

## Gaza conversations

Ben Coleridge

News of the conflict in Gaza prompted Ben Coleridge to reflect on the time he spent in Israel and Palestine last year, and on his encounters with people whose daily lives are affected by the troubles in the region. Why are conversations about the issues so difficult, and how might they lead to resolution?

Seen from the walls of Jerusalem in the evening, the harsh features of the surrounding landscape appear accentuated; the scorched countryside is dotted with settlements and the immense Israeli security wall curls across baked and rocky hills.

As the eye roves east, the Mount of Olives and the graves of thousands who lie buried there awaiting the resurrection come into view. The domes of the Russian Orthodox Church glint in the sun.

I stood on the walls of Jerusalem in September 2008 after having spent the better part of a month in Israel, the Occupied Territories and Jordan. Together with an international group of young people I had been introduced to peace and conflict research and the situation of minorities within Israel.

From conversing with members of Arab and Israeli NGOs, we went hither and thither, to encounters with the Druze sect, meetings with United Nations workers, visits to schools, all the while attempting to make some sense of people and place.

I think back on these conversations now as I follow the reporting of Israel's aerial bombardment and land invasion of the Gaza Strip in response to continuing Hamas rocket attacks on Israeli citizens. How can these recollections help me to think clearly through the headlines, arguments and shouts of anger?

One conversation began around a dining table in the home of a Jewish family in Haifa on the northern coast of Israel. Throughout the 20th century, Haifa



Photo by Julia Capps

had been a major point of arrival for Jewish immigrants and settlers. It is now a significant port city.

We were staying at the University of Haifa, perched on the summit of Mount Carmel. The view has changed since Elijah's day, and is dominated by the industrial zone that spreads across the plains below.

On a Friday evening our group had been to pray with the community at the local synagogue, following which two of us were invited to share a Sabbath meal. The family and their friends were of British and American origins and their son was attending university in the United States.

They welcomed us into their house and the conversation was happy and inviting. After we washed our hands and drank the Sabbath wine, they asked us about the purpose of our time in Israel. Inevitably, the topic of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians slowly reared its head. Once it fully emerged, the atmosphere was transformed.

In the preceding week my friend and I had been travelling around the Galilee region to Jewish as well as Arab towns. The smell of urine in the streets of Umm el-Fahm was still strong in our nostrils and the rubbish piled high in heaps decaying in the hot sun remained vivid.

The apparent form of segregation between Jews and Arabs had triggered a passionate response. We had questions to ask. Our conversation with the Jewish family became heated; everyone's voices were raised

and tense, interrupting each other, desperate to articulate just one more 'vital' point which would affirm the righteousness of one side's narrative.

Despite the tension, our Sabbath meal ended with hugs and fond farewells, a mark of how special it was to have come together from different religions and far corners of the world, to share such a moment.

But as the two of us emerged on to the dark Haifa street we spoke of our discontent. Our ideals and hopes had met with immovability. We felt that nothing good had emerged from discussing the conflict. In fact, it may have been better to leave the subject alone altogether.

But how could we? After all, it surrounded us, smothered us, we were boiling with indignation.

Weeks later, in the Jordanian town of Al-Kerak — a small hilltop town in the middle of the desert overlooking the Dead Sea — conversation again appeared futile. When asked by a local where we had come from, my friend and I replied 'Israel,' to which he responded, 'We do not have that word in our vocabulary.'

Deep within we felt immense frustration, an urge to point his eyes across the Dead Sea and shout 'Look! There it is and there it will stay so get used to it!'

Thinking back later over this exchange, and over our Sabbath dinner, I tried to identify the focus of our conversations. What, at their core, were they about? I concluded that we had been struggling with each other over identity: over who has a right to claim the identity of 'the persecuted' and why.

It seemed to me that what these encounters demonstrated was the difficulty of conversation. It was hard to talk, to really talk, in this part of the world.

That is why I try to remember lessons learned by our group as I follow media reports of the present crisis. Most of these lessons concerned ways of conversing about the conflict between Jewish and Arab communities. Be wary of rhetoric, we were told, but also avoid deploying the many personal stories of anguish to substantiate a sweeping observation.

We were constantly pushed to draw threads from both Jewish and Arab narratives when considering any given issue. This presented challenges to both habitual and spontaneous forms of thinking.

Standing in the shadow of the concrete Israeli-built security wall that rips through the West Bank, we could feel anger and horror at its effect on Palestinian communities; it was a wall to weep at. But this feeling was complicated by the realisation that the number of suicide bombings in Jerusalem has decreased with the advent of the wall.

Every issue became multilayered, and taking a balanced approach required a supreme and prolonged effort. It was so very easy to simply pop the cork and let your emotions explode into partisan form.

But did this 'balancing act' of ours create a kind of moral stasis where we could not say what was clearly wrong? I don't think so. Injustice became the target of our condemnation rather than either Israelis or Palestinians. We were able to locate injustice wherever it existed, on both sides. I have just seen the latest newflash on the situation in Gaza. The hundreds of people killed, including all those children: that is clearly wrong.

And by being open and recognising goodness on both sides, we were more able to meet with both. In trying to develop this capacity to listen we took our lead from a range of people and groups.

One such group were the parents of the Kfar Kara bilingual school in Galilee where Jewish and Arab children are educated together: we watched the children playing and chasing each other through the playground. Every day at Kfar Kara parents and children engage each other in conversation; they have built a community which symbolises trust.

The Arab and Jewish NGOs such as Dirssat (Arab Centre for Law and Policy) and Shatil (funded by the New Israel Fund) were centres of conversation and engine rooms for dialogue. Via research and activism they persevered in cultivating conversation with Jewish and Arab communities and organisations.

They struggled with dialogue but pushed on with constructing new options for local communities to

reach across the divide — the gulf of silence which has now been filled with the sound of gunfire.

These leaders, from both sides, and despite their personal experience of violence, rejected the computational form of thinking that many embrace. They rejected the identity of 'the persecuted' because it was a reason to do nothing constructive or hopeful. And because of that, they were able to be creative.

In recent days events in the Gaza Strip have demonstrated that power finds it easier to use force than to begin or maintain conversation. Hamas' mission is to engineer situations which will bolster its support in the Gaza Strip and perhaps also on the West Bank. And Israel's assault confirms the conviction amongst Palestinians (many of whom have already suffered from the blockade of Gaza) that Israel is their bane.

Among a new generation of youth whose nostrils are also full of the smell of urine and hopelessness, among the young soldiers who suffer in the fighting, the conflict will inspire long term and disdainful hatred. Force maintains distance between the two sides, even though blood is inevitably mingled. The Jewish and Arab communities will simply go on thinking of each other as the dishonourable enemy.

In Bethlehem, in Umm el-Fahm, in Haifa and Jerusalem, among all those our group met, anger will fester. The desperation felt in the shadow of the wall, in the ruins of Gaza City, in the rocket-afflicted streets of Sderot will now be intensified, a feeling that hope is lost, that it is time to 'pack up the moon and dismantle the sun ... for nothing now can ever come to any good'.

Only by enduring the trials of conversation, by finding the balance between both sides' narratives, and by rejecting force, can we cleanse this sickness from the soul.

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