



Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking

An International Resource Center in Support of Restorative Justice Dialogue, Research and Training

NATIONAL SURVEY OF ARAB/PALESTINIAN/JEWISH DIALOGUE GROUPS

Conducted by

The Cross-National Arab Jewish Dialogue Support Network

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“In dialogue, not only are you going to change others, but you will be changed.” –
Dialogue group member

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The Cross National Arab Jewish Dialogue Support Network conducted a survey of 28 Arab/Jewish/Palestinian dialogue groups and other related organizations in the fall of 2003 to identify the type of work being done and to assess the needs and challenges of these groups. Thirty-eight people were interviewed, including members of twenty-three dialogue groups in the U.S. and Canada. Several people involved with dialogue work in Israel/Palestine were also interviewed. Representatives of other related organizations engaged in peace and reconciliation but not sustained dialogue were also interviewed. The information gathered from this survey will help determine the nature of the activities and technical assistance that the Cross-National Arab Jewish Dialogue Support Network develops over the next several years.

Most groups have operated in the range of one to five years, with the oldest group operating for 20 years. Group size varies from very small, 5-6 participants, to larger groups of 20-30 people with mailing lists of nearly 100 people. Many groups have regular attendance of 12-15 people. Most groups meet once or twice per month.

Many groups reported having started the dialogue process by sharing personal stories and histories. Some have moved to a discussion of the substantive issues of the conflict, involving the history of the conflict and current issues, including the occupation, the separation wall, the Intifada, and peace proposals. Some groups have spawned action groups that have become involved in political action, while others have remained committed to sustained dialogue. Many groups have public education events such as film festivals, prominent speakers, and presentations in Jewish/Palestinian pairs.

Among the biggest challenges groups have faced include: 1) the tension between dialogue and action; 2) the inadequacy of the dialogue process for many Palestinian members to address the critical issues of the conflict or to lead to political action; 3) the resulting lack of interest in initial or continued attendance among Palestinians; 4) inadequate group leadership, both in providing organizational leadership and facilitation skills; and 5) difficulties in accommodating new members of the group.

Among the greatest needs identified by the groups are: 1) training in facilitation skills to productively discuss the challenging issues of the conflict, including a resource manual on dialogue; 2) a vehicle for creating greater public awareness of the work of the dialogue groups both locally and nationally; 3) access to a directory of groups and more interaction among groups to share information and approaches; 4) development of an approach to engage the larger Jewish community in dialogue; and 5) increased cross-national activities, including bringing speakers such as Sari Nusseibeh and Ami Ayalon to the U.S. to trigger discussion of the recent peace initiatives that have been developed by Israelis and Palestinians.

GROUPS/ORGANIZATIONS SURVEYED

Jewish Palestinian Living Room Dialogue of Silicon Valley, CA
San Francisco Jewish Palestinian Living Room Dialogue, CA
American Alliance of Arabs and Jews, Los Angeles, CA
East Bay Jewish Palestinian Dialogue, Berkeley, CA
San Francisco State University Dialogue Group, CA
Jewish/Palestinian Dialogue of San Diego, CA
Peace Café, Washington, D.C.
Search for Common Ground, Washington, D.C.
Office of Jewish Affairs, University of MA Amherst, MA
The Dialogue Project, Chevy Chase, MD
Zeitouna, Ann Arbor, MI
Bridges for Peace, College of St. Scholastica, Duluth, MN
The Intentional Living Center, Chapel Hill, NC
Project Understanding of Central New Jersey, NJ
Friends of Open House, Princeton, NJ
Animating Democracy, New York, NY
Syracuse Area Middle East Dialogue, Syracuse, NY
The Dialogue Project, Brooklyn, NY
Arab Jewish Dialogue of Harrisburg, PA
South Central Pennsylvania Arab Jewish Dialogue Group, PA
Philadelphia Arab Jewish Dialogue, PA
Providence Arab Jewish Dialogue, Providence, RI
Palestinian Jewish Dialogue of San Antonio, TX
Austin Muslim/Jewish Community Council, Austin, TX
Austin Dialogue for Peace, TX
Compassionate Listening Project, Seattle, WA
Jewish/Muslim Dialogue of Milwaukee, WI
Toronto Jewish Palestinian Dialogue, Ontario, Canada
D.C. Chapter, International Encounter, Madrid, Spain

NUMBER OF YEARS GROUPS HAVE BEEN IN EXISTENCE

Most groups have operated in the range of one to five years, with the oldest group operating for 20 years. The 20-year old group is still operating. Some of the groups met for 3 or 4 years and then stopped for a range of reasons outlined below. Other groups have spawned new groups. Some have evolved into different compositions and purposes over time.

GROUP COMPOSITION AND SIZE

Group size varies from very small, 5-6 participants, to large groups with mailing lists of nearly 100 people. Of the larger groups, regular participants range from 20-30 people. Many groups have regular attendance of 12-15 people. Some of the large groups have split into smaller more manageable groups. In San Diego, for example, the number of groups has grown to 10, with a small steering committee that coordinates communication among the groups.

Some groups restrict their membership to Jews and Palestinians and try to balance the numbers from each category, while other groups, over half of those contacted, have open policies that welcome diverse and interfaith members. The Dialogue Project in New York has a large waiting list of Jews because the groups try to achieve a balance of Jews and Arabs and Muslims. A number of groups have Pakistani, Syrian, Jordanian, Egyptian, Moroccan, and African American members. A number also have Israeli members. Many groups also have members who are either Christian or don't identify with a particular faith. One group has limited itself to women, six Palestinians and six Jews.

HOW GROUPS OPERATE

Group Initiation and Leadership

The oldest known dialogue group in the U.S., the 20 year-old Syracuse Area Middle East Dialogue (SAMED means "steadfast" in Arabic) was initiated in order to discuss and reach consensus on the elements of a peace agreement. SAMED was part of a coalition of early dialogue groups, called the American Coalition for Middle East Dialogue, which developed a peace proposal and lobbied elected officials. The Syracuse group still exists but has gone through many changes of participants.

The 10-year old Jewish Palestinian Living Room Dialogue Group of San Mateo, led by Libby and Len Traubman, spawned a number of other groups in the San Francisco Bay Area through public education events and networking. The Dialogue Project in New York City has also initiated a number of groups throughout the city. Both projects have played significant roles in assisting in the development of new dialogue groups in their regions. In addition, the Traubmans have played a significant role in networking with other groups throughout the country through the maintenance an email list, distribution of resource materials, and organizing public events.

Several campus groups and programs were initiated after conflict and tensions developed between Palestinian and Jewish students on campus. At one campus, bitter divisions between members of Hillel (Jewish student organization) and members of the General Union of Palestinian Students led to a dialogue effort, which ended after six months.

Other groups began after the start of the second Intifada because people felt the need to talk about the intensified conflict. One group leader, a Palestinian woman, hosted a group of Palestinians and Jews, which lead to an ongoing dialogue group. Conversely, a dialogue group functioning in Jerusalem halted its meetings when the Intifada broke out because of the increased tensions. Some groups in the U.S. stopped after the events of September 11, 2001 because of tensions and the impact of the Patriot Act on Arab participation. Another Jerusalem group was initiated at the Open University in Tel Aviv, funded by the USIA, with a Palestinian and Israeli coordinator. The group developed its own materials and the group is still continuing to meet. The meetings take place in Tantour, one of the few locations where both Israelis and Palestinians can meet.

Many groups are led and facilitated by two leaders, one Jewish and one either Palestinian or Arab American. Several groups are facilitated by a third party who is neither Jewish nor Palestinian. A number of groups started as open-ended dialogues, and then became more structured by selecting topics for discussion. The San Antonio group devotes half of

their meeting to dialogue about a selected topic and the other half to business. Topics covered in groups include the right of return, the roadmap, extremists, events of 1948, and the security wall.

One group started out as a dialogue group where people shared personal stories. As the group progressed, some members wanted a more action orientation, so the group split into a dialogue sub group and an action sub group. The action group faded away because no one wanted to keep it going. There were also other opportunities in the community for action-oriented members, such as a local Alliance for Justice in the Middle East.

Group Process and Approaches

In describing one group's process, a group member stated that the idea of dialogue is "an honest approach to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, non-threatening, and non-blaming." The group member noted that dialogue "starts with the assumption that people are decent. It is necessary to understand the tragedy, without "buts" or "ors" – humans abusing humans for political gains."

One group has engaged in the telling of personal stories and perspectives, asking a number of key questions, such as:

- What would you have to overcome to feel the group is an ally?
- What brings you hope, despair?
- What has happened in the last month that has impacted you?
- If you were to advocate for one state, what would you say?
- What would be the obstacles?

A number of groups have speakers come to the group or group members make presentations on topics agreed on by everyone. Another group has worked together on a joint vision for peace. Several other groups reported discussing solutions and what it would take to work out a peace agreement. One group reported that it has become safe place where people can discuss their views. Some groups structure their dialogues by picking topics that the group discusses every month. Conversely, one Muslim/Jewish dialogue group focuses on a religious agenda, and its dialogue involves views of god, war, and family. While they don't talk about the conflict directly, they would like to find ways of addressing the political issues in the future.

The Compassionate Listening Project's approach to dialogue includes a discussion of 1) your truth, 2) my truth, 3) your distortion, and 4) my distortion. Another group had a series of presentations on the history of Zionism and the Arab national movement from different perspectives. They aired out the misconceptions each side had about the other. The next area of concentration will be a discussion of the Geneva Accords. The group reports that there has been "an openness and transformation of thinking that has been beautiful." Similarly, another group has had in depth discussions of the Nakba, Zionism, and co-existence. While members held strong emotions about what happened to their people, shifts have occurred which have resulted in a deepening in their mutual empathy and the way group members care about each other.

The events of 9/11 prompted Palestinian and Jewish co-leaders of one group to bring people together to write a statement, which they read at city hall. They gathered with rabbis, imams, and other leaders to show solidarity between communities. Their goal was to reduce stereotyping, become allies, and focus on relationships. They identified issues they wanted to address, including hate crimes, anti-Semitism, and anti-Muslimism.

One group was started by a Holocaust hidden child, who isn't a Zionist, but whose daughter went to Israel in search of her roots and married a Palestinian. The group has taken their process very slowly, carefully examining their assumptions about each other and the conflict. They call things as they are, and acknowledge the need to write a new narrative. They felt a need to meet twice a month, and the group has generated a lot of affection, warmth and trust.

One dialogue and negotiation facilitator has developed a six-step process based on the teachings of Martin Luther King and Gandhi. This process asks participants to commit to "not being right," and helps them move out of polarity to a militant creative partnership. As part of the process he asks participants to find something in the other side that they can passionately advocate for. The process leads participants to create an inclusive vision that incorporates the essence of each side.

A very different approach is taken by International Encounter, a program of three-week workshops for Palestinian and Israeli high school students implemented in Spain. The program doesn't encourage dialogue about the history or even a therapeutic "humanizing" model, but a European model for co-existence. Students live together, play sports, and engage in other group building activities. There is no moderated or facilitated dialogue because the narratives of the conflict have no intersecting points. There is no way to achieve consensus and there is no evidence that the other side will agree. The program teaches the participants about human rights, non-violence, and peace. They teach the Declaration of Human Rights and model co-existence, teaching through a tolerance of differences. Palestinian youth come with two teachers, and Israelis with at least one. Students are encouraged to apply human rights to the current conflict.

Another novel approach has been taken by Animating Democracy, a Ford Foundation funded project that looks at the intersection between dialogue and art. Three teams of African Americans, Filipino Americans, and Palestinian Americans do performances and then engage audiences in dialogues. They have found that the arts have the potential to help people understand each other and express themselves.

There are several important Internet dialogues that have operated for a number of years. Mid-east Web has hosted Salaam/Shalom, a six-year old moderated Internet dialogue with international members, which allows members to exchange views on different issues. Friends of Open House has an email dialogue that enables teenagers to engage in dialogue. Peace Now Israel also has maintained a cross-national moderated dialogue.

PUBLIC EDUCATION, OUTREACH AND ACTION ACTIVITIES

Groups have engaged in diverse and creative activities. Some groups have developed "demonstration dialogues" in which pairs of Palestinians and Jews speak at various venues such as college campuses, high schools, community centers, synagogues, churches, and other public and private gatherings to demonstrate how to engage in the dialogue process. The Dialogue Project in New York City has brought demonstration dialogue to a large radio audience by broadcasting facilitated dialogues between Palestinians and Jews or Israelis on a local radio station. Members of Zeitouna, a Michigan group, have spoken in schools and did a teach-in at a temple in which the audience observed a dialogue. Zeitouna doesn't want to polarize their audiences, so their presentations are guided by the possibilities of co-existence. Zeitouna wants people to come together, with both sides suspending their fears to hear the other's narrative.

Many groups have public education events with prominent speakers such as Michael Lerner, members from Rabbis for Human Rights, and Al Awda. Film festivals and screenings are also common. Other groups have done fundraisers for a variety of recipients, including hospitals and children's social services. One group did a benefit for project Open House in Ramleh.

Other groups have started initiatives among teenagers. One group created a youth initiative, Muslim/Jewish youth, to talk about life cycle events. Increasing numbers of synagogues want to participate in this project. Other groups have started Arab/Jewish teen groups to address the political issues.

Some groups also engage in political action. One group made the decision to engage in action while continuing dialogue at the same time. Some have organized or participated in peace marches. One group made a statement to the press about its views on the conflict and the requirements of peace. They reached out to synagogues and churches with the statement. Many groups have received press coverage.

One group has the goal of reaching as many people on both sides as possible. As one participant commented, "we have to reach the decency in the Jewish community."

CHALLENGES OF DIALOGUE GROUPS

Tension between Dialogue and Action

Nearly all of the interviewees reported that a major challenge of dialogue groups is the tension that exists between dialogue and action. Many people reported a split in their groups because some members want to engage in political action while others don't. One group ran its course because some of the members wanted it to take a political stand while others resisted. Another person said that it is difficult to sustain a dialogue group without a central activity. Some feel

that the purpose of the group is not to solve the conflict. One group member commented that some view the process as a form of “Jewish therapy.” Several people observed that a dialogue model limited to personal stories and experiences is too limiting. One participant explained that his group started with the model that focuses on personal stories and humanizing at the conflict, but questioned whether there was really healing or understanding or movement on issues. He wants his group to address the facts and history of the conflict and engage in reading and study of the issues. Others raise concerns about being able to address substantive issues while maintaining a dialogue, as opposed to a debate. Many Palestinian participants feel frustrated that their groups don’t deal with Middle East issues.

Dialogue Process Inadequate for Palestinian Needs

Related to the tensions between action and dialogue are a range of Palestinian concerns. Almost all of the interviewees reported that many Palestinians left their groups because they wanted the groups to engage in joint Jewish/Arab political action, such as letter writing, public lectures, and other direct action activities. Many groups are having a hard time sustaining attendance because Palestinians and other Arab members are losing interest and dropping off. Younger group members are especially frustrated because groups aren’t sufficiently political, and university students are not staying or are resisting joining groups. Not only are Palestinian members leaving, but groups also have a difficult time recruiting Palestinian members to initiate groups.

One group member explained that many in the Palestinian community are totally opposed to dialogue. There is an innate inequity when groups with different power sit down to talk. Some Palestinians questioned the purpose of dialogue, and asked to what end? One group member said that Palestinians see the Holocaust as in the past, but the Palestinian pain is in the present. One person commented that Palestinians feel more oppressed, and if they reach out they feel that they are betraying their people. Another group reported that the Patriot Act cooled Palestinian participation. As a result, groups are having difficulty sustaining numeric parity between Palestinians, Arabs and Jews. One group reported it turned into a group of progressive Jews.

Other Related Challenges

Some groups reported the lack of sufficient leadership to take responsibility for organizing meetings. Others talked about their groups becoming too big, with too many people coming in and out. This forced groups to continue to repeat their stories. A related challenge is integrating new people into the group, regardless of the size.

One group member reported that the last 18 months have been difficult because people are more polarized due to increased tensions and conditions in the Middle East. There is more hostility, anger, and recrimination. One person commented that “talking is very difficult now; hearts were more open before.”

The tenor of one group is pro Palestinian so when Jews come, they are turned off by the orientation of the group. Another group member reported tension between Israeli Arabs and Palestinians in the group, since they feel they have a different experience. Another group member observed that some Israeli members feel the dialogue group makes the conflict worse since they don’t like what the Palestinians say. One group is deliberating about how diverse the group should be; they want people at respect each other and listen.

One person related that 10 years ago there was a dialogue group that never went anywhere. It involved mainstream Jews, Hadassah members, the Jewish Federation, and Palestinians that were ardent anti-Zionists. Many groups reach a dead end with no clear road to follow. One person commented that in order to succeed, “it is necessary to join the heart and mind.”

One group member framed the challenge this way: “The question is: what is the next step, now that people know what is going on. Palestinian and Jewish voices together are so important but it is a voice hard to organize to speak politically.”

STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINING GROUPS

Interviewees identified a range of approaches that have helped sustain the groups and the process. One group has adhered to its co-founders insistence on keeping discussions on the personal level and how participants are affected by events, rather than how the groups should solve the conflicts. A group member observed that “dialogue builds relationships, and relationships build sustainability.” Another group reported adhering to a humanizing model of dialogue, first sharing

personal stories and then sharing stories of 1948. The Palestinian members were then able to tell stories about the Nakba, the occupation, the checkpoints, and other impacts of the conflict.

Some groups found that groups can be sustained if members are working on a project. Activities include intercultural events, dinners, and religious events. Other groups have sustained themselves by addressing the critical issues of the conflict. They identify topics, such as the perspectives of 1948, the Geneva Accords, and discuss them at meetings. Others select books and articles to read and discuss.

Other group members report evolving into second and third groups. One group started out with an open entry policy and evolved into a group with Jewish/Palestinian numerical parity. Members made a commitment to attend for one year. Other groups have brought younger Palestinians into their groups to sustain the balance of participants. Several groups reported that having a facilitator helped maintain interest and momentum.

Another group member observed that sustaining the dialogue has taken a lot of work and reflective thinking to listen with the heart. The group has strived to create a third perspective and have gone through a process of conversion, which has brought them closer together.

NEEDS AND ACTIVITIES IDENTIFIED AS MOST HELPFUL TO ARAB/JEWISH DIALOGUE EFFORTS

When asked an open-ended question about what groups need, responses clustered into the following categories.

Networking Activities

Many interviewees recommended the creation of an organized network to allow groups to connect, communicate, and exchange and disseminate information about activities and programs. Some suggested regional gatherings and conferences, a consolidated email list, Internet connections, a directory and a biweekly newsletter. A network would also provide an affirmation of the work, lend moral support, and share information about approaches that have worked and not worked. Some suggested a global network. One person commented that the most powerful aspect of a network of groups would be its mere existence and ability to easily reference it as a point of growing national involvement in the conflict. Others recommended the establishment of an actual center, in Washington D.C. or New York, staffed by Palestinians, Jews, with strategic planning and public relations activities.

Training and Resources

Many people identified training as an important need, including resources on how to structure dialogue, and in particular, how to approach the critical issues of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Many commented that groups need and want to go beyond the “humanizing” approach to dialogue and help people address the political and historical issues of the conflict. In this climate of growing desperation, many interviewed want dialogue guides to address the Nusseibeh/Ayalon plan and the Geneva Accords. One person suggested creating and disseminating a “how to” kit, discussion starters, a manual on how to start a group. Several suggested creating educational materials that address tolerance and making people aware of the existence of the other. The need for facilitator training to make groups more effective was also suggested by a number of people. Alternatively, others suggested the need for resources to pay a professional facilitator to run the meetings.

Outreach to Jewish Community

Many people urged intensified efforts to engage the Jewish community in the U.S. in dialogue efforts. One person commented that the Jewish community is shaken by the conflict and it is important to make it safe for mainstream Jews to participate. One suggestion was to create a think tank on how to engage the mainstream and organized Jewish community. One Jewish dialogue leader observed that the American Jewish community sets moral and political parameters for Israel. The more that American Jews demonize Palestinians and move to the right, the more permission it gives to Israel to continue to do what it is doing. Others talked about the need to create Jewish/Jewish dialogue. Some Palestinians commented that they preferred that Jews educate other Jews about the Palestinian perspective on the political and historical issues. While progressive Jews have participated in many groups, mainstream Jews aren’t involved. Several groups reported that animosity has grown in the Jewish community toward the dialogue activities and speakers, such as Rabbis for Human Rights executive director Arik Asherman.

Public Education/Awareness and Action

Given the creative tension between dialogue and action noted by many dialogue participants, a number of people commented that it's time to take the dialogue group to another level. According to one group member, "dialogue serves a purpose but it is limiting." While many groups already engage in public education and action, a number of people suggested that there needs to be more activity in both areas. One interviewee said that the problem is the awareness of the general American population. There is a need to make the mainstream public more aware and the media less biased to change policy of the government. If groups were more hands on and more active on projects, like showing films, direct action, speakers, public education, it would be helpful.

One person asked, "How do we know that the dialogue process is having an impact?" In terms of public education, some of the needs identified were getting into the schools to do information sessions and getting the message out to people who aren't involved, on campuses, in communities. One person commented that this should be done without trying to convince people, but to heal the rift. This work can't be left "in the hands of politicians; we must do something." Another person suggested that "we need to reach people on the ground; students at early ages, and focus on the affective domain." A Palestinian participant suggested the need to do community outreach in the Middle East and create more visibility in the U.S.

Another Palestinian dialogue leader suggested the need to work through the mosques on education and conflict resolution. He observed that "today Palestinians won't listen to Sari Nusseibeh; they will listen to imams."

One program participant in San Diego is making and editing videos and broadcasting documentaries on public access TV to local audiences. He wants to work with the network of groups throughout the U.S. to bring video resources to public access TV throughout the country. Another dialogue member suggested creating a peace-building award to bring awareness to the dialogue network. One group member emphasized the need to enlarge the profile of the dialogue groups, and the need for the larger secular and local religious community to know they exist – this does change minds. This group wants the community to know "we refuse to be enemies."

Taking a different approach to public education, the Animating Democracy project suggested that dialogue groups bring in artists to help facilitate story telling or non-verbal communication in approaching education about the conflict. Words are hard for people going through trauma, but when people engage in an art making process, they can shift perceptions and understanding.

In the political action arena, one person suggested that the groups need a collective campaign to influence the American government and the Jewish community. Another asked, "Why can't all Mid-east peace groups come together for a powerful and articulate message from a mass of concerned citizens?" Some want to engage in more work with policy makers in the U.S.

Cross National Efforts

A number of people support cross-national efforts between the U.S. and Israel and Palestine. One group member suggested starting an international effort of peace building groups, noting that there is support from Ami Iseroff, moderator of the Salaam/Shalom list serve.

Others suggested that it is very helpful to bring speakers from Israel and Palestine, like Hanan Ashrawi, to share their experiences. Many interviewees gave enthusiastic support for the idea of bringing Sari Nusseibeh and Ami Ayalon to the U.S. for a speaking tour, to trigger an active discussion of their peace initiative. Another person commented that the tour could demonstrate how a resolution to the conflict would be in the U.S.'s best interests.

One interviewee suggested bringing 15 imams to the U.S. to interact with American Jews and Palestinians and have them dialogue with American rabbis. Synagogues and mosques are very influential. The current message in the mosque is to resist. This interchange could lead to changes from both sides.

Others suggested sending a delegation of dialogue group participants to Israel/Palestine to meet with people and counterparts and other cultural exchanges.

Ranking of Proposed Support Activities

Interviewees were asked to rank proposed support activities on a scale from 1 to 5 with 5 being the most useful and 1 being the least useful. These are the results.

a. Organizing regional gatherings of dialogue groups	4.08	
b. Organizing an annual gathering of dialogue groups.	4.04	
c. Providing training in the dialogue process and other types of assistance to new or continuing dialogue groups.	4.82	(1)
d. Facilitating communication among the network of those interested in Arab-Jewish dialogue through written and web-based initiatives.	4.52	
e. Providing a limited number of small "seed money" grants to support the activities of local dialogue groups.	4.13	
f. Providing greater public awareness about the national network of local Arab-Jewish dialogue groups.	4.79	(2)
g. Providing speakers from other groups in the U.S. and abroad to share their experiences	4.68	(4)
h. Having a national or international directory of groups (web based or hard copy)	4.70	(3)