



USIPEACE BRIEFING

AN EDUCATION TRACK FOR THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE PROCESS

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BACKGROUND

Educational issues have largely been excluded from previous efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This report examines how the parties and international mediators can create an education track for the peace process that would create opportunities for more effective mediation, and increase the chances for success of the process overall.

This report was prepared by USIP based on input of educators and peace activists associated with various local and international educational non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They represent decades of accumulated hands-on experience working with Palestinian and Israeli youth and educators, their respective Ministries of Education, and their wider communities. Primary contributors include Barbara Zasloff of the International Center for Contemporary Education and Adina Shapiro, who co-managed a joint Palestinian-Israeli education NGO.

INTRODUCTION

President Barack Obama declared in his June 4th address at Cairo University that "all of us must recognize that education and innovation will be the currency of the 21st century." His emphasis throughout the speech on the importance of educational initiatives reflects the central role that education can play in preparing communities for change. This is particularly relevant in regard to the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. Education can be an important component of fostering positive change in social values, attitudes and skills that are necessary to overcome the pain of conflict and to cope with the frustrations involved in a peace process. Alternatively, education can reinforce conflict-producing myths and stereotypes, serving as a battleground where social groups are demonized, and different communities compete over history and the society's narratives.

Education has been able to make an important contribution to reconciliation, conflict prevention, post-conflict reconstruction, and the re-building of war-torn societies, including in Northern Ireland, South Africa, as well as France and Germany after World War II, or in Poland and the Baltic States after the end of the Cold War. Often, the contribution of education in promoting conflict resolution and reconciliation at the grassroots level has been in helping to build a supportive environment in the wider society for a peace settlement or its implementation.

It is important to emphasize that where education has played such a transformative role, considerable attention and resources have been allocated by governments, focused inter alia on developing new curricula and teacher training, as well as providing teachers and students with

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practical skills and tools that foster critical thinking and open minds and attitudes about the other and about the past.

Despite its power to make or break the implementation of a peace process, education has not been addressed as a serious issue in any of the peace processes aimed at ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unlike the areas of finance, security, health, and environment, none of the agreements signed by the parties have directly addressed the needs arising in the education systems as a result of the conflict, nor have the agreements initiated cooperation between the two Ministries of Education upon implementation. In fact, over these many years, the respective Ministers of Education have never openly met in their formal capacities to address these matters. The educational systems have not been asked to prepare for the necessary shifts in curriculum, textbooks, and programs to ready youth, educators and communities for a time of peace.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have attempted to fill this vacuum on a small scale by running education programs and projects involving such topics as curriculum analysis, the creation of new curriculum, and cross border learning opportunities for youth and teachers. Although institutional resistance and lack of funding have limited the impact of such programs, some of the outcomes have been promising, and can serve as a basis for developing more strategic programs in the future.

Third party mediators in any relaunched peace process would be well advised to end this exclusion of the Ministries of Education from the process. By inviting them to play a role in the peace process, mediators can create opportunities for discussions to begin within the ministries and between ministries to help them address existing needs in their communities and assist in realizing the goals of an accord. Rather than complicating an already knotty task, including education in the peace process can actually create opportunities for more effective mediation, and increase the chances for success of the process overall.

This brief provides the justification for why an education track should be included in the negotiations phase and in the text of an agreement itself. This brief also puts forward practical recommendations of how third party mediators can assist the involved parties to create an effective education track in regard to the following:

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- Building a role for the Ministries of Education to address both the effects of an extended period of violent conflict and the challenges involved in moving toward peaceful relations when conflict has not been fully resolved;
- Addressing education in the peace agreement itself in order to create structures for finalizing and sustaining a settlement;
- Developing mechanisms in which issues and frustrations arising from the process of implementing a peace agreement can be discussed and facilitated within the network of schools.

Throughout the process, it will be important for mediators to treat an education track not merely as a sign of goodwill by the parties, but as a concrete effort to respond to existing, pressing needs of both educational systems.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AN EDUCATION TRACK IN RESOLVING THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

While there is widespread recognition that education plays a central role in preparing societies to make and sustain peace, diplomats and mediators tend to see education issues as falling outside their jurisdiction. By doing so, they often miss opportunities to ready educational systems both during the negotiations and in the text of an accord—in a way that would support political objectives.

From the perspective of a third party mediator, there are several compelling reasons for including an education track in an Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Create Political Legitimacy for Change

Including educational issues as a formal part of the negotiations process and including specific text about education in an accord will help provide political legitimacy for changes within the educational system that are necessary for sustainable peace. Educational institutions and individual educators are unlikely to promote positions that have not yet been embraced by their governments.

For instance, certain techniques, such as negotiating skills or skills for critical examination of one's own community and the "other" might be perceived as sensitive or even subversive. Teachers and schools may be hesitant to teach these skills without clear leadership from their governments. If the educational systems are expected to implement change, reforms to the

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system — like reforms to any other system such as finance, defense, or foreign affairs — must receive the proper mandate and commitment from the government.

Broaden the Discussion

The centrality of education and the wide-ranging nature of entities involved in it create opportunities to engage actors who are normally excluded from other official interactions, and can create wider buy-in and acceptance of the peace process. Previous processes have been criticized for a failure to obtain support of public opinion, civil society or religious leaders. Because the educational systems of both sides have delegated some autonomy to a wide variety of educational institutions, an education track provides a unique opportunity to involve broader participation from segments of both societies that might otherwise be marginalized in a peace process. By making education a formal part of the negotiations process, a range of educators and their communities could be invited to participate in their own assessment of how to prepare for peace.

At the same time, a clear mechanism for addressing educational issues can reassure and give a voice to groups who might be protective of the national narrative and who fear a settlement will compromise their values and culture.

Assure Financial Commitment for Necessary Educational Reforms

The adaptation of an educational system to an era of political change will likely be accompanied by physical and psychological turmoil, and will have a significant associated financial burden. These costs must be carefully calculated and accounted for in the commitments of the international community to support implementation. Failure to do so may result in the lack of sufficient funds, or, alternatively, uncoordinated appropriations and wasted funds. By articulating an educational track in the negotiations and in an accord, clear commitments can be obtained early on from the respective governments and the international community to financially support the educational steps needed to prepare for and maintain the peace.

The overarching purpose of an accord is to document a comprehensive understanding of all the elements that play a role in implementing the new status of relations between the parties. The accord serves as an outline describing the movement from a state of war to a state of peace or at least non-belligerence and should address all relevant components, including education. An accord that addresses other critical fields but excludes education would undermine the role of

educators and communities in building a sustainable peace and make their already challenging task even more difficult.

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR DEVELOPING AN EDUCATION TRACK

As part of the newly relaunched peace process, U.S. Special Envoy George Mitchell could help create a designated role in the peace process for the Palestinian Authority's and the Israeli Ministries of Education, a role that acknowledges the importance of education in readying both populations for a future of peace.

Given the sensitivities surrounding educational reform to prepare for peace, it is evident that the Ministries of Education will not and perhaps cannot make significant moves forward unless directed to do so by their respective prime ministers. To date, the leaderships of Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have not provided such direction. The special envoy can make an education track a priority in its approach to the peace process, securing commitments from the top leadership to include their Education Ministries in the process, and to address peace-related education issues within their own communities. With that political top cover, the envoy could facilitate the development of regular interactions between the two ministers focused on identifying and addressing shared educational goals in this regard. The envoy could also ensure that this process includes representation from all educational systems including schools administered by the Ministries of Education, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), religious authorities and others. The process would also have to take into account the divided administration of PA schools resulting from the Hamas-Fatah split.

It is important to note that the special envoy's comparative advantage would be to play a convening role and to ensure the integrity of a process rather than attempting to develop educational standards or reforms or to impose them on the parties. If the envoy offers such a process, then movement on educational issues may be a reasonable and manageable way for the political leaderships to respond to an existing need within their communities and demonstrate good faith towards the peace process. The process can also serve as a confidence building measure with the other side,

The parties, supported by the special envoy, should take the following steps to create and maintain an educational track in the renewed peace effort:

- **Establish Regular Meetings between the Two Ministers of Education**—Regular meetings would be held between the Israeli and Palestinian Ministers of Education to discuss the status of their systems’ readiness for peace.
- **Create a Palestinian and an Israeli “National Education Advisory Committee”**— Each minister of education would create a “National Education Advisory Committee” (NEAC). Each committee would have the mission of identifying the internal challenges involved in coping with the effects of the conflict and preparing the ground for peaceful relations (both before and after a formal accord is signed). The NEAC would critically review practices used in the past in their various education systems, as well as evaluate their own national progress regarding education practices. Each committee will report to its respective minister of education on how to ensure that such education practices meet the shared criteria developed by the Joint Advisory Committee (see below). These reports would also be shared with the special envoy and the counterpart minister.
- **Establish a Joint Israeli–Palestinian Education Advisory Committee**— Representatives from each National Education Advisory Committee, perhaps augmented by international education experts, would be appointed to a joint advisory team, which would identify common challenges, solutions and areas for cooperation. This Joint Committee would develop recommended criteria that each National Education Advisory Committee would use for monitoring the status and progress of education during negotiations and after the signing of an accord. The criteria would reference characteristics of textbooks, curricula and programs to prepare youth, educators and communities for overcoming the effects of the past conflict and establishing peaceful relations.

These steps would ensure that education is integrated into the renewal of the peace process. In implementing these actions, education officials and the special envoy could draw from the extensive body of work on educational practices in both communities to support both a peace process and a sustainable resolution to the conflict.

AN EDUCATION COMPONENT IN A PEACE ACCORD

Inclusion of educational aspects during the negotiations phase will vastly enhance the political climate for reaching a resolution. But it will be equally important to articulate a design for the parties’ educational systems in the text of any agreement itself—either an interim or final

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accord. Effective implementation of any accord requires the assistance and support of the parties' education systems. That assistance should be spelled out in an accord just like any other facet of implementation such as borders or security forces. This section explores considerations for addressing education in the peace accord and outlines the main features that should be included.

An educational component that supports the desired changes resulting from an agreement is critical, but in order not to undermine the autonomy and independence of either of the parties, such a component would need to be defined in minimalist terms if it is to be acceptable and enforceable. The parties may long to be able to define what the other will teach its younger generation, but that would contradict the legitimate autonomy of the parties and violate the essence of a desired accord. The challenge is to define the educational component that will lay a basis for sustainable peace, without binding either of the parties to outside intervention in the educational contents of their systems.

Therefore, an educational component within an accord would be most successful if it sets out formal arrangements for a process to be put in place by each of the parties but does not mandate specific educational content. Each party knows how to best respond to requirements of the agreement within the context of its own education system. The accord would articulate that the parties agree to address certain substantive issues, it would specify processes and structures that facilitate steps to do so, and it would include mechanisms to monitor progress.

The specific substantive issues and details on the processes and structures to include in an accord would be determined by the parties and will inevitably be shaped by the processes developed to address education during the negotiations phase. However, a few guidelines are offered here on possible issues and processes that the accord could address.

Substantive Issues

The substantive issues that the parties might agree to address from an educational point of view might include:

- Inclusion of information about the accord, its background and ongoing developments within school curricula;
- Provision of tools that assist students and teachers in coping with the frustrations involved in the "ups and downs" of moving towards the new era envisioned by the accord;

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- Development of neutral curricula that teaches about the “other” including shared and diverse cultural practices;
- Increase in opportunities to expose teachers and students to the other community’s language;
- Identification of educational tools for building and strengthening national identity while teaching respect for the other’s national identity.

Processes and Structures

Because these issues may require personnel training, textbook revision, outreach, exchange programs, and needs assessments, specified processes and structures would be required to manage them. In contrast to the intentionally broad identification of substantive issues, the accord should be highly specific about processes and structures. Although this study does not delineate specific mechanisms, it suggests that any mechanism should incorporate the following principles:

- **Information Sharing** -- An integral part of the accord is building trust. Transparency and information sharing on educational reforms—both between governments and with the public—would allow each side to see the efforts being made by the other. It may also serve as ground for learning and making suggestions on reforms. Mechanisms should also be put in place to invite public input on educational needs relating to implementation
- **Funding** -- A critical component of the accord is to ensure that the international community and local governments provide the necessary financial aid for implementation of the educational components.
- **Enforcement Measures** -- Any accord must to some degree rely on the goodwill of the Parties and their governments. It is practically impossible to prescribe a fail-safe formula that would prevent the leaderships from straying if they chose to do so. However, the inclusion of Israeli, Palestinian and international education professionals familiar with the development of an accord may enhance responsible implementation.

CONCLUSION

If education is thoughtfully enlisted in the pre- and post-accord periods, teachers and school systems can play a vital role in defusing tensions and helping young Palestinians and Israelis understand their evolving environment and find places for themselves within it. Positioned to

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change attitudes and teach new skills, the schools have exceptional outreach to all levels of society. With active encouragement from third party mediators, the two governments can play highly positive roles in supporting a changing reality through their educational systems.

Carefully designed educational changes can reduce the frustrations and confusion associated with societal change. The Ministries of Education and their cadres of professionals can set in motion important reform which will allow schools, principals, teachers and administrators to empower youth to understand and successfully manage their new reality.

For more information, see articles by Gershon Baskin on education reform to support a peace process published in *The Jerusalem Post*.¹

¹Gershon Baskin, *The Jerusalem Post*, "Encountering Peace: The First in a Two-Part Series on what Israelis and Palestinians Teach Their Young." Apr. 20, 2009.
<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1239710740345&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

"Encountering Peace: Education for Peace - Who Will Stand Up to the Challenge? Part II."
April 27, 2009.
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The Center for Mediation and Conflict Resolution designs and manages the Institute's efforts in areas where fighting is active. The Center also conducts research, identifies best practices, develops new peacemaking tools, and supports related training and education efforts. David Smock is vice president of the center.

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