

THE POWERS OF THE NINTH TRACK. AN APPLICATION OF THE MULTITRACK MODEL TO THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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Abstract: *Good leadership, based on cultivating values and a shared identity have proven essential, yet not sufficient in the rise and fall of empires, social movements and religions. In a profoundly diverse contemporary society, the control of social perceptions of the large masses has become the heel of Achilles of current power games as well as the frontline of modern warfare. So how can digital civil engagement and new media be kept in the service of a positive peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as conceptualized by Johan Galtung, the father of peace studies? Media and communication have been widely used by individuals and groups to advance their political projects. This article applies the model of the ninth track of communication from the multitrack peace negotiations framework of Diamond and McDonald (1996) to provide an interpretation of the usage of media and communication tools in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This allows us to understand the growing importance of new media in the conflict and to indicate how this framing might generate questions for empirical research.*

Keywords: *digital communities; negotiations; positive peace; multi-track diplomacy; Israeli-Palestinian conflict*

1. MULTITRACK PEACE

1.1 What is ‘peace’? The concepts of peace and conflict are perceived very differently by the Israelis and by the Palestinians. The social cosmologies of the civilizations that are confronting each other in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have a fundamental role in modelling the ideological and cultural substrata of all those involved, from the civil societies all the way to the official negotiators and the leaders.

Johan Galtung, the founder of the discipline of peace and conflict studies more than six decades ago has defended through a prolific bibliography the importance of positive peace, particularly in protracted conflicts (Galtung, 1996, 1985, 1981, 1969, 1964). Positive peace is defined as “the integration of human society” in contrast with negative peace, which is “the absence of war” (Galtung, 1964:2). For what good is a peace maintained by isolation, and the threat of violence? It will only last for as long as it takes to breach the enclosure, overcome the fear, revolt against gender, race, class and family violence, stand up to socio-economic and political structures of exploitation and repression (Galtung, 1985).

“Peace is a concept applied to a system” Galtung (1985:75) warns, and this concept is imbued with the characteristics of the system,

including the creation of concepts, traditions, ways of thinking, perceptions of the self, of the other and of the rest.

The 20th century passage from classic to contemporary diplomacy has also seen important changes in its components. Most prominently, trends like increased transparency and participation of the broad public in decision-making, increased democratization of international public and private affairs, have led to the emergence of new types of diplomacy, such as public diplomacy and digital diplomacy.

In order to create the premises for positive peace, the activities undertaken in different sectors of society and by a wide range of actors need to be convergent when not correlated. There are two frameworks of analysis which have gained more traction in the academia and specifically in peace studies, aiming at classifying the multitude of activities taking place in one conflict and aimed at bringing the prospect of peace closer. For the purposes of the current article, the Nine-Track framework of Diamond and McDonald (1996) is more useful than the Three-Track of Agha et. al (2003), since it focuses on the types of activity, rather than the political outcome or level of authority of the participants. The Nine Tracks are government (Track one); non-government and professional (Track two); business (Track three);

private citizen (Track four); research, training and education (Track five); activism (Track six); religion (Track seven); funding (Track eight); communications and the media (Track nine) (Diamond and McDonald, 1996:5).

1.2 Multi-track diplomacy. Alternative negotiations proved essential for the beginning of the Oslo Peace Process between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization / Palestinian National Authority (PLO/PNA). But the lack of a feasible and coordinated strategy of multitrack diplomacy was a major reason for the decline and death of the ground-breaking Accords. Since then, every round of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict rewrites the same chapter of historic failure, with ever stronger highlights of frustration, uselessness and despair.

The concept of “multitrack diplomacy” is an umbrella descriptor encompassing the variety of forms of interaction between nations and a broad range of other actors, venues, objectives and methods for advancing the same aim: a positive, sustainable, mutually-beneficial peace across all areas of activity.

Despite repeated collapses of official inter-governmental negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, also known as Track I, informal or unofficial diplomacy – the other eight tracks – is taking place and it has been at times the only avenue of communication for the two societies.

The particular characteristics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including among other issues nationalities, religions and ideologies involved, time span, geographical scope and peaks of crisis - have led to prolonged negotiations. As such, Track nine diplomacy has also evolved and at time fused with the other tracks.

In the past 25 years, the peace focus on Galtung’s dial has fluctuated from negative peace during outbursts of violence¹ to positive peace for the more optimistic observers and peace activists.

This research is based on desk research anthropological observations and benefits from the insight offered by 20 interviews with negotiators who set the groundwork for agreements between

Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) such as the Oslo I, II, Geneva, Annapolis and Ayalon-Nusseibeh Agreements.

These interviews reflect the general view expressed by opinion polls, theorists and politicians alike *an almost absolute consensus* about the final status, taking as a departure point a two-state solution based on June 4th 1967 borders, with necessary territorial swaps and compensation, solid security assurances for Israel, a national homeland for the Palestinians and a satisfactory and final solution to the refugee problem and Jerusalem. There is a very vivid debate about the details of what can be acceptable, but the majority has no doubt that these issues must be on the table, along with the so-called secondary issues, such as economy, relations with the Arab world and democratic guarantees.

2. THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN IMPASSE

2.1 Whither the peace? Although the opinion polls² as well as the majority of negotiators interviewed for this study (Gadi Baltianski: 2014; Yossi Beilin: 2014; Abu Ala’a: 2013; Gibril Rjoub: 2013) show that over three quarters of both societies want a two-state solution, their practical involvement towards achieving it has so far been weak. The possible resolutions to the conflict have been explored and presented in great detail and it is only political will for implementing them that is still lacking (Mohammad Shtayyeh, Ephraim Sneh, Samieh al Abed, 2013).

The Geneva Agreement outlines in 50 pages and details in almost 500 more pages a proposal for resolution of the conflict, one that is acceptable and reasonable for politicians and experts on both sides. This comprehensive permanent-status agreement was reached by Israeli, Palestinian and international professionals in the different areas of dispute, such as security, resources demography, history and sociology.

Twelve of the practitioners who have been interviewed for this article believe that after Geneva there is little if any role for unofficial

¹ The First Intifada (1987-1993), the Second Intifada (2000-2005), the Summer Rains Operation (2006), the Gaza Operation (2007), the Cast Led Operation (2008-2009), the Pillar of defence Operation (2012), the Protective Edge Operation (2014) as well as other outbreaks of hostility of a lower intensity, following provocative gestures and declarations such as the July 2017 events at the Al-Aqsa Compound or President Trump’s declaration on Jerusalem in December 2017.

² The most constant poll recording the pulse of the feelings between Israelis and Palestinians has been the Peace Index, analysed in *Palestinian-Israeli Pulse: A Joint Poll*, conducted by the *Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research* (TSC), Tel Aviv University and the *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research* (PSR) in Ramallah, retrieved 14-04-2018 available online at http://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Joint%20PAL-ISR%20Poll%20%20English%20Summary_9%20February%202017.pdf

negotiations (tracks two through nine) aimed at finding solutions to the conflict. There is only one possible solution and that is a positive sum game.

Direct negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians were interrupted in September 2010 and they collapsed altogether on by April 2014. The US, who had sponsored the talks, insisted that “both sides did things here that were very unhelpful”³ referring to settlement expansion plans, threats of international legal action, delays in agreed prisoner releases and military reprisals. There were other significant regional developments, such as general elections in Israel and building a unity government in the Palestinian territories, which strongly influenced the attention of political leaders towards their constituencies, rendering them less likely to make the unpopular and brave decisions required for a breakthrough. This failure once again showed the importance of sustainably cultivating the desirability of peace for the conflicting populations, both top-down and bottom-up. In lack of a bold and powerful leader, able and willing to build peace, the importance of honest, meaningful, substantial and positive communication between the conflicting populations becomes a quintessential prerequisite and possible solution to this lengthy crisis.

2.2 Peace and its circumstances. On the multi-track dial, the focus has increasingly shifted from supporting First Track and generating possible solutions acceptable to both sides, to engaging the public. This is happening through projects aimed at mainstreaming the preoccupation with peace and the positive interest of the peoples towards each-other, including agreeing on some general framework for uniting the narratives of the two sides (Geneva Initiative - Baltianski, 2014). Other initiatives aim at fostering private encounters between students or professionals of similar fields (Shades Negotiation Programme at the IDC, Neve Shalom) or even the general public through public

³ Marie Harf, Deputy Spokesperson of the US Department of State 5/05/2014 Daily Press Briefing, Washington, DC form <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/05/225613.htm> retrieved 18/04/2018. The unhelpful steps mentioned are „On the Palestinian side, the appeal to 15 different treaties while we’re actively working to secure a prisoner release [... o]n the Israeli side, large-scale settlement announcements, a failure to release the fourth tranche of prisoners on time, and then the announcement of 700 settlement tenders at a very sensitive moment, really combined to undermine the efforts to extend the negotiations.

Negotiations Conferences, such as Minds of Peace (Handelman, 2014). All these have emerged from the desire to improve a faulty process and aim it in the direction of the ideal communication of Jurgen Habermas (1990). Downey and Fenton argue that an application of Habermas’ theory to the internet age needs to differentiate between a political public sphere, when Track Nine “provides for a discourse about shared societal concerns”, or a counter public sphere, when “the ethical framework of a political public sphere is undermined or deliberately overturned”, warning of the irrational and anti-democratic dangers of this framework (2003:191).

The dialectical relationship between the unit and the ecosystem is maintained transversally from the individual to the community, the nation or any other unit and the context in which they operate (Ortega y Gasset, 2004:757) A broad range of actors, from private citizens to more organised groups and media-specialised branches of every institutions take to the social media in order to overcome the biases of mainstream media and to keep the pulse of the general public on the specific issues of their interest. The Palestinian protests from 2011 through to 2018 have brought to prominence the role of social media beyond sharing real-time information, to generating and spreading ideas and identities, organizing social movements creating and reshaping discourse and choices, leading some analysts to argue that these media potentiated the movements (Aouragh, 2011:105; Shirky, 2011:28). Further research is warranted to clarify how the dynamic equilibrium between emission and reception of information and ideas on Track Nine favors an incremental peace or at least the re-humanization of *the other*.

2.3 Media, Communication and Digital Civic Engagement. The primary, declared aim of the media is to inform and engage the public, based on the core democratic assumption that well-informed individuals will make the best political decisions for their social groups (Downing, 2001; Diamond and McDonald, 1996:120). The immense relativity of the terms of this assumption have caused splits, wars, alliances and more recently the emergence of alternative and social media. In a world where political clout translates directly into power and money, the importance of how public opinion is shaped cannot be overestimated.

Traditional media relies both on advertisers for funding and on state institutions for access to information, therefore, it tends to be more conservative, averse to risk and novelty. In order to

balance out this likely bias of mainstream media, alternative - yet still centralized – forms content creation, sourcing, production and distribution have emerged, like zines, magazines, info-sheets and later blogs circulated since the emergence of the printed press, with radically increased production capacities generated by the invention of the printed press, photocopying technology and the internet. The liberalization and democratization of information flows was taken to a new level by social media.

In the internet era, but pre-social media, Downey and Fenton show how the internet permits radical groups from both Left and Right “to construct inexpensive virtual counter-public spheres to accompany their other forms of organization and protest (2003:198).” Technology like virtual private networks (VPNs), proxy servers and specialized smart-phone applications with integrated encryption technology, such as Telegram or Whatsapp have helped groups surpass national boundaries and restrictions, as well as attacks by adversary groups and institutions.

In order to ensure sustainability and the transition towards positive peace, it is essential to maintain contending societies engaged on the different tracks of diplomacy and at the various levels of each track. The lagging behind of one or more of the tracks, such as people-to-people activities in the framework of Agha et. al. (2003) or digital civic engagement in the framework of Diamond and McDonald (1996), along with the lack of coordinated efforts on all tracks are central factors for the failure of bilateral negotiations in the multi-track framework.

Chris Wylie of Cambridge Analytics, the company behind Donald Trump’s Social media engineering explains the very simple inference at the foundation of this unexpected 2016 US election surprise: “If you control the stream of information around your opponents, you can influence how they perceive that battle space and then you can influence how they’re going to behave and react⁴”.

The ‘Breitbart Doctrine’, based on the idea that Politics is downstream from culture has been promoted on Breitbart’s website⁵ since 2009, with

⁴ In an interview with *The Guardian*, 24/03/2018, retrieved on 29/03/2018 from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/mar/24/cambridge-analytics-week-that-shattered-facebook-privacy>

⁵ Retrieved 29/04/2018 from <http://www.breitbart.com/big-hollywood/2009/01/08/changing-an-industry-culture/>. The term ‘Breitbart doctrine’ was used for the first time by William Warren, although only coined by Chris Wylie – see note 4.

the aim of creating a movement countering Barack Obama’s success in the 2008 elections. This doctrine claims a causal chain relationship between a series of shifts. The assumption, is that a change in politics is based on change in culture, which is based on influencing the way individual people think. The 2016 US presidential elections and the ensuing investigations have surfaced how easily influencing digital civil engagement can turn into fraud and corruption.

The recent scandal about the improper use of users’ data by Facebook and the manipulations by third companies, such as, most prominently, Cambridge Analytica, have surfaced leadership strategies that shocked and enraged the general public. Their response, including public campaigns, hash tags, a media uproar and culminating with the shameful questioning of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg in the US Congress was fast to come and fast to go. Despite the scandal and anticipation of the end of Facebook⁶, the company did not see a significant decrease in revenue or in revenue or value. In fact, Facebook’s April 2018 dip did not reach the level of the company’s cheapest shares on Nasdaq or Dow Jones in May-June 2017 (a minimum value of 144\$ on June 2017 versus 150\$ in April 2018 due to the Cambridge Analytica scandal⁷).

2.4 Keep in touch. In the 90s, the Oslo Accords were breaking ground in creating a geographical, administrative, social and political space for the Palestinians to develop. This complex labour of building material and immaterial institutions is paralleled by the global expansion of alternative and social media surging in the 90s. This is demonstrated by the multiplication of the number of media outlets and a communications culture flourishing in a much more accelerated pace than previously.

A major reason for the death of the Oslo process and, with it, the decay of prospects for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, is the alienation of the public from the decision-making process. The

⁶ Hash tags like #deletefacebook, #facebookfree were used to call for users to delete their Facebook profiles and stop using the platform due to the breach of confidentiality. Compiled from Twitter on 20/04/2018 https://twitter.com/hashtag/deletefacebook?src=hash&ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bc.net.au%2Fnews%2Fscience%2F2018-03-27%2Ffacebook-after-cambridge-analytics%3A-what-now%2F9586604.

⁷ Compiled from Nasdaq and CBS News websites on 28/04/2018.

public was expected to accept the 'tough decisions' that leaders had to make, yet these often hid behind the unpreparedness of their constituents to accept such decisions. And preparedness is to be constructed. Various web-based initiatives of alternative conflict resolution are trying to fill this gap. These processes are of the people, by the people and for the people. They offer safe and cost-effective environments to engage and re-humanize former adversaries, even enemies, reverting them to potential partners for peace.

Aouragh applies Habermas' public sphere framework, claiming that the 'virtual escapism' and the physical environment of the internet cafes in Palestine has resurrected the possibility of a public sphere (2011:231). The next wave of developments – the spread of smart phones and therefore of social media access created the virtual space where the principles of communicative action could apply.

The further study of communication and new media use for advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace prospects can reveal critical mechanisms. Questions to be raised include: the range of uses of Track Nine, such as organization, propaganda and types of online social activity; the relationship between online and the offline activities, such as the role of Track Nine activities in organizing offline activities, demonstrations, coordinated non-violent or violent acts; the role of Track Nine in enhancing group identity amongst the participants, attracting new members and supporters, mainstreaming the idea of peace and coexistence outside the peace camp; whether the construction of a virtual public sphere can lead to a virtual peace and whether this reduces or strengthens the need for off-line peace; and whether the expansion of Track Nine activities in the Israeli-Palestinian context has hindered the prospects for peace at turning points of heightened violence or during Track One peace negotiations.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Civic movements, including those promoting the universal suffrage, women's empowerment, green causes and an ample range of national and independentist movements need to rely on their ability of rallying followers in order to compensate for other resources which are less readily available to them than to leaders with an established power infrastructure. The cases of the Jewish and Palestinian national movements are no different,

neither in 2018, nor in the past 70 or indeed 2000 years, both milestones in the conflict in the land holy for the three main Abrahamic religions.

This article has applied the Ninth Track of the Multitrack diplomacy framework of Diamond and McDonald (1996) to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and has elaborated on relevant further research. The impact of different forms of Media and Communications and particularly the different forms of digital civic engagement can be major for the possibility of peaceful coexistence in the region, regardless of when reality and tensions will settle down and where on the broad spectrum between the one- and the two-state solutions.

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