

Appendix B

The Jerusalem Link in Historical Context

A brief history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict should provide a context for the current work of the Jerusalem Link. Almost all of the peacemakers I interviewed for this study linked their personal activities on the grassroots with the national history of their people. They told their individual and collective histories as one. The historiography of this conflict has further fueled the conflict.¹ Israelis and Palestinians have each created their own differing national narratives of the past one hundred years. Both peoples use each historical event, especially the successive wars, to justify their current political agendas. By emphasizing their own group's suffering, vulnerability, weakness, and the other group's belligerence, both sides have tried to evoke international sympathy, assign blame, and strengthen their claim to certain political and human rights.

The Birth of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

Some trace Arab-Jewish tension back to the Biblical period.² But most modern historians date the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to a little over one hundred years ago. In the late 19th century, the joint influences of a liberal Jewish enlightenment movement and the effects of increased anti-Semitic attacks generated the modern political ideology of Zionism. Theodore Herzl articulated the

¹ See Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, Avi Shlaim and Ephraim Karsh, "Rewriting Israel's History-A Debate," in *Middle East Quarterly* (September 1996): 51-60 for the role of history in shaping the current conflict.

² For example, some link the current Palestinian people to the Biblical Canaanites and Philistines who inhabited the area West of the Jordan River at the time of the Israelite conquest in

political goals of this ideology: to settle as many Jews as possible in a Jewish State, the only viable solution to the “Jewish Problem” of rampant anti-Semitism in Europe. At the same time that the Zionist leaders were organizing financially and diplomatically, waves of Jewish immigrants began arriving in Palestine. The new immigrants purchased land, built settlements and social institutions, and clearly signaled their intentions of establishing a Jewish homeland and ultimately a Jewish State in Palestine.³ For these Jews and some of their descendents, Zionism is the destined return of the Jewish people to their promised homeland, following the cyclical pattern of exile and return which has characterized Jewish history.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the growing Jewish presence in Palestine was perceived as a threat by the Arab population of the land, mainly farmers in small villages under the distant governance of the failing Ottoman Empire. They saw the new Jewish settlers of European descent as the latest group of invading Westerners who believed Palestine to be uninhabited or inhabited only by backwards uncivilized natives. For the Arab inhabitants of the land of Palestine as well as their descendents (the modern ethno-national group labeled “Palestinians”), Zionism is a political ideology that inspires colonialization and occupation.

The ideology of Zionism has taken on vitriolic power in the discourse of the conflict, representing for most Palestinians a major obstacle to democracy in Israel and the West Bank and the supposed justification for widespread human rights

the thirteenth century BCE. See Mark Tessler, *The History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 8-13.

³ Herbert C. Kelman, “The Role of National Identity in Conflict Resolution: Experience from Israeli-Palestinian Problem-Solving Workshops,” 4.

violations. Most Palestinians today associate Zionism with racism. Peace activists on both sides grapple with this ideology. For example, the self-definition of a Palestinian peacemaker often entails a willingness to recognize the State of Israel's right to exist and therefore some concession to the Zionist cause. For their part, many Israeli peacemakers whom I interviewed called themselves "skeptical Zionists" and a few "anti-Zionists."

From the British Mandate to the Israeli State (1919-1948)

The implementation of Zionism is as contentious as its ideology. When the Allied Forces defeated the Ottoman Turks in World War I, Great Britain seized control of Palestine and ruled until 1947 under the British Mandate. During this period, the British promised the Jews a homeland in Palestine (The 1917 Balfour Declaration) yet also tried hard to restrain Jewish immigration and land sales to placate the discontented Arabs. After widespread Arab riots from 1936-1939 and the waning of Britain's political strength following World War II, the British referred the Palestine problem to the United Nations. In November 1947, the UN's General Assembly passed the Partition Plan, dividing Palestine into a Jewish State and an Arab State.⁴ The Israeli narrative views the birth of the Jewish State, including the organized underground military units and the illegal smuggling of immigrants into Palestine, as the only resort of a desperate people facing annihilation in Nazi Europe. Palestinians, on the other hand, see the Mandate Period as an instance of Western imperialistic alliance formation and the Partition

⁴ The Partition Plan called for international control of the city of Jerusalem under a UN committee. Today, most Palestinian peace activists as well as the Palestinian Authority regard United Nations control and the internationalization of the city as the only possible means of reaching a compromise about Jerusalem.

Plan as a product of Western guilt over the Holocaust. Palestinians see their great uprising of the late 1930s as a revolutionary movement against the British and the Jewish settlers, as well as a turning point that forged the disunited Bedouin and Arab farmers into a cohesive ethno-national unit, the modern Palestinian people.

The 1948 War

Today, Ehud Barak, Prime Minister of Israel, and Yasser Arafat, Chariman of the Palestinian Authority, deliberate four sticky final status issues: the future of Jerusalem, the return of Palestinian refugees, the establishment of secure borders between the two people, and the declaration of the Palestinian State. All four issues can be traced back to the 1948 War. The Arab countries' rejection of the Partition Plan precipitated the war, and five Arab armies attacked the one-day old State of Israel in May of 1948.⁵ Between December of 1947 and September of 1949, between 600,000 and 700, 000 Palestinian Arabs lost their homes and entered into refugee status.⁶ The Palestinians hold Israel entirely responsible for this national trauma, which they call "al-naqba," the catastrophe. Each group blames the other for creating the Palestinian refugee problem and the displacement of Palestinians into the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and neighboring Arab countries. Palestinians describe the refugee problem as the forced exile of their people by Israeli troops. Israelis explain the origins of the refugee problem by describing the panic flight by the Palestinians in advance of these troops.⁷

⁵ Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia attacked within twenty-four hours after Prime Minster David Ben-Gurion's declared the New State of Israel on May 14, 1948.

⁶ Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1. These numbers themselves are heatedly contested.

⁷ Recent historical research has revealed the Palestinian refugee problem resulted from a combination of forced eviction by Israeli troops, voluntarily flight in advance of the troops, and the

The 1948 War drew into contention the demarcation of borders between the Israeli and Palestinian state. During the course of the war, Israel seized some of the land originally intended for the Arab State under the Partition Plan.⁸ They claimed that land taken in a war of self-defense should not be returned. Palestinians, however, consider illegal the seizure of any land taken in excess of the Partition Plan. The current discussion of borders in the two-state solution — a contentious topic mentioned by 80 percent of the peacemakers I interviewed — involves a more ideological and historiographical debate about whether the 1948 war can be attributed to Arab rejectionism or Israeli aggression.

The 1967 War

The war of June 5-11, 1967 irrevocably shaped the course of the conflict. It sufficiently changed the situation on the ground so that both Israelis and the Palestinians would eventually seek peace for pragmatic reasons. After Israel's lightning victory, its occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip meant that 3 million Israelis ruled more than one million Palestinians.⁹ The Israeli occupation forged a stronger national unity among the Palestinians. As a result of the 1967 War and the symbolic defeat of Pan-Arab nationalism, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) attempted to mobilize members of the refugee community abroad and to fight for Palestinian self-determination. During the first fifteen years of occupation, the quest for Palestinian political emancipation blossomed into a

general fear and confusion born of war. See Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*.

⁸ Under King Abdullah Hussein, Transjordan annexed the rest of the land set aside for an Arab state under the Partition plan.

⁹ In addition to the 600,000 Palestinians in the West Bank, 300,000 Palestinians in Gaza and 300,000 living in Israel's pre-1967 boundaries, 250,000 additional Palestinian refugees fled to

quasi-ideological movement, parallel in some aspects to the earlier Zionist movement.¹⁰

For the Palestinians I interviewed, the peace process must involve a redressing of the historical wrongs ushered in by the Israeli victory of 1967. The pro-peace platform calls for a Palestinian state with pre-1967 borders and an independence that will rescue the Palestinians from the humiliating effects of military occupation. The daily degradation of Israeli occupation has included complete economic dependence on the Israeli economy and job market, a lack of free passage internally and abroad, and the prohibition of any internal political infrastructure. Military occupation has also meant violent arrests, detainments, and imprisonments of many Palestinians suspected of political activism or organizing.

For the Israelis I interviewed, interest in peace also stems in part from the moral discomfort that they have experienced in the past thirty years as military occupiers of an estranged and resentful people. Most current Israeli peace work directly addresses lingering injustices against the Palestinians promulgated by the Israeli government in their control of the West Bank and Gaza and their annexation of East Jerusalem. Rebuilding demolished Palestinian homes is just one example.

For the Israeli women as well as for all Palestinians, house demolitions are a

the East Bank of the Jordan River. See Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, *The Palestinians* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1993), 209.

¹⁰ The Palestinian National Charter, created by the National Congress of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1968, the Seven Points of Fateh, the Palestine National Liberation Movement (headed by Abu Ammar, now known as Yasser Arafat) in 1969, as well as the growing strength of more fringe groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), despite their internal conflicts, can all be loosely grouped into a Palestinian independence movement.

glaring reminder that the occupation is not over.¹¹ Arrests, torture, and physical abuse of Palestinians as well as closures and curfews on the West Bank and Gazan cities and towns have characterized the occupation, provoking much of the deeply rooted resentment and even hatred towards Israel and Israelis often articulated by Palestinians.¹²

From 1967-1987: Twenty Years of Occupation

The Israeli-Palestinian relationship during the first twenty years of the military occupation can be best described as symbiotically antagonistic. Relationships between the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and Israelis, who had been divided from one another during the period of Jordanian annexation, 1948 to 1967, now found themselves politically, economically, and militarily interdependent yet mutually suspicious. During this time period, the Egyptian-initiated 1973 War and subsequent Egyptian-Israeli Camp David Accords augmented the rift between the Palestinians and the Egyptians. After Camp David, the Palestinians emerged as a unified, autonomous and articulate international actor, unwilling to stand behind the shadows of greater Arab superpowers such as Egypt, their long-time sponsor. Palestinians today balance a brotherly loyalty to their Arab neighbors who fought Israel in 1967 and 1973 with a desire to create their own independent national identity, born out of their historical experiences in Palestine in the twentieth century.

¹¹ Currently, Bat Shalom works with Rabbis for Human Rights, the Israeli Coalition Against House Demolitions, B'Tzelem (Israel's major Human rights watch) as well as Palestinian groups on this project.

¹² The Israeli occupation left the IDF and Israeli government in control the Gaza Strip, with a population by 1967 of 360,000 (in a land mass only 140 square miles), the West Bank, with a population of 900,000, about 80,000 lived in Annexed East Jerusalem. The Golan Heights and the

Throughout most of the occupation, dialogue and interaction between the Palestinians and Israelis was unthinkable and frowned upon by both societies. For the Israelis, an atmosphere of nationalistic jubilation following the 1967 War could only be upset by recognizing the abject situation of new population that came along with the occupied land. Yet following the surprise attack of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israelis began re-evaluating their sense of military superiority. They recognized that their hostile Arab neighbors could pose external as well as internal threats. For the Palestinians, for whom occupation meant growing economic dependency as well as military and political subjugation, any interaction with Israelis was regarded suspiciously. Speaking with Israelis, even members of left wing anti-Zionist Jewish groups or peace activists, would imply a recognition of Israel's right to exist and, therefore, an acceptance of the status quo situation of occupation.¹³

The Intifada 1987-1991: Something Must Change

On December 8, 1987, an Israeli truck collided with two vans carrying Gazan laborers to the Jabalya refuge camp, home to over 60,000 Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip. Word of the resulting death of four Gazans spread throughout the Occupied Territories in leaflets distributed that evening, attributing the fatalities not to an accident but to an act of vengeance killing premeditated by

Sinai Peninsula, the other seized territories, were vast landmasses with negligible Syrian and Egyptian populations. See Tessler, 399-405.

¹³ The first groups to begin dialogue came from the political fringes of both sides. In the early seventies, the miniscule anti-Zionist organization Matzpen, the New Communist Party (Rakah) and the Council for an Israeli-Palestinian Peace pioneered the advocacy of two-state solution, thereby recognizing the Palestinians' rights to their own State. During this period, only a small number of academics, mainly from Bir Zeit University in the West Bank, who also often had strong leanings to the Communist faction or the DFLP, were open to dialogue and the idea of a two state-

the Israeli driver. Thousands of angry mourners assaulted the nearby Israeli army barracks at the funeral of the deceased, sparking a full-scale civilian uprising that would last over four years. Violence against the occupying forces spread throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In the first six months after the December crash, 42,355 incidents of violence were recorded, whereas from 1968-1975, the Israeli military had counted an average of only 350 incidents every year.¹⁴

The civil rebellion and uprising against Israeli occupation, called the *intifada*, or “shaking off,” would alter the attitudes of both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples and leaders, making the peace process pragmatically attractive to both sides. The *intifada*, for the purpose of securing independence and statehood, forged Palestinian national unity through its collective disobedience and violent strategies. The mass unrest and widespread protests, boycotts, and strikes created the opportunity for the Palestinian leadership abroad, namely the Fateh faction of the PLO headed by Yassir Arafat, to establish Arafat as the legitimate political representative of the Palestinians.¹⁵

Historians and politicians consider the *intifada* as significant as any Arab-Israeli war in its long-lasting diplomatic repercussions. The uprising formed a structure for grassroots political activism and a method for channeling public

solution. See Galia Golan and Zahira Kamal, “Bridging the Abyss: Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue” (1999), 3–4.

¹⁴ Kimmerling and Migdal, 261-262.

¹⁵ The local leadership of the PLP consolidated support by disseminating political leaflets illegally throughout the Occupied Territories. At first, the leaflets were signed by the Unified National Leadership (UNL) and later by leaders of the PFLP, DFLP, the Palestine Communist party and finally Faith and the PLO. The leaflets called for protesting against Israeli civil administration, boycotting Israeli goods, mass resignations of Palestinian police men and tax collectors, refusal to

discontent and anger into organized rebellion. Although mainly a Palestinian attempt to shake off the occupation and exert nationalist aspirations, the *intifada* also increased Palestinian interest in creating conditions of co-existence with Israelis in preparation for the two-state solution. Thus, while the Palestinians began to organize violent stone-throwing, boycotts, strikes and protests (mostly targeted at Israeli military forces), they simultaneously became increasingly open to interaction with Israeli citizens.

The town of Beit Sahur offers an unusual example of these seemingly dichotomous effects of the *intifada*. A majority Christian West Bank village on the outskirts of Bethlehem, Beit Sahur's residents refused to pay taxes to the Israeli government. Hoping to undermine the town's resolve and send a message to other villages considering similar acts of civil disobedience, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) responded by destroying the towns' businesses and most of their commercial base. Even after watching the soldiers destroy groceries in their food stores and furniture within their houses, the Beit Sahurians openly reciprocated the gestures of Jerusalem peacemakers who invited them to join in a dialogue group. Throughout the course of the *intifada* and continuing today, Beit Sahurian Palestinians and Israeli Jerusalem residents have been meeting together every Thursday evening.

Thus, the *intifada* heralded the rise of Palestinian national unity and pride but also created an environment more open to peace work on both sides. On the Israeli side, the *intifada* also altered the political environment and sparked the beginning of changing attitudes towards the conflict. The *intifada* increased Israeli

pay taxes, attacks on Jewish settlers, throwing stones and molotov cocktails at Israeli soldiers, and a search for alternatives to finding work in Israel. Kimmerling and Migdal, 264.

interest in political activism, especially at the grassroots.¹⁶ The *intifada* as well as Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 began to diminish Israelis' unfaltering trust in their military's tactics and objectives. As part of the soul-searching evoked by these events, Israelis began to re-evaluate their military's offensive tactics and intentions. The result was a burgeoning number of peace groups. As a result of the protests, demonstrations, and solidarity marches during the *intifada*, the average Israeli began to feel a threat to her personal security, leading to the realization that the status quo, i.e. continued occupation, would be untenable. In addition, the graphic newspaper and television images of angry Palestinians burning tires and throwing stones chilled the Israeli public. Israelis began to sense that the long-ignored Palestinian occupants of the territories could pose a potential Palestinian security threat, especially because of a relative Palestinian demographic growth that surpassed that of Israel. At the same time, many Israelis were repulsed by images of their own army, "their own sons," quelling the rebellion and beating back even Palestinian women and children.¹⁷

The effects of the *intifada* on the Israeli conscience remain conflicting and complex. Whether from fear or guilt, most Israelis drew the same conclusion: the Palestinians could no longer be ignored. For the Palestinians, increased Israeli public awareness of their situation signaled a triumph of the uprising. The Palestinians hoped to publicize their outrage, suffering and demands for national rights to self-determination to Israeli policy makers, citizens, and international decision-makers in Washington and at the UN.

¹⁶ Judith Green, interview. 25 July 1999.

¹⁷ Golan and Kamal, 7.

Still, after four years the *intifada* brought only mixed success. The *intifada*'s greatest success was its mobilization of political momentum at the grassroots. Local leadership, including most of the Palestinian women whom I interviewed, had galvanized mass political participation and created and directed numerous organizations, women's committees, and economic self-sufficiency projects. The nation-wide activism transcended the previously guarded social barriers of gender, class and geography. The revolutionary environment had reaffirmed the Palestinian national identity and strengthened the Palestinian demand for a homeland.¹⁸

On the other hand, although the *intifada* empowered Palestinians politically and opened the eyes of the Israelis to the struggles of occupation, it did not succeed in its ambitious goal of achieving full Palestinian independence. The economic boycotts and strikes came at a great cost to the Palestinian economy, so much that local leaders eventually moderated their previous demands. For example, the leaders imposed a ban on working in Israel only certain days of the week and banned the purchase of only specific Israeli products. Realizing, ultimately, that a Palestinian State would not be achieved through collective disobedience, the grassroots committees turned to the outside for further leadership. The PLO's Fateh party chairman Yassir Arafat became the spokesperson for Palestinian rights, bringing the Palestinian demands from street barracks to the negotiating table.

¹⁸ The Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish captured the Palestinian sentiment during and after the *intifada*, in words addressed to Israelis: "We have that which does not please you: we have the future/And we have things to do in our land." From his poem "Those who Pass Between Fleeting Words," qtd. in Zachary Lockman and Joel Beinin, eds., *Indifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 26.

The Peace Process 1991-1999

By 1990, a series of Middle East political changes thrust the PLO and Israel into direct and indirect negotiations. The diplomatic agreements, treaties, and conferences that ensued together compose what is popularly referred to as the “Peace Process.” The women of the Jerusalem Link consider this international, bilateral and multilateral diplomatic process as the important context as well as the complement to their work at the grassroots.

In 1988, the Palestinian National Council issued its Declaration of Independence, followed by Jordan’s King Hussein official disengagement from any “administrative or legal links between the two banks that could constitute an obstacle to the liberation of the occupied Palestinian land.”¹⁹ Now the official spokesperson for the Palestinians in the eyes of his people and the Arab world, Arafat petitioned for the diplomatic recognition of the U.S. and Israel and their willingness to secure Palestinian rights. Both the Gulf War and the fall of the Soviet Union in the beginning of the 1990s changed the balance of power in the Middle East and cemented the role of the U.S. as the sole broker in the region. The Arab world recognized that rejecting Israel’s right to exist was no longer a tenable position.

The first meeting between Israel and Arab parties convened in Madrid, Spain in 1991.²⁰ The momentum of the peace process was unstoppable; the

¹⁹ See King Hussein’s *Disengagement from the West Bank, July 31, 1988* in Walter Laquer and Barry Rubin, eds., *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict*, 5th ed., rev. (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 481-486.

²⁰ At Madrid, Israeli Prime-minister Yithak Shamir was not prepared to directly negotiate with the PLO. The bilateral track of negotiations involved direct talks between Israel and Syria, Israel and Lebanon and Israel and a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation. The multilateral talks outlined in Madrid and launched in Moscow in 1992 include members of all of the Middle East

stunning Declaration of Principles (DOP), negotiated in secret between Israeli and Palestinians negotiators at Oslo, represented the first bilateral talks between the two parties. Signed in 1993, the DOP, also known as Oslo I, provided a skeletal framework for the transition from Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip to a Palestinian self-ruled entity over a five year interim period. The final status issues — which would be addressed no later than year three of the interim period — included the status of Jerusalem, refugees, borders and Palestinian Statehood. As part of the Oslo I agreement, Arafat recognized Israel’s right to exist, accepted United Nations Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, renounced the use of violence and pledged to restrain potentially violent PLO factions.²¹ The peace process continued with the 1995 signing of Oslo II, a second direct Israeli-Palestinian Accord, the 1996 election of Arafat as the President of the Palestinian Authority, and an eighty-eight member Palestinian Council. In 1997, the former Palestinian National Council revoked the clauses in the Palestinian National Charter calling for the destruction of Israel through the armed liberation of Palestine.

countries plus international representatives divided into five working groups: arms control and regional security, water resources, the environment, economic development and refugees. See Geoffrey Kemp and Jeremy Pressman, *Point of No Return: The Deadly Struggle for Middle East Peace* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 12.

²¹ Kemp and Pressman, 13. United Nations Resolution 242, created by Lord Caradon, the British representative to the Security Council, in the months following the 1967 War, established the principle of trading land for peace. Its wording however, calling upon the Jewish State to withdraw “from territories occupied in the recent conflict” appeared in final form without a definite article. This deliberate ambiguity permitted different interpretations of the text by Israel and the Arab States. UN resolution 338 of October 1973 called for a ceasefire and reaffirmed the provisions of land for peace outlined in 242. See Tessler, 480.

The Jerusalem Link

The origins of the Jerusalem Link predate the peace process. The first unofficial meeting between Palestinian and Israeli women occurred at the 1985 Third United Nation's Women's Conference in Nairobi.²² In 1987, The Radcliffe Project on Interdependence sponsored an interactive problem-solving workshop under the direction of Professor Herb Kelman, bringing together women parliamentarians, academics, party influentials, and political activists, with a range of viewpoints from the political center to the left wing.²³

Following the first international Palestinian-Israeli Women's Conference in Brussels in 1989, the participants coalesced to form an official network of Palestinian and Israeli activists. They drew up a seven-point declaration of principles that affirmed their commitment to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. That declaration recognized the rights of all of the region's people to live with dignity and in security, the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination alongside Israel, and the right of all sides of the dispute to choose their legitimate representatives.²⁴ The declaration also called for the end of the occupation and

²² This conference culminated the UN's Decade of Women, an offshoot of the Women in Development (WID) movement, popular in the seventies and eighties among Western women who advocated for women's rights in the third world. From the start, the influence and examples offered by the Western feminist movement have permeated the Israeli-Palestinian peace movement's discourse. Americans or Europeans serve as third party sponsors of much of the Jerusalem Link's work, both by funding the organizations and sponsoring joint workshops in Israel/Palestine and abroad.

²³ See Tamara Pearson d'Estree and Eileen F. Babbitt's, "Women and the Art of Peacemaking: Data from the Israeli-Palestinian Interactive Problem-Solving" (1998). The women involved in these pre-Oslo dialogue groups were self-selectively confined to those who were willing to talk to members of the other side.

²⁴ From "What is the JCW?" <<http://www.j-c-w.org>>. Note, the purposely abstract wording of the "right of the Palestinian people to self-determination alongside Israel" subtly recognizes the right to an independent Palestinian state. The careful avoidance of an outright declaration of such, though, was important to prevent alienating Bat Shalom from some of its more centrist constituents.

advocated a settlement of all aspects of the Arab-Israel conflict. Since 1989, declarations of joint principles have been the formal basis of the Jerusalem Link partnership.²⁵

At the time of the Brussels Conference, both the Palestinian and Israeli communities considered this written declaration of principles radical. Before the Oslo Accords, Israeli law prohibited seeking contact with members of “terrorist organizations,” including the PLO. Because many of the Palestinian women involved in the dialogue groups represented the PLO, such dialogue groups were technically illegal until 1992, when this law was abrogated by the Knesset. In practice, however, the ban on such meetings was rarely enforced.²⁶ On the Palestinian side, any partnership with Israelis — even grassroots women — was generally considered unacceptable.

A second women’s meeting in Brussels in 1992, followed by the 1993 Oslo I signing, eventually produced the establishment of the Jerusalem Link in 1994. From the beginning, the founding members of the Link recognized the need for separate, independent women’s centers, one in East Jerusalem and one in West Jerusalem, which would each promote peace and women’s rights yet cater to the needs of their own community. At the same time, the Israeli and Palestinian women would work cooperatively, in the “establishment of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace between both peoples.”²⁷ Thus, organizationally, with two independent boards of directors connected by a joint steering committee, the

²⁵ See Appendix E for a comparison of the old and new Jerusalem Link Declarations.

²⁶ See Golan and Kamal, Note 12, 29.

²⁷ See Sumaya Farhat-Naser in *Sharing Jerusalem* (1997), 11-12.

Jerusalem Link has become regarded as a model of Israeli-Palestinian coexistence: separate but linked, similar but independent. At the Beijing Fifth UN Women's Conference, prominent Israeli and Palestinian women (members of the Knesset and PLO members) presented the Link as a model method for bridging ethno-national groups living in protracted conflict.²⁸

At its inception, the Link's directors envisioned a range of joint programs that would bring together the activists and members of Bat Shalom and the Jerusalem Center for Women. In practice, besides the ongoing dialogue groups, the joint activities have been limited to political statements and periodic special events.

In June 1997, the Link organized a weeklong event to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the Israeli annexation of Jerusalem. For the Palestinians, the event served as a protest; for the Israelis it served as an educational tool intended to promote the sharing of Jerusalem. Musical performances and art exhibits in both East and West Jerusalem drew thousands of Israelis, Palestinians and foreigners. Alternative city tours allowed hundreds of Jerusalem residents and international visitors to see the city through the eyes of the "other." A conference addressing the future of Jerusalem generated discussion about potential compromise positions.²⁹ Two women's vigils called for ending the occupation of East Jerusalem and lifting the closure of the city. Finally, the week concluded with a mass march from East to West Jerusalem of over three hundred women.³⁰ By interspersing joint cultural events with political activities, the *Sharing Jerusalem* project intended to send the

²⁸ Golan and Kamal, 25.

²⁹ At this time, any discussion of the future status of Jerusalem was non-existent. Both sides strongly retained their uncompromising claims to the city.

³⁰ See Daphna Golan and Amneh Badran in *Sharing Jerusalem (1997)*, 7-9.

radical message that Jerusalem could effectively be shared between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

As expected, the event met with resistance by Israelis, Palestinians, and political leaders. Especially in 1997 but even today, most Israelis strongly maintain that Jerusalem will always be Israel's eternal, indivisible capital. Many Palestinian Jerusalem residents boycotted the *Sharing Jerusalem* events because the project entailed and implied "normalized relations" with Israelis in Jerusalem. This event and the controversy surrounding it drew widespread publicity both within Israel and Palestine and abroad.³¹

A Stagnant Peace Process

Today, members of the Jerusalem Link still idealize the 1997 *Sharing Jerusalem* event as a model for future joint Palestinian-Israeli activities. The event's success is all the more surprising given the atmosphere of hostility and pessimism that characterized the period from 1996 to 1999. A series of political events dealt severe blows to the peace momentum during this period. In 1995, the right-wing Israeli extremist Yigal Amir assassinated Labor Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who had catalyzed the peace process. The assassination, followed by a series of Palestinian suicide terrorist attacks on major Israeli urban centers, resulted in the close victory of Likud member Benjamin Netanyahu over Rabin's foreign minister, Shimon Peres, by a 51% popular margin. The election was widely interpreted as a reflection of the popular Israeli desire to slow the peace process. From 1996-1999, Netanyahu and his right-wing coalition stalled the

³¹ *The New York Times* and other western media covered the 1997 *Sharing Jerusalem* event.

implementation of the Oslo Accords.³² In response to the Hamas suicide bombs, Netanyahu enforced strict measures of reprisal, such as border closures and curfews, provoking anger and resentment among the Palestinian populace. A series of controversial Likud decisions, such as the opening to tourists of a Jerusalem tunnel — considered by Palestinians and the Arab world a religiously sacred protected area — generated increasing hostility and mistrust.

The three-year lull in the peace process altered the attitudes and strategies of both the Israeli and Palestinian activists. First, the intransigence of the Netanyahu government and its failure to continue the momentum of the Oslo process by implementing the staged withdrawals from the West Bank deleteriously affected the validity of the Jerusalem Link (and the peace movement) on both sides. To the Palestinians, the Israeli peace movement seemed powerless and ineffective in light of an anti-peace government. According to Gila Svirsky, director of Bat Shalom, “it was like pulling teeth trying to convince the Palestinians we wanted peace when our government was behaving less than cooperatively. They had good reason to be frustrated and tired of dealing with us.”³³ To the Israeli women, the frustration, paranoia, and general lack of optimism among Israelis during these three years diminished the previous enthusiasm for dialogue groups with Palestinians.

In May of 1999, Labor candidate Ehud Barak defeated Netanyahu. At that point, the crucial cooperation between the Israeli and Palestinian women which originally created the Jerusalem Link had been tested by three years of a tense

³² Netanyahu delayed the agreed upon timetable of Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank, in the interest of Israel’s security.

³³ Gila Svirsky, interview, 6 July 1999.

political atmosphere and a stalled peace process. Although depicted by the Western media as a dovish leader who will continue Rabin's legacy and complete the peace process, Barak still faces many challenges, especially the resolution of the difficult final status issues. Almost every activist I interviewed expressed serious doubt over her ability to alter dramatically the present situation. Still, the past ten years have proven that perception as much as government policy can serve as an efficacious change agent of political attitudes. In the Netanyahu years, the perception of the Israeli government (and the Israeli people) as hawkish and intransigent impeded communication and activity on the ground both among Israelis and Palestinians. This negative perception shifted the focus of the Link's work away from joint projects and towards internal projects. Similarly, the new popular perception of the Israeli government and voters as more amenable to the peace process could itself recharge the joint activity of the Link and other similar grassroots peace organizations on both sides.