



**“People to People:
Examining Grassroots Peacebuilding Efforts Between
Israelis and Palestinians”**

**Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the
Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism
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“I know that the peace process and its success didn’t begin in a vacuum. There were many great things that laid the ground for the negotiation to succeed. One was the International Fund for Ireland. I believe that [MEPPA], which I’ve been very privileged and happy to support, could do exactly the same to the Israeli and Palestinian conflict.”

*-Tony Blair,
former Prime Minister of the U.K.,
co-signatory to the Good Friday Agreement*

“Whether it is Trade Unions, Women's Groups, Business Organisations, Youth Leaders, Civil Society translating the wishes of the community and the desire for peaceful progress is absolutely essential. In the case of Ireland the role played by civil society was a key component in our efforts to end violence and make a peaceful society.”

*-Bertie Ahern,
former Prime Minister of Ireland,
co-signatory to the Good Friday Agreement*

Introduction

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson and members of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the critical role of people-to-people peacebuilding efforts between Israelis and Palestinians. We have seen, even just in the last few months, the role that grassroots movements can and do play in our region for better or for worse. It brings me great hope to see that you, as leaders of the United States government, have chosen to invest in improving economic cooperation and people-to-people peacebuilding programs, and to further community building, peaceful coexistence, dialogue, and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.

Background

In the years immediately following the Oslo Accords, which initially enjoyed high levels of support among both Israelis and Palestinians, each society waited eagerly to experience the anticipated gains promised by their respective leaders. Unfortunately, the ensuing broken promises, rising violence and the agreement's own inherent flaws resulted in the collapse of this brief moment of optimism. Oslo arrived suddenly, following secret negotiations whose success surprised even the most well-informed and politically engaged citizens. With no civic preparation for even the *idea* of peace, let alone the compromises the agreement entailed, it is not surprising that the agreements collapsed. The cynicism and fatalism that replaced the initial euphoria proved more detrimental than the prior reality, exacerbating tensions tenfold and leading to the Second Intifada, one of the most violent periods in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Each society quickly became far more ignorant of the other, embracing zero-sum narratives, and more polarized than when the "peace process" began.

In the mid-1980s, just a few years before the Oslo Accords, when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was in one of its periods of relative calm, violent attacks were a daily occurrence in Northern Ireland, with polarization, fear and hatred growing rapidly between the Nationalist and Unionist populations. Seeing few of the preconditions necessary for peace, the United States government and international partners intervened in order to disrupt and rearrange key civil society variables. That intervention, the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), helped to create the social, economic, and political foundations upon which peace was secured more than a decade later.

Unfortunately, efforts since Oslo to establish Israeli-Palestinian peace have continued to disregard the complex entanglement of grievance, belief, and ideology which are at the root of the conflict. Peace efforts thus far have failed to recognize the catalytic and precursive role played by civil society in other successfully resolved conflicts with similar religious and identarian characteristics, such as the Troubles in Northern Ireland, among others.

Unprecedented Investment in Grassroots Peacebuilding

The Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act of 2020 (MEPPA) is so monumental because it represents the first large-scale governmental attempt at building Israeli-Palestinian peace from the ground up. This U.S. contribution offers unparalleled support for people-to-people peacebuilding and economic partnership, and also invites even greater

multinational investment and the possibility of creating a central institution for civil society peacebuilding that could allow it to operate at the same scale as the conflict itself.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your courage, for looking backward at our prior failed peace process attempts and choosing to invest in the critical element that has been missing all along: grassroots people-to-people peacebuilding.

This paper offers guidance to assist in developing an implementation plan for MEPPA. The approach outlined below focuses on the belief that *civil society peacebuilding efforts must systematically break the intractable nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict down into more manageable parts, tackling each of those parts one by one, and leading to a popular belief that peace is in fact possible, and that all people have an integral role and responsibility in its pursuit.*

Overall Purpose of MEPPA

The overall purpose of MEPPA's funding is to *invest in civil society peacebuilding that will lead to a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians.* Civil society peacebuilding in this case refers to efforts designed to build a more peaceful reality, defined by a) reduced hatred, tension, and violence, b) increased quality of life, and c) improved systems for interaction between the two sides.

Peacebuilding efforts cannot focus solely on preparing civil society for a future political peace agreement. Rather, peacebuilding efforts must include concrete actions that improve lives today, helping over time to create civic consent for interim arrangements and confidence building measures, while also laying the groundwork and building ties of mutual benefit that will live beyond, and be strengthened by an eventually negotiated peace agreement. I recommend the following overall theory of change for MEPPA:

***If** a critical mass of Israelis and Palestinians at all levels of society and across all sectors develop positive perceptions of the other; see themselves as agents for creating a more peaceful reality, develop a sense of shared interest, and have channels for taking action; **and if** sufficient capacity exists, including funds, infrastructure, and mechanisms for bridging research with best practices, **then** a critical mass of Israelis and Palestinians will hope for, believe in, and act toward a more peaceful reality. **Then** the cycle of violence and tension between the two sides, replaced by a sense of partnership based on mutual interest, will be relinquished, leading to the conflict feeling less intractable, more solvable, and worthy of political capital being deployed toward peace at the social, economic, religious and political levels.*

Objective 1- Engage a critical mass of Israelis and Palestinians in people-to-people peacebuilding by funding a strong portfolio of people-to-people peacebuilding initiatives:

It is imperative that initial funding efforts prioritize institutionalization of grassroots peacebuilding initiatives and long-term impact, rather than simply disbursing and monitoring project grants. Years of program evaluation and research have proven that person-to-person

peacebuilding is highly effective in changing attitudes and enhancing cooperation in ethnic and territorial conflicts around the world. Research confirms that these programs change attitudes that conflicting groups have about each other, establish deeply rooted cooperation, build new feelings of trust, and positively change people's views about peace. For example, after participating in the Parents Circle's *History Through the Human Eye* dialogue project, 80% of participants were more willing to work for peace; 71% reported more trust and empathy for the other; and 77% had a greater belief that reconciliation is possible. These new beliefs are typically durable and lasting.¹ The priorities detailed below are examples of the sort of innovations that MEPPA's scale makes possible.

- **Capital Projects:** Expanded funding offers an opportunity to quickly launch and support major capital projects that are badly needed in the region as a backbone for overall peacebuilding efforts. This could include, among other projects, a Center for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, an education and research center, a Museum of the Other, a Peace Leadership Institute, event halls, exhibitions, public displays and demonstrations, as well as new initiatives developed and implemented by staff and partners. While some local initiatives could benefit from grants intended to scale their work into these larger scale programs, MEPPA could and should consider developing infrastructure of its own.
- **Laboratory for Program Innovation:** This mechanism would offer grants on a rolling basis to encourage new peacebuilding initiatives to launch and assure their success within the context of a MEPPA-run research center. Seed funding should support new projects, requiring accompaniment via training, regular meetings with consultants, program and support staff. Ideally, programs funded through the laboratory would become eligible later to apply for funding via other mechanisms, and should also be required to establish income-generating models to assure a degree of independent financial sustainability.
- **Impact Investments and Microgrants:** Impact investments and microgrants will enable investing in organizations and initiatives focused on peacebuilding with the intention to generate social impact alongside a financial return. This includes startup and business ventures that promote social peace, or income-generating programs inside not-for-profit entities that encourage financial sustainability for the organizations themselves.
- **MEPPA Peace Fellowship:** If MEPPA invests in the field's human capital, it will create more effective leadership in the field and encourage organizational staff and lay leadership to stay committed to peacebuilding work over the long term. The MEPPA Peace Fellowship would bridge leaders' skill base with their passion and desire to lead, by funding staff members' salaries for a multi-year period while they participate in parallel professional development, dialogue and adaptive leadership training. This prestigious fellowship would require multi-year commitments of individuals to the organizations they work in, incentivize them to stay in the field and provide a holistic ecosystem and support network within which to grow and learn.

¹ Guzman, Danice Brown and Lila Khatiwada, Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development under contract for USAID. *Expanding the Reach of Impact Evaluations in Peacebuilding: A Retrospective Evaluation of CMM P2P Activities in Israel/West Bank* (July 2019), available at https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TVV3.pdf.

- **Core and Program Funding:** Core and program grants should be offered to support general operations and strategic plan implementation for peacebuilding initiatives. Within each recommended focus area there are already strong organizations and programs operating with models that have demonstrated impact, but not necessarily at scale.
 - Phase 1 Overview, Years 1-2:
 - Peacebuilding centers: Main hub in Jerusalem, branch hubs in mixed cities, local partnerships between paired community centers, West Bank hubs in areas with existing local partnerships, innovative peacebuilding hubs focused on entrepreneurial efforts for transforming civil society;
 - Environmental collaboration: Solar and water infrastructure, joint policies, wastewater, landfills, wildlife protection;
 - Regional tourism pilot program and mapping ;
 - University partnerships: Collaborative research, and exchange opportunities, accredited internships, fellowships, scholarships ;
 - Interfaith peace in the public sphere: Religious declarations in support of peace, public events, demonstrations, art, theater, music for peace;
 - Grassroots engagement: Women empowerment programs, children, youth and young professionals, informal education programs focused on leadership & civic engagement, youth empowerment;
 - Education policy efforts focused on dual narrative and language education
 - Institutionalizing Hebrew & Arabic language learning;
 - Uni-national nonviolent communication and conflict resolution
 - International civil society peacebuilding
 - Insider mediation (Track 2 Diplomacy) with political and religious leaders
 - Phase 2 Overview, Years 3-5
 - Public broadcasting services using different media within each society
 - Cultural competency training: Security forces, security coordination, bureaucrats, city councils, educators;
 - Restorative justice programs (uninational and binational)
 - Parades demonstrating public support for peace on a large scale
 - Collaborative Tourism Ministry:
 - Dual narrative experiences for the sides to learn each other's narrative and to develop partnerships for the sides to work together to share the narratives to international audiences.
 - Regional tourism initiatives can promote tourism in both communities, especially in underdeveloped tourist areas.

Objective 2- Aggregate support to strengthen the infrastructure of Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding by hosting and/or partnering on the development of the following peacebuilding infrastructure:

- **MEPPA Center for Israeli-Palestinian Peacebuilding:**
 Cross-border meetings between Israelis and Palestinians require constant negotiation of bureaucratic and security issues related to movement and access. Palestinians from the West Bank who hold a Palestinian national identity card require special permission from the Israeli Civil Administration in order to enter Israel. This makes programs bringing Palestinians into Israel very unreliable. The lack of access for Israelis and Palestinians to

one another in a safe, comfortable and viable work atmosphere places additional strain on the resilience of organizations, isolating staff and lay leadership as well as participants.

A MEPPA Center for Israeli-Palestinian Peace can address these issues by providing a home for peacebuilding efforts via office spaces, meeting rooms, a conference center, activity spaces, extracurricular activities, an auditorium for musical and theatrical performances, prayer and meditation facilities, an events hall, innovation center, and much more. Jerusalem, the most central and easily accessible location for interaction between Israelis and Palestinians--and the symbolic heart of the conflict and both parties national and religious identities--is a natural home for such a center.

A state-of-the-art facility can make peace feel enticing, encouraging participation from previously unengaged members of society. Skainos, an example of a significantly scaled center for peace in Belfast funded by the IFI, engaged the local community within which it sits to design an income-generating model addressing issues of regeneration using art and symbolism to create new ways of coexisting. This is one of several models upon which the MEPPA Center for Israeli-Palestinian Peace can learn how to develop a shared space, promoting local, healthy, sustainable community engagement for peace. Such a center will promote and incubate partnerships, encourage existing initiatives to meet locally, more often and over longer periods of time. This will encourage organizations to keep programs local, more frequent and more ongoing as opposed to the common and sometimes even financially crippling model of constantly taking groups overseas.

- **Capacity Building for Scale:**

Grassroots peacebuilding organizations seek to resolve one of, if not *the*, most complex and intractable conflicts in the world. The external context has become increasingly challenging with violent extremism, controls on movement, and limited financial resources which has only intensified due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the staff who do stay committed to the field over time, nearly all come from the programmatic side of the work with minimal experience in the administrative or managerial aspects of organizational leadership. The complicated and sensitive issues around human resources, finances, insurance and other administrative concerns in any NGO are exacerbated in cross-border work. The lack of expertise in this field drains energy, time and resources from staff, directors and board members who are forced to navigate these issues alone.

Providing professional development opportunities to local leaders as well as conflict-support systems will allow them to gain tools to professionalize while processing their work in the ongoing conflict within which they live. MEPPA funding should convene, support, and build capacity for organizational leadership and individual activists to work more effectively, strategically and in coordination with one another. Recommended capacity building programs include:

- *Palestinian Leadership Institute:* In line with the challenges around inequality between Israelis and Palestinians, leadership in peacebuilding organizations also faces inequality with 82% of peace NGOs run by an

Israeli director, whether alone or in a co-leadership model.² MEPPA can offer adaptive leadership, project management, public speaking and many other skills bases to Palestinian local leadership, skills that Israelis often obtain through their formal and informal education systems.

- *Accelerator for Peacebuilding Organizations*: Accelerators are short-term intensive programs that convene, support and build capacity for strategically chosen cohorts of peacebuilding organizations. The goal of the program would be that each participating organization would learn to operate more effectively and strategically. Participating NGOs will complete the program with increased capacity to track progress and achieve goals, with concrete practiced skills and mentorship in strategic planning, program implementation, community engagement, fundraising, communications and operational management.
- *Conflict-Support and Facilitated Dialogue*: It is a challenging time for peacebuilders, with a tense political climate exacerbated by the insecurities and fears of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social pressure for in-group conformity is high, and people who try to develop positive relationships with their “enemy” face retaliation. As MEPPA seeks to directly challenge entrenched patterns of division, attitudes of suspicion, and erroneous beliefs about the other side, they must acknowledge the painful disruption this causes to individuals engaged in peacebuilding. MEPPA *must* provide a safe and supportive community with respected mentorship, trained facilitators and ample opportunities for the growing peace constituency to express themselves, listen to the perspectives of others, and feel confident in their identity as peacemakers.
- *Peacebuilder Conferences and Roundtables*: Conferences, events, and roundtable discussions facilitated in different formats and groups of different sizes can regularly bring the field together and allow working groups to focus on maximizing coordination, sharing resources, sharing successful program models and minimizing infrastructure distress.

Conclusion

MEPPA, with unparalleled resources, legitimacy, and international partnership demonstrates an understanding that peace between the two peoples must be built strategically, between the people themselves who are at war with one another, and over the long term. This innovative model, if implemented along the lines above, offers much more than a government grant program seeking to select the most interesting projects in a given year. If implemented effectively, the above objectives will legitimize Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding efforts, measurable via the following long term results:

² “The State of Cross-Border Peacebuilding Efforts.” *Amal-Tikva*, 2020 www.amal-tikva.org/report.

- The scale of funding will have enabled a critical mass of Israeli and Palestinians at all levels and throughout all sectors of society to have participated in long-term peacebuilding experiences, or to have been indirectly yet positively affected by them, with a quantifiable improvement in their support for peace, compromise and non-violence;
- Peacebuilding methodologies will be institutionalized and professionalized, rooted in research and part of system-wide strategy, with greater efficiency and ROI gleaned from funding being channeled through one single, highly focused entity; and
- Within a few years of MEPPA's launch, Israeli, Palestinian and international actors will be ready and committed to returning to negotiations and engaging in a comprehensive peace process, with a critical mass in each society ready to support, champion and defend such a process.

In conclusion, I wish to sincerely thank the Commission for its focus on this important issue and for extending me the privilege of testifying today. I truly believe that MEPPA provides a once-in-a-conflict opportunity to change the dynamic on the ground between Israelis and Palestinians for the better, and to lay the foundation for a sustainable, just and lasting peace.