapons caches in their churches.

The prevalence of conspiracy theories points to the deeper tendency toward simplification and demonization of all others. “We don’t like gray,” Ms. Mahmoud said; we stick to black and white. That enables a kind of free association to conflate all supposed enemies into one great enemy, so that if an Egyptian says, for example, that she supports more rights for women, then she somehow orthogonally becomes a “Zionist,” meant in such cases as an unalloyed dirty word.

Ms. Mahmoud argued that the four centuries of Ottoman rule, particularly the empire’s use of the *millet* system to separate minorities from the dominant Sunni majority, formalized and deepened patterns of separation in the Middle East inherited from earlier times.

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Hussain Abdul-Hussain agreed with the gist of the foregoing comments. Not only is empathy with and for others rare, but it is stigmatized as signaling some sinister intention or agenda. The rule in the region, at best, is coexistence defined in group terms, not equality defined in individual terms. Social segregation is the rule to the point that even intermarriage between Muslims from different confessions in Lebanon is frowned upon and rare.

Mr. Abdul-Hussein did note that pockets of empathy can and do arise in certain circumstances. He pointed out that the purveyors of “social Islamism” rarely win elections in cities. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt never won Cairo, and in Lebanon Hezbollah never wins the large town of Ba’albek, despite its being heavily Shi`a demographically. Urban areas allow for more pluralistic engagement, while village life remains more isolated, more tribal in its social and authority structures, and generally less well educated. Cross-cultural elites in urban areas also tend to be more secular, while village life tends to reinforce more traditionally religious attitudes.

The same exceptions tend to hold for oases of universities. Mr. Abdul-Hussein specifically mentioned the area of Ras Beirut, where the American University of Beirut has long been located, as such an exception.

Several panelists acknowledged recent government-led efforts to foster dialogue and a culture of tolerance. Several also acknowledged efforts by clerics, sometimes associated with government, to foster interfaith dialogue. But all noted their superficiality and critiqued their underlying motivation as often focused on impressing outsiders – not incidentally, American

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officials with a foreign aid budget in hand — rather than on pressing for meaningful social change. The consensus was that these efforts, some now decades old, have produced little positive change.

Roya Hakakian pointed to the opportunity afforded by diaspora communities in the West to overcome the physical and metaphysical barriers that have arisen to separate groups. This is especially important in cases where the regime in question is particularly draconian in enforcing and punishing effects to generate empathetic dialogue. That certainly includes the Iranian regime.

Ms. Hakakian noted an incident, at a conference in Toronto, in which a Bahai woman described the brutal arrest of her husband in Iran, and an audience member attested that he witnessed the incident himself. The bonds of pain and honesty that can exist in exile, but not at home, show that while still separated and segregated in Iran, Bahai, Jewish, Christian, and more secular opponents of the Iranian clerical regime can interact usefully in the West.

She raised the hope that dialogues of empathy developed and cultivated in the West might influence realities back home, especially if and when the regime either reforms or falls. She suggested that this might be the case for other countries in the region as well.

Braude then challenged panelists to imagine how to breach the obstacles to an empathic narrative exchange among the communities and realms they described.

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Rebar Salahuddin laid out his vision of opening spaces for empathic engagement in the 100 among Kurdistan's 5,000 mosques where the leadership appreciates the value of such an undertaking. He also proffered ideas about how to use public spaces to represent and reinsert into social consciousness a more benign, pre-Ba'athi Iraqi history through the rededication of architectural vestiges along the general lines of the German "Stolpersteine" model.

Ms. Mahmoud noted the possibility of reclaiming Egyptian social media spaces for empathic engagement, snatching it back from Islamists. She did acknowledge that the technology, because of its protection of anonymity, inherently disembodies personality from message and so tends to produce more ranting-then-blocking behavior than incentives to genuinely listen to each other. It is, after all, much easier to be irrational and disrespectful of others when not in face-to-face engagement, and when the targets of criticism cannot identify the critic. But perhaps there are ways nevertheless, she suggested, to craft social media to promote empathetic engagement.

She also proposed engaging those Arab autocracies that adopt cultural policies consonant with the agenda of empathic civil engagement; not all of them, though less than democratic, are alike, she pointed out, and noted that some regimes see empathetic dialogue as being in their own interests.

Hussain Abdul-Hussain agreed that diasporas are a potential asset in developing empathetic dialogue. The readiness of Lebanese diaspora figures to model such forms of dialogue that are

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lacking inside the country is an example. Today, too, a range of broadcasts and other media can beam such practices back into the country. Lebanon may be a special case due to the large relative size of its diaspora. But its model might be adaptable to other cases.

Braude then thanked all of the webinar’s participants, and proposed follow-on efforts to develop more specific ideas and projects to generate empathetic dialogue across the region’s fault lines of conflict.

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