Shared History Project: A PRIME Example of Peace-Building Under Fire

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Minimal peace building during a violent conflict is suggested as a strategy for future post-conflict peace processes. This paper describes a process of five workshops in which Palestinian and Jewish-Israeli teachers developed a joint school textbook of two narratives (an Israeli and a Palestinian) in regard to three dates in their mutual conflict: the Balfour Declaration, the 1948 war and the 1987 Intifada. The teachers developed these two narratives to be taught in their classrooms. All these activities took place under severe conditions of asymmetry of power relations of occupation (of the Palestinians) and of suicide bombers (against Israelis) throughout the project. The Two-State solution requires in our view textbooks of two narratives, so students learn to respect the narrative of the “Other.”

KEY WORDS: Textbooks; peace building; narratives of conflict; shared history; PRIME.

Peace building is a planned activity, based on bottom-up processes, while peacemaking is a political agreement based on top-down processes. We usually believe that a peace process can become sustainable only when the two are synchronized. For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa was a political agreement, compromising the interests of both sides, which took into account also the bottom-up needs of acknowledgement of past atrocities and taking personal responsibility for

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them, letting 22,000 victims of the Apartheid give testimonies. Along this analysis, the Oslo accord gave a political opportunity (and hope) to synchronize the top-down and bottom-up processes in the Israeli and Palestinian conflict. Many bottom-up projects were initiated because of such a hope. Alas, these hopes were shattered by the outbreak of the bloody conflict in October 2000, after the failure of the Camp David talks.

Clearly, when there is no ongoing top-down peacemaking initiative, the peace-building activities cannot bring about peace all by themselves (see Maoz, this issue). Therefore, they should become more modest in their goals: they have to focus on maintaining the ability of mutual positive interactions of the peace builders (the idea of “islands of sanity”), and/or prepare the ground by initiating small projects that could become widespread once a future synchronization with top-down initiatives will take place. Again, to take the example of South Africa, the agreement of the TRC in the 1990s did not take place in a vacuum. Black and white cadres were prepared for more than thirty years, in isolated, mostly Christian refuges, which served as such “islands of sanity” under the most severe external conditions.

This perspective is based on a more mature conclusion that peace processes of intractable conflicts have ups and downs, are not linear, and need a long-term commitment of the peace builders rather than momentary conjectural optimism or opportunism. We will present here a project of a joint school textbook that we developed with Palestinian and Israeli teachers at PRIME (Peace Research Institute in the Middle East) in 2001, during one of the most violent periods of the conflict. The textbook helped us to maintain our “island of sanity” while developing it, and such a textbook project could become widespread when there are future peace agreements. At the present stage, we did not try to advertise the textbook or bring it to the attention of the ministries of education, because the public and the ministries were paralyzed and haunted by the conflict, not the peace process. We estimated that such attempts would hamper the possibility of future dissemination rather than accommodate them. Our project was based on a more realistic approach: at the present stage of hostility and violence, the Israeli Jews and the Palestinians are not able to develop a joint narrative of their history (nor do we expect them to do so). Nevertheless, in the meantime, they could learn to acknowledge and live with the fact that there are at least two competing narratives to account for their past, present, and future. We assumed that this is an essential intermediate phase in the process of each learning about the other and legitimizing the other’s valid reasoning.

In periods of war and conflict, societies and nations tend to develop their own narratives, which from their perspective become the only true and morally superior narrative. These narratives devalue and even dehumanize their enemy’s right for a narrative. If the enemy’s narrative is described at all,