

Experiential Encounters: New Models of Interfaith Dialogue

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By

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my loving husband, soul mate, and best friend, Essam, who has always supported me in everything I do.

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ABSTRACT

EXPERIENTIAL ENCOUNTERS: NEW MODELS OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

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This is a qualitative research study that explores new models of interfaith dialogue (IFD) characterized as dialogue-by-experience that remain understudied and that may provide opportunities for religious minorities, youth, women, and religious leaders from a variety of persuasions that traditional IFD models do not. The goal of this study is to examine several research gaps in the field of conflict resolution regarding dialogue-by-experience encounters: individual paths to participation, participant motivations, the effects of encounters on individuals, and the role of religion, more specifically the nature of participation by Muslim religious and community leaders.

Three dialogue-by-experience encounters serve as the foundation of this research: The Fez Sacred Music Festival, the “On the Way to the Sulha” encounter, and the Big Hug on Jerusalem. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews with three target populations: IFD scholar-practitioners who have served as observers, participants, and facilitators of dialogue-by-experience encounters; dialogue-by-experience

organizers/leaders; and encounter participants. In-depth interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed.

Deeper findings highlight several unique elements of dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters that provide opportunities traditional IFD encounters do not. The use of universal mediums like ritual, symbol, and gesture through the inclusion of music and joint prayers provide an opportunity for people to make meaning of the encounter through means other than words. As a result, this multi-faceted methodology attracts a diverse pool of participants. These participants form new relationships and networks during the encounter that have immense potential to mobilize later for positive social action. However, obstacles including apolitical frameworks are currently holding dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters back from their full potential to positively impact social change positively.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Traditional models of inter-faith dialogue (IFD) often influence only a small circle of elites. Dominated by male clergy and theocracy, traditional IFD efforts attract clergy from specific sects and religious persuasions. With increasing diversity and the limited success of traditional models of IFD, IFD efforts have begun to step out of the box and develop more innovative and inclusive models. These new models of dialogue that I would characterize as dialogue-by-experience remain understudied and may provide opportunities for religious minorities, youth, women, and religious leaders from a variety of persuasions.

As new models abound so do challenges. One of the most important questions for Muslims engaged in IFD in the 21st century will be the role of legitimacy and authority in Islam. With increasing decentralization, individuals that oppose IFD are turning up the volume, criticizing and even threatening Muslim religious leaders or communities engaged in IFD. While some communities and individuals oppose traditional IFD models, newer dialogue-by-experience models (i.e. The Fez Sacred Music Festival, Sulha Peace Project, and the Big Hug of Jerusalem) are seen as heretical at best¹.

¹ One example of groups opposing interfaith dialogue is mentioned in Chapter II when the King of Saudi Arabia faced threats after participating in traditional high level talks in Spain in 2008.

Dialogue-by-experience models of IFD are distinguished from other models of IFD by the way individual transformation occurs. For this research study, individual transformation at dialogue-by-experience efforts is understood to develop from the actual experience of the encounter as a whole. This includes verbal and nonverbal exchanges as well as stimulation of the senses of sight and sound through music, dance, prayers, rituals etc.

Chapter II of this study examines the current state of the field of IFD and conflict resolution. The section examines the state of traditional IFD models and obstacles to theology-centric and verbal-centric models. Examination includes a review of impediments to Christian-Muslim relations and Jewish-Muslim relations, and concludes with an examination of the conflict over the concept of *ijtihad* (exegesis) in Islam.

The theoretical framework highlights a diverse set of theories and concepts that shed light on the role of dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters in IFD and conflict resolution more broadly. The discussion includes a number of different theories to help analyze the question of impact on participants of dialogue-by-experience encounters and the role of networks in conflict resolution processes. A wide range of theories was needed to examine the multiple layers of dialogue-by-experience encounters.

Chapter IV explains the research design and methodology. Research was conducted using qualitative methods and resulted in ten in-depth interviews that were audio recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Interviews were coded according to variables identified prior to interviews and embedded in interview questions. The results of these interviews and analysis form the basis of Chapters V-VIII where in-depth

descriptions of each encounter are presented along with encounter specific findings, and concluding with Chapter VIII where overarching findings and analysis are conducted to draw out several major themes including questions of impact, the potential of networks formed as a result of encounters, and the effects of a lack of funding or funding with “strings attached.” Here the study begins to apply a new framework of incremental change (Gopin, 2009) to explore how dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters can be better assessed to measure impact.

Finally, the study concludes with some concluding remarks and suggestions for future research to continue building a literature on dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters and to fill in remaining research gaps.

Chapter II **State of the Field**

Why Does IFD Matter?

Technology and globalization have narrowed the gap between peoples and communities, making IFD more important than ever before. According to Mohammed Abu-Nimer, a seasoned scholar and practitioner of IFD, critics of IFD claim IFD efforts are often naïve and miss a central problem with religion: that it is a significant source of intolerance, and often leads to conflict and deadly violence. These critics point to conflicts with religious overtones across the globe including Nigeria, Palestine and Israel, and Northern Ireland to highlight the potential for destruction under religious frameworks. In addition, critics often dismiss IFD efforts as weak and irrelevant (Abu Nimer, 2007: xi). While current IFD efforts have room for improvement, in my view, the critics miss the potential and need for such encounters.

In many countries, religious organizations and leadership replace or complement the state (2007: xiii). These religious actors are often more trusted than government entities of the state which lack legitimacy and suffer from corruption. This is not to say that religious organizations and leadership do not face corruption problems...on the contrary. Corruption does not discriminate based on religion or level of religiosity. Nonetheless, religious organizations often remain the only entity with credibility and moral authority (2007: 9). In addition to being a trusted authority, religious leaders and

organizations are able to draw on a cherished set of beliefs shared by community members (2007: 7). This special link positions religious organizations and leadership as important stakeholders in any conflict situation or peace process.

Deficiencies in Current Research

Current research on IFD lacks analysis and evaluation on new experiential models of IFD. Theological dialogue is one of the most common models of interfaith dialogue studied by academics. These dialogue encounters focus on doctrinal dialogue examining religious texts to understand differences, and highlight similarities. Theological dialogues can be held privately between a small group of leaders, or broadcast on TV to a wider audience. However, the most popular model is to limit the dialogue to a small group. While theological dialogue addresses important scriptural messages, the conversation is entirely dominated by elites. This provides a narrow point of view and application for wider religious communities. Since the dialogues are often dominated by male clerics, women and youth are not present at dialogues, or rarely given a voice as religious leaders tend to serve as gatekeepers (2007: 211).

Obstacles to Theological Models of IFD

Theological dialogue encounters can have positive effects on interfaith relations. However theological-based models of IFD face serious obstacles. By examining relationships between the three Abrahamic faiths, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, it becomes very clear that models that do not rely on words or theology may be the most helpful and gentle way to mend relationships.

Jewish-Muslim Relations

The relationship between Jewish and Muslim communities has experienced chronic problems of historical baggage and misperceptions. In his book, *The Challenge of Islam*, Douglas Pratt identifies several themes coloring Jewish-Muslim relations: the historical relationship between Jews and Muslims in 6th century Medina, different interpretations of the dhimmi status, and the Zionist movement in Palestine and Israel. While there are little theological opportunities for conflict, history continues to be a stumbling block for Jewish-Muslim relations. The 6th century expulsion and killing of the Jews of Medina serves to feed a perception of mistrust on both sides. Muslim narratives of the events feed what is perceived as an inherent need to mistrust Jews with the contemporary Zionist movement and creation of the state of Israel. In addition, although Jews and Muslims coexisted fairly successfully during the “Golden Age” of Muslim Empires², inconsistent application of the dhimmi status meant that some Jews experienced considerable autonomy and protection under Islam while others experienced discrimination throughout history (2005: 119, 127-28).

Christian-Muslim Relations

Although unresolved attitudes and obstacles still remain in the relationship between Jews and Muslims, the relationship between Christian and Muslim communities has experienced more difficulty. A long history of fighting for power and truth plagues Christian-Muslim relations. First, many Christians consider the Quran and Muhammed a heresy. According to Christian theology, revelation ended with the New Testament and

² See Menocal, Maria Rosa. *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2003.

Jesus. Many Muslims also share a negative view of Christians. While Muslims believe Jesus was a prophet and the Bible is divine revelation, they believe Christians have misinterpreted scripture. Both perceptions create a difficult atmosphere for theological dialogue since disagreements center on issues fundamental to each faith (2005: 196).

In addition to disagreements on the foundation or application of each faith, Christian-Muslim relations face difficulty over conceptions of God and Jesus. First, some Christians assume Muslims worship a different God because the Christian theological understanding of God is a three-in-one framework versus a one deity understanding. On the other side, Muslims consider the three-in-one framework blasphemous and contradictory to the idea of tawheed (unity, oneness of God). Differing conceptions of God are not small theological differences and are often a barrier to developing positive relations because both sides cannot even identify God as a central similarity (2005: 198, 216).

Evangelical missionary efforts also serve to irritate Christian-Muslim relations. The perception by some Christians that they have a privileged road to salvation and the spreading of this message has always been a flashpoint. In response, some Muslim efforts to share their faith have mirrored this hard-line stance, also claiming that the only true relationship with God is through Islam. Wrapped with the issue of missionaries on each side is a huge gap in knowledge of the “other” side’s faith. Both Christian and Muslim communities lack knowledge of each other’s faith and theological underpinnings (2005: 200).

Perceptions of Islam

Finally, underlying the relationship between Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities is a poor perception of Islam, which they often perceive as a threat, Christian and Jewish communities struggle to relate to a religion perceived in the media as foreign, not self-critical, archaic, and Middle Eastern in the media. In addition, narrow perceptions about the role of secularism and militarism add to tensions (2005: 172-95).

The Role of Ijtihad³

Muslim religious leaders and community members are increasingly participating in IFD efforts. However, the majority of this participation, especially in nontraditional encounters, has drawn from one segment of the Muslim population...Sufis. Through their emphasis on the importance of inner and outer peace paired with a duty of non-judgment, Sufi leaders and community members have dominated the IFD field. While other segments of the Muslim population have engaged in IFD, their level of engagement has been significantly lower than Sufis. A huge contribution to this lack of participation revolves around questions of legitimacy and authority.

Debates about the role of ijtihad have abounded since the early 18th century when figures including Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduh, and Muhammed Iqbal called for the doors of ijtihad to be re-opened. This calling came in an effort to halt what the reformers considered “stagnation” in Islam (Pratt, 2005: 150-1). Suddenly the possibility for authority was moved from what some perceived as a set of ruling elites to

³ The concept of ijtihad in Islam refers to the process in Islamic law where an “independent or original interpretation of problems not precisely covered by the Quran, Hadith (traditions concerning the Prophet’s life and utterances), and *ijmā* (scholarly consensus).” Definition from the Britannica Online Encyclopedia.

individuals. Embedded in the movement was a sense that the former schools of law were the reflection of elitist views of a particular historical context. Contemporary reformers continue the push for *ijtihad*, feeling strongly that it is important to shift authority and legitimacy from an elite few to each individual Muslim (Glenn, 2005).

On the other side of the debate are contemporary scholars pointing to what they identify as dangerous effects of individual *ijtihad*. Scholars assert that ironically, the *ijtihad* meant to bring more openness and relevance to the modern day has given the authority of interpretation to extremist individuals including Osama bin Laden. Suddenly, charismatic individuals with no legal authority are asserting religious and legal authority. The respect for diversity once alive in the plurality of the Islamic schools of law is now considered *bid'a*, or innovation, by ultraconservative movements like Wahabism from Saudi Arabia (Fareed, 2001).

The struggle for authority has resulted in mixed consequences. Segments of the Muslim population that have lacked voice and power (Muslim minorities and women) are now given the space to serve as their own authority. At the same time, leaders with political agendas issue fatwas and are held up as religious leaders despite the fact that they may read no Arabic, in addition to lacking religious educational training, and experience. As a result, *ijtihad* has brought the opportunity for empowerment and oppression at the same time.

The question of authority and legitimacy has several implications for interfaith dialogue encounters. The new authority granted to individuals has empowered ultraconservative groups, some of which condemn *any* IFD efforts. One recent example

of this occurred in the summer of 2008 when the King of Saudi Arabia organized an interfaith conference in Spain. Towards the end of the conference, Al Qaeda condemned the monarch, claiming that the King was trying to replace Islam with a “modern faith” and called for his murder⁴. While Al Qaeda’s call has political underpinnings and implications, it is also perceived by some segments of the population as a de-legitimization of IFD efforts. Most troubling is the fact that the effort in Spain was purely focused on theological dialogue led by elites. As a result, the space for grassroots and more experimental forms of dialogue is abolished if legitimacy cannot even be given to traditional forms of IFD. Music, art, and other forms of expression suddenly become “forbidden” and ultimately, against Islam.

⁴ Reuters, “Qaeda Slams Saudi King Over Interfaith Dialogue,” Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSL81168020080728> (accessed July 29, 2008).

Chapter III

Theoretical Framework

A diverse set of theories and concepts shed light on the role dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters play in the field of IFD and conflict resolution more broadly. The ability for dialogue-by-experience encounters to draw a diverse pool of participants and have a profound impact on some individuals lies in understanding the way contact between different groups; the role of rituals, symbols, and gestures; identity; attitudes towards IFD; ideas on reconciliation, and networks interact.

Contact Theory

One of the most popular theories guiding conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and more specifically IFD encounters is contact theory or the “contact hypothesis.” Contact theory is built on the assumption that bringing together adversary groups in conflict situations, in other words creating the opportunity for personal “contact” between different groups, will fundamentally create positive attitudinal and perception shifts. One of the main underlying assumptions of this hypothesis is that groups develop negative ideas and prejudices of each other and through prolonged personal contact, these prejudices can be broken down (Forbes 1997, p.15).

Although the theory has been criticized as being too simple or “not enough,” peacebuilding initiatives including IFD encounters continue to place contact theory at the foundation of their methodology. Some may argue this replication is a failure of the field

to implement lessons learned; however there may be great wisdom in this replication. What appears to be an oversimplification could be local genius and intuition. After all, the alternative to contact is no contact at all...which is unlikely to produce attitudinal or perception shifts. Therefore, the fundamental question is not whether contact is helpful in shifting attitudinal shifts, but what kind of contact is needed and how the nature of that contact effects the depth of positive changes.

Ritual, Symbol, and Gesture

Contact at dialogue-by-experience encounters is often colored by rituals, symbols, and gestures. Both Marc Gopin and Mohammed Abu Nimer, two veterans of interfaith dialogue, emphasize the importance of rituals, symbols, and gestures in conflict resolution and its ability to prove successful when words fail. All three concepts are used to create positive attitudinal and perception shifts by transcending rationality in addition to evoking deep emotional reactions. Abu Nimer has seen the way values, symbols, and meaning making systems can be embedded in rituals and can therefore serve as a useful tool in conflict resolution to guide contact between different groups (Abu Nimer, 2007: 24-5). Popular rituals performed in dialogue-by-experience encounters include participating in spiritual practices of different groups, for example prayer.

Gopin explores the importance and impact of symbols and gestures in his research. Both symbols and gestures have the ability to transcend language and national boundaries. During his work in the field, Gopin found that gestures and symbols can reach both extremes of necessary human emotion: suffering and joy (Gopin, 2002: 180). Dialogue-by-experience encounters often include profound symbols and gestures

including the powerful gesture of one group acknowledging the suffering of “the other” or the symbol of an unlikely pair of religious leaders embracing. These “irrational” and highly sensitive emotions are most delicately dealt through nonverbal communication in protracted conflicts with painful narratives. Through symbols, rituals, and gestures, contact between different groups can go beyond “just contact” to create the opportunity for transformation.

Identity and Conflict

Stepping back, it is important to understand the role identity plays in protracted conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the current perceived “clash of civilizations” that the Fez Sacred Music Festival addresses. When identities are threatened, enemy images are formed. Definitions of who is the “enemy” form as understandings of “self” and “other” evolve (Stein, 2006). One important way to change this dichotomy is to “complexify⁵” the situation where underlying beliefs or hypothesis about “other” individuals and groups are challenged. This can also be referred to as a shift in worldview where the fundamental foundation understanding of who friends are and who enemies are is shaken (Gopin, 2002: 38). If quality contact is combined with rituals, gestures, and symbols there is a chance for ideas of “self” and “other” to be challenged. Many dialogue-by-experience models of IFD understand this and incorporate the triad assumption into their methodology.

⁵ The term “complexify” embodies the process facilitators typically create where the introduction of new images, conflicting images, and unclear images of “the other” are introduced primarily through contact with the other, hearing their story, seeing what they look like etc. This process makes the situation more complex, and images are no longer clear cut and in black and white.

IFD Worldviews⁶

Worldviews towards interfaith dialogue are worth mentioning to guide analysis later of the level of impact on participants and understand underlying assumptions behind various IFD approaches and activities. Abu Nimer identifies four worldview orientations that shape IFD approaches: denial/defense, minimization, acceptance/adaptation, and integration. According to Abu Nimer, the denial/defense worldview over simplifies and polarizes religious and cultural differences. Individuals with this orientation often view their own religion as the one and only true religion. On the extreme, individuals and groups with this worldview can be pushed to engage in violent acts under conflict conditions. Other viewpoints and religions are considered misled or misinformed. Individuals working from this point of view often avoid difference and uphold an “us” versus “them” paradigm. Participants with denial/defense worldviews can benefit by IFD because encounters can widen their understanding of other faiths as well as their own.

Minimalist worldviews are different from denial/defense individuals due to their focus on commonalities. At the core, minimization highlights the universal values and commonalities among different cultures and religions. Religious or cultural differences are avoided all together. Minimization IFD encounters often highlight abstract ideas and include umbrella statements like “we are all children of God.” Although open to IFD participation unlike individuals who espouse a denial/defense worldview, individuals with a minimization⁶ worldview typically have yet to acknowledge the equal spiritual paths of different groups and the equal rights of “the other.” Abu Nimer suggests that

⁶ Abu Nimer, 29-35.

participants with minimalist worldviews should engage in IFD activities that validate religious differences, for example, studying a specific concept to explore in multiple faiths.

The third worldview is the acceptance/adaptation worldview. Individuals with an acceptance/adaptation lens, range from individuals with an ability to accept the validity of other religious paths and teachings to the ability to adapt and alter behavior and perceptions. Adaptation includes the ability to take on a lens to understand perspectives held by “the other” or even take on those perspectives personally. Activities that take on an acceptance/adaptation worldview run the risk of being perceived as attempts to convert groups as participants actively experience each other’s spiritual practices. And in some cases religious communities feel that individuals who take on practices of other religions may be violating their original religious tradition.

The final worldview that Abu Nimer discusses is the integration worldview. Many groups and participants of dialogue-by-experience encounters uphold this worldview. Individuals with an integration worldview often do not have their own faith or belief system or have embraced some syncretic faith and are able to fluidly move between different religions, embracing a diverse set of beliefs and practices. Many of the participants or organizers of dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters carry this worldview and come from a “new age” spiritual background. Encounters built on an integration worldview face obstacles gaining legitimacy and participation from more traditional religious communities. This has certainly been the case in the three dialogue-by-

experience encounters featured in this research and will be discussed further in later chapters.

Reconciliation Theory⁷

A critical theory to dialogue-by-experience encounters is John Paul Lederach's comprehensive theory of reconciliation developed after years of engagement in peacebuilding. His theory was built on the understanding that society is an ecosystem of relationships and to move towards peace, individuals must have new ways of positively relating to one another. To work towards peace in a protracted conflict, there must be steps towards reconciliation. Lederach identifies four critical concepts that require space to build reconciliation: truth, mercy, justice, and peace.

Truth is the ability for communities to reflect on the past and retell stories in public that shed light on actions and responsibilities of those involved in conflict environments. The key is that a social process takes place where an individual or group recognizes and takes account for actions they committed that affected others in the presence of "the other." While the path to truth usually includes a more traditional inquiry or tribunal process, IFD efforts play an important and unique role in bringing forth truth. It is not uncommon during transformative encounters to have an individual or several individuals of one group publicly apologize for the actions of their group against the "other." This is different than having individuals who committed specific acts admit

⁷ See the work of John Paul Lederach Lederach, John P. "Civil Society and Reconciliation." *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006. 841-54 and Lederach, John Paul. *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace, 1997.

those acts in truth. However, equally powerful gestures of truth through apology have the ability to positively shift perceptions and attitudes to be “ripe” for reconciliation.

Lederach’s second essential element to reconciliation processes is mercy. Unlike truth, mercy is looking forward to the future groups would like to create. This requires face-to-face relationships where victims of violence must learn to live in the same location with perpetrators of violence. Expanding Lederach’s idea of mercy, violence can be understood in terms of violence committed against individuals as actual violence, or structural violence. Multiple day IFD encounters that bring individuals from different groups together, face-to-face, and build relationships are also a process of working towards mercy. Participants in an IFD encounter may not be perpetrators themselves, however, that does not necessarily mean they are not perceived as a “perpetrator” if they are a member of a group perpetrating violence, structural violence, or both. Processes that bring different groups together can help victim groups process the idea of peacefully sharing a space with “perpetrators” actual or otherwise. Like the expanded understanding of truth, this understanding of mercy can prime communities for reconciliation and more macro mercy processes after violence has ended.

The concept of justice is one of the most essential elements to reconciliation and building peace, yet one of the most difficult elements to tackle in IFD encounters. For Lederach, justice is often attributed to accountability for actions, compensation for damage that has been done, and an effort to work towards equality and fairness. Since dialogue-by-experience encounters often avoid politics, elements of justice are often missing. This is one of the biggest complaints and frustrations for IFD participants of

dialogue-by-experience efforts and remains a major obstacle sometimes affecting whether groups or individuals are impacted or transformed by the encounter.

Finally, Lederach's concept of peace is the ultimate goal to take steps towards ending patterns of violence. This is traditionally done through a "peace process." In addition to steps to move towards ending violence, peace ultimately includes creating space for people to begin rebuilding the social fabric of society together. The metaphor of coming to the table together is a popular image used to articulate this concept. "Dialogue-by-encounter" gatherings can occur during active conflict, a short period of cessation of violence, and post conflict. However, no matter what stage of the conflict, most dialogue-by-experience encounters have the concept of peace at the core of their activities. Manifestations of this concept often include cooking and eating together, representing an image of rebuilding the social fabric.

Social Network Theory

One common characteristic of dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters is the fact that the gatherings are organized by a loose network of individuals in addition to building and fostering new networks of individuals. In his most recent research, Gopin explored how social network theory can help the field understand the impact and potential of loose networks. According to social network theory, the most effective tool for social change is "loose networks" of individuals who serve as "connectors" to networks with "strong ties." "Strong tie" networks are groups that are more formal and insular. Gopin gives the example of academic disciplines, religious groups, or small villages as examples of groups with "strong ties." On the other spectrum of networks are groups of individuals

with “loose ties.” “Loose tie” networks are not necessarily organized around a certain group or institution and may connect through multiple initiatives and activities (Gopin, 2009: 77-79). What is unique about dialogue-by-experience encounters is their ability to have “strong ties” in communities, usually religious communities and loose ties within religious, secular, and everything in-between worlds. These connections help them draw a large and diverse pool of participants along with the plethora of activities included at gatherings. The multi-faceted network creates a wide web of people who, if impacted by the encounter, could become a network of people mobilized to work towards positive change.

In addition to the nature of “loose” tie versus “strong” tie networks, Susan Allen Nan argues that the role of networks in conflict resolution processes lies in whether they are organized around an inclusive or an exclusive framework (Nan, 2008: 113). Inclusive networks are characterized by “loose” ties that allow them to be “inclusive” of different people, organizations, activities, perspectives, and worldviews. In an inclusive network, people play roles as participants in a system that is usually organized by a decentralized, democratic, transparent decision-making process where diversity of ideas is valued. In contrast to inclusive networks, exclusive networks are characterized by their “strong” ties that create an exclusive membership-based network where members organize around a single voice or set of ideas and perspectives (Nan, 2008: 121). Inclusive networks often play an important role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution activities whereas exclusive networks can sometimes play the role of a conflict instigator, sparking conflict or creating agitation to keep conflicts going.

Dialogue-by-experience IFD models are often built on a unique set of networks with an inclusive network base with connections to exclusive networks. This unusual combination means that exclusive networks and strong ties exist as part of dialogue-by-experience IFD models; however, the encounters themselves and foundational network remain governed by inclusive network structures and rules to allow for flexibility, the inclusion of a wide range of individuals and worldviews, and the possibility to expand rapidly through “loose” ties. For example, in dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters, orthodox religious leaders often play important roles as participants and sometimes as facilitators, or leaders in the encounter. These religious leaders are members and in some cases leaders of exclusive networks. However, at the same time they are participants in the inclusive network of the IFD encounter. This interesting organization provides the inclusive network of the dialogue-by-experience IFD encounter access to exclusive networks that may not have otherwise included themselves and visa versa. The result is the possibility to reach exclusive networks that may be engaged as active conflict parties or agitators into conversations and spaces they would not normally enter.

Experiential Education Theory

The field of experiential learning provides important insights and lessons learned for dialogue encounters. The richness of “learning by doing” is widely recognized by experiential learning scholarship. During his research on mega-simulations, Stephen Weiss concluded that students who learned in community settings with specialized contexts were more impacted by the learning experience than students who learned in more traditional settings (2008: 29). In other words, context matters. The unique

opportunity of dialogue-by-experience models of interfaith dialogue is the rich community-based setting and special context whether it is in the form of a music festival outside in the historical city of Fez or a reconciliation ceremony in one of the most sacred cities in the world, Jerusalem. Participants make meaning from the context and special space created as they “experience” dialogue through activities like shared rituals. The special context combined with active participation beyond words amplifies the participants’ ability to make meaning of the encounter.

In another study, J Donald Weinrauch explored the role of musical metaphors in marketing classes. Over the course of several semesters, Weinrauch experimented with the use of musical metaphors in his marketing classroom. Overall, students responded positively to the new tool. Weinrauch widely contributes the meaningful effects of musical metaphors to his ability to communicate abstract concepts, open people’s subconsciousness, and creates bridges via music and language create between the analytical left sides of peoples’ brains and the creative right sides (2005: 13). These are important observations and provide useful insights for the role of music in translating messages and difficult concepts. Many dialogue-by-experience forms of IFD do include music as an element of the encounter. Religious, peace, justice, and reconciliation metaphors are woven into the musical sections of encounters, communicating dialogue messages in a new way. If Weinrauch’s research regarding right and left brain usage is correct, utilizing music in dialogue encounters will naturally impact a larger circle of diverse people due to its universal translation and appeal.

Chapter IV

Research Design and Methodology

Research Objectives and Hypothesis

This research is a qualitative descriptive study of the three dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters: the Fez Sacred Music Festival, the “On the Way to Sulha” gathering, and the Big Hug on Jerusalem. The three gatherings utilize religious ritual, song, and language; are centered on participant transformation as a result of the entire experience and encounter; are not limited to the verbal exchanges that take place; are large gatherings that can last over several days and draw people from across borders and sometimes continents; have occurred annually over several years; and are multi-faceted encounters with dialogue, dancing, eating together, music etc., touching participants’ multiple senses. Due to the lack of in-depth research and evaluation of dialogue-by-experience models of IFD, several unanswered questions sparked this research:

- No research has examined the different paths that lead participants to join dialogue-by-experience encounters. How did participants become participants? Was it through their search for dialogue encounters? Or just a coincidence?
- Little research has been done to analyze the motivations for participation in new dialogue-by-experience models or the individual impact on participants. Why do

people participate in these dialogue encounters? If they engage over multiple years, what motivates that continued engagement?

- Little research captures the effects these encounters have on dialogue participants. How do dialogue-by-experience encounters affect people at an individual level during the encounter as well as post-encounter? How does being with “the other” color their experience?
- With an increasingly tense and sometimes dangerous environment, no research analyzes the role of Muslim religious and community leaders in dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters. What kind of Muslim religious and community members participate in dialogue-by-experience encounters? Do Muslim leaders need a nod from upper leadership to participate? Do Muslim leaders root their participation in religious texts? Or is their decision an act of individual autonomous authority?

While answering all of these questions completely is impossible in a short study, this study seeks to shed light on these research gaps and to begin a discourse on dialogue-by-experience models of interfaith dialogue. Three main hypotheses guided this research:

1. Dialogue-by-experience models of interfaith dialogue have strong transformative effects on individual participants, causing shifts in consciousness that fundamentally positively change the way they understand themselves and others. This transformation is heavily colored by their interactions with “the other” at these encounters.

2. The diversity of participant motivations and backgrounds for dialogue-by-experience models of interfaith dialogue is vast, reflecting the wide-range impact and reach dialogue-by-experience encounters can have through interlacing networks and relationships.
3. Muslim participants of dialogue-by-experience models act as individuals agents of autonomy, seeking authority from their self-interpretations of what is considered acceptable in their faith.

Research Design and Methodology

Research for this study primarily focused on four variables: participant motivations and backgrounds, the effects of dialogue-by-experience models of IFD, and the motivations and roles of Muslim religious and community leaders in these efforts. To gather data relevant to these variables, in-depth semi structured interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes were conducted in person, using the program Skype, or by telephone with three target populations: IFD scholar-practitioners who have served as observers, participants, and facilitators of dialogue-by-experience encounters; dialogue-by-experience organizers/leaders; and encounter participants. An initial list of scholar-practitioners, organizers/leaders, and participants already identified during the literature review and previous experience were contacted first. Snowballing was used to widen the circle of interviews. In total ten interviews were completed.

Interviews with the target populations included open-ended questions to examine the four variables identified at the beginning of this section. The following list of interview questions was used to guide the research:

- How did you get involved in interfaith dialogue? What motivates you to continue that involvement?
- From your experiences, what paths lead people to become participants of dialogue-by-experience models of IFD? Do you find that participants have a similar path or different path to that experience?
- Why do people participate in dialogue-by-experience/traditional models of interfaith dialogue? What motivates them? And for multi-year participants, what do you think motivates their continued involvement and engagement?
- What role does interacting with “the other” play in these dialogue encounters?
- What affect do these encounters have on people at an individual level? How would you characterize that affect? Does interaction with “the other” color that affect? If so, how? What affect does it have on people outside the circle of participants and facilitators?
- What level of impact do you think dialogue-by-experience models of interfaith dialogue have? Is that impact long-term?
- Do you think there is any level of risk for people participating in these efforts? If so, what are the risks? Why do you think people are willing to take these risks to participate?
- How do these dialogue encounters affect you?
- What role does religion play in the dialogue encounter?

Interviews were digitally audio recorded for analysis, transferred to a password-protected web-based archive, and transcribed. Interviewees were asked to give informed consent utilizing an informed consent form approved by the Human Subjects Review Board at George Mason University. After recordings were transcribed, transcripts were coded using the following codes to guide analysis of data: description of the encounter (D), participant information (P), effects on participants (E), challenges (C), motivations (M), the role of religion and religious leaders (R), and other (O) for additional miscellaneous data. Following data coding, transcripts were analyzed for individual encounter observations and conclusions in addition to overall findings found in all three encounters to form overarching research observations and conclusions.

Ethical Concerns

There are no perceived risks or benefits to the people who agreed to be interviewed for this study. Although all interviews were audio recorded, anonymity was guaranteed to participants and upheld in this analysis to reduce any level of risk as well as ensure responses are candid and rich. Individuals are generically identified as for example, a Muslim religious leader, Israeli academic to strip all labels of further details because the community working on these issues is very small. Research was started after approval was given by George Mason University's Human Subject's Review Board (HSRB).

Quality Criteria

Every effort has been made to ensure that questions for the semi-structured interviews are clear and relate to variables identified earlier in this research. As a result, there is no reason to believe that this study could not be replicated by other researchers in the future to get similar results. However it should be noted that the goal of this study is not to generalize all dialogue-by-encounter experiences, but rather provide foundation descriptions and some observations of three dialogue groups to allow space for a serious discourse to begin.

Research and Design Limitations

There are several research and design limitations. Due to the unique niche filled by dialogue-by-experience efforts, the number and ability to access scholar-practitioners, organizers/activists, and Muslim religious or community leaders that are active and is small. The snowball method helped to widen the circle of already identified individuals, but may have diminish the diversity of responses. Due to the fact that most dialogue-by-experience efforts are led or facilitated outside of the United States, access to desired interviewees in Morocco, Palestine, and Israel was difficult. Many interviews had to be completed by phone or via Skype, and could possibly have affected interview dynamics.

There are also limits on relying on scholar-practitioner observations and reflections rather than focusing solely on participant reflections. Scholar-practitioner responses may not represent the motivations, level of impact, and transformation participants' experience. However, their multiple roles (observer, participant, and

facilitator) yield a unique opportunity to gain multiple angles of reflection. Language was also a limitation. The targeted IFD efforts are based outside of the United States. Since the interviews will be administered in English, interviewees who have stronger English language skills may be better able to express their experiences in their own words; whereas interviewees with weaker English language skills may feel limited in their ability to express their experiences.

Chapter V Sulha Peace Project

“We are trying to create a new language of peace, one that goes beyond the political clichés, the skepticism, the despair, the confusion, we want to reconnect with the prophetic spirit of Israel...justice, justice, you shall pursue, and love your neighbor as yourself, these are the ways of our ancestors and the creativity of our grandchildren, we are going to surprise reality until it changes.” – Sulha Peace Project co-founder Gabriel Meyer⁸

Project Inception⁹

The “On the Way to Sulha” annual gathering was started as a local peacebuilding effort in Israel in 2001 by a local Palestinian sulha mediator Elias Jabbour and the son of an Argentinean rabbi active in the civil rights movement, Gabriel Mayer. The gathering was inspired by the Arab traditional reconciliation ritual process known as “sulha.”¹⁰

Three main concepts formed the foundation of the gathering’s design. First, prior to 2001, co-founder Gabriel Meyer was active organizing and participating in large

⁸ *On the Way to Sulha*. Dir. Zohar Ron. 2007. *Sulha Peace Project - Part 1*. Youtube. Web. 1 May 2009. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFgMH1TX1SY>>.

⁹ Information about the “On the Way to Sulha” annual gathering led by the Sulha Peace Project is drawn from interviews with two scholar-practitioners, one Muslim community leader, and the Sulha Peace Project website www.sulha.com.

¹⁰ Sulha or sulh is both a term in Islamic law and traditional tribal custom. The word is often used to refer both to a restorative justice process and the outcome of the process. For more information see Chapter 9 in Funk, Nathan C. and Ayse S. Kadayifci. *Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam Precept and Practice*. New York: University of America, 2001.

gatherings of Israelis in the Negev desert. The gatherings were infused with a “New Hebrew spirituality that was connected to the land and also to the tradition and Kabala (Jewish mysticism), but in a very colorful and creative way that connected with land and the earth and being outdoors...not just being indoors for ritual celebration.¹¹” This “New Age” spirituality would later form the spiritual foundation and framework of the “On the Way to Sulha” gathering. The second major concept that formed the foundation of the gathering links back to a Jewish Zen Buddhist teacher, Bernie Glassman¹². Glassman often organized interfaith “bearing witness retreats” where individuals would travel to a location that represented deep pain to one community, for example the Nazi death camp Auschwitz in Poland. At these deep centers of pain, the group “witnesses” the pain and comes from a place of not knowing, to “knowing.” The assumption was that people would be individually transformed from the experience of witnessing “the other’s” pain and lead to healing for all parties. After participating in a bearing witness retreat, Gabriel and others started to ask themselves what a bearing witness gathering in the Holy Land would look like to get Palestinians and Israelis to acknowledge the pain of “the other.” According to a Jewish leader and activist involved in sulha, “the idea was to help build and heal the process of Israelis and Palestinians from their trauma and wounded-ness.¹³”

The third concept that formed the foundation of the gathering is the traditional reconciliation process, sulha, usually performed between Arabs in Israel and Palestine. Seeing value in the traditional reconciliation process, sulha, Gabriel along with Elias

¹¹ Interview with Jewish leader and activist, June 3, 2009.

¹² For more information on the Zen Peacemakers and Benny Glassman see <http://www.zenpeacemakers.org/>.

¹³ Interview, June 3, 2009.

started to consider what a gathering would look like to move Israelis and Palestinians towards sulha. Both hoped a gathering around the principles of sulha would start a “universal” healing process between Israelis and Palestinians and could form a more indigenous form of a bearing witness retreat. The first gathering was held in 2001 combining the three inspirational concepts.

Encounter Goals and Description

The Sulha Peace Project’s website identifies the main goal of the project as an effort to “universalize responsibility for the healing of one of the most excruciating epicenters of conflict and pain: Jerusalem, bringing the Holy City back to her true destiny: the inheritance of Peace.¹⁴” The project’s goals and assumptions are drawn from a combination of contact theory, the role of gestures, symbols, and rituals in conflict resolution and a combination of the minimization and adaptation worldviews discussed earlier in chapter three of this research.

Each annual gathering has been held in different locations. Changing locations is an integral part of the organization’s long-term strategy to prepare Israelis and Palestinians to eventually experience sulha (reconciliation) on a national level after both sides have experienced a positive shift towards acceptance of each other. The organization expects the last gathering to ultimately be in Jerusalem. Co-founder Gabriel Meyers explains the long-term goals of the project best:

“If we get to be a critical mass of people, who embody the way of peace, our life in the Middle East will look very different...beauty and creativity beyond

¹⁴ *Our Story*. Web. 15 June 2009. <http://www.sulha.com/showitem.asp?itemid=Our_story>.

imagination. I am optimistic that in the near future, most people will accept the fact that our two peoples have to live in the same land – “the Land of the Prophets” and our destiny as the inheritors of the “Chalil” (friend of God) – Abraham, Sarah and Hagar is to share light, loving kindness and harmony with the world.¹⁵,”

The three-day gathering consists of three main phases each day. The first phase is experienced through listening circles in the morning to allow space and time for participants to share personal stories related to the conflict. The organization refers to this as a “heart-opening” exercise. It is not uncommon for the listening circle to serve as the first experience participants have with “the other” side. The listening circles are usually organized around themes to frame the conversation such as trust or faith¹⁶. One of the main sulha facilitators described the process:

“We bring people together to sit together, eye to eye, to share their stories.

Through the stories I believe that what we gain is the ability to really feel how it is to be the other because what is most painful for me in this conflict is that we live so close to each other, but there are so many walls in between us we don’t really get to feel, to know how the other experiences reality even though we are so close, and what I believe is when we sit together, we share our personal stories, our life stories, then we get to feel how it is to be the other.¹⁷,”

¹⁵ *Our Story*. Web. 15 June 2009. <http://www.sulha.com/showitem.asp?itemid=Our_story>.

¹⁶ *Days of Sulha 2003*. Rep. Sulha Peace Project. Web. 17 June 2009. <<http://www.sulha.com/ShowItem.asp?ItemId=Reports>>.

¹⁷ *Sulha Preparing*. AinTV, 2008. *24.07.2008 Sulha Preparing*. Youtube. Web. 5 June 2009. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZZZAKsf-aI>>.

The listening circles are only guided by basic principles of a “talking stick” where the participant who is holding the “talking stick” is the only person allowed to speak at that time. Participants are not given time or verbal constraints on what they can say and how long they are each allowed to speak. This sometimes results in listening circles that can last up to four or six hours. Organizers and participants site this first phase as one of the most impactful elements of the annual gathering.

The second part of the encounter engages participants in workshops to help them break down stereotypes and assumptions related to culture, ethnicity, and religion. These workshops are led by facilitators, other local peacebuilding organizations, and religious leaders. Organizations like the Bereaved Family Forum¹⁸ set up tents to run small workshops to explain their work and often share transformational stories they hope will transform sulha encounter participants. For example, members from the Bereaved Family Forum will share stories of the loss of their family members and how they chose to join the forum rather than seek revenge. Through the Forum they have sought reconciliation with their “other” counterparts. In addition to local organizations sharing their work and stories, religious leaders often lead workshops to discuss interpretations of religious texts to support peaceful resolution of the conflict and peaceful resistance. Interviewees also said they felt the workshops with religious leaders were impactful since they provide a different face on religion than the common negative lens portrayed in the media.

¹⁸ For more information on the Bereaved Families Forum see <http://www.theparentscircle.com/>.

The third part of the encounter engages participants through interfaith prayers and rituals, followed by dance, music, and the arts to integrate earlier processes using the arts as a medium for healing and deeper transformation. These evening festivities are the first opportunity for all participants to be together in a larger group and to share the gathering together. Music performances include popular local artists and religious leaders leading the group in prayer, religious chants, and sacred music.

Participation

Participation in the “On the Way to Sulha” gathering has been growing steadily since 2001 from 150 adults and 15 children to 3,000 in 2007¹⁹. Participation is extremely diverse. The Sulha Peace Project and interviewees say the participant pool includes individuals who are activists, peacemakers, music lovers, participants of other Sulha projects (Sulhita Youth Project, Sulha Family etc.), religious and non-religious individuals, people who love dialogue, people who are burnt out from dialogue, and is not limited to Israelis and Palestinians, but draws international participants from the United States, Africa, and Tibet. Interviewees attribute this wide pool of participants to the diverse range of activities mentioned earlier at the gathering from music and dance to theological text study circles with religious leaders. The wide pool of participants was noted by several interviewees as one of the gathering’s greatest strengths:

¹⁹ *Our Story*. Web. 15 June 2009. <http://www.sulha.com/showitem.asp?itemid=Our_story>.

“The festival attracts so many people who otherwise will not come to Arab-Jewish dialogue, to Christian-Muslim dialogue or Jewish Abrahamic dialogue and that’s a very important strength.²⁰”

General participation is extremely diverse; however there are always less Palestinian participants that organizers and interviewees attribute to logistical issues like difficulty getting permits for Palestinians to travel to Israel.

Negotiating the Role of Religious Leaders

Initial sulha gatherings did not engage the more traditional religious communities in Israel and Palestine very much and heavily drew a more “new age” spiritual crowd. This has shifted over time to include traditional and non-traditional religious leaders including the rabbi of a large settlement in the West Bank and the Sheikh of Al-Aqsa Mosque. However, this shift did not happen over night. A lot of negotiating and compromises were needed to ensure the more traditional religious leaders and communities could participate while at the same time leaving space for the non-traditional participants and leaders:

“There would be parts of the program and aspects to all this that would allow for traditional clerics to have some role then it would be up to them as to whether they wanted to come on the grounds of a place that clearly wasn’t traditional. What we managed to do here was have a space and an invitation and respect (for the religious leaders) without the surrender of that space over to orthodox religion that would have made unwelcome all of these Palestinians and Jews who didn’t

²⁰ Interview with Palestinian academic, April 22, 2009.

want a narrow traditional space...they wanted something more open so this is how the compromised happened.²¹”

After negotiating the space to include traditional religious leaders, initial attempts to include them faced challenges:

“It was less of a problem at the beginning, frankly because it was winter and everyone was cold and fully dressed and there was no issue about modest dress at that one (the gathering). So that helped, the subsequent gatherings all tended to be in the hottest time in summer...July and August...which brought more of a challenge around this issue...there was a challenge about how to bring religious leaders into Sulha because already at that point there were a lot of women dressed from a traditional religious point of view, dressed immodestly...meaning tank tops or skirts and dresses above the knee. After that gathering (the second gathering) one Sheikh said, I can’t participate in further Sulha gatherings because I have to be in a place where people are dressed modestly.²²”

To remedy the dress issue, Sulha gathering organizers took several steps to resolve the discomfort around dress issues. Organizers discussed the possibility of requesting participants dress modestly on invitation flyers. Additionally, a separate tent was set up for religious leaders who may not want to mix with different genders during the event:

“In that space a religious leader could come and just hangout there if they don’t feel, even didn’t want to wander around the rest of the Sulha or they could come

²¹ Interview with Jewish academic, April 21, 2009.

²² Interview, June 3, 2009.

and feel comfortable in that place. It has a lot of religious symbols up on the walls and (we) created a space for Muslims to pray and orthodox Jews to pray²³.”

Another challenge complicating the participation of religious leaders was the communal kitchen that Israeli and Palestinian volunteers staffed to provide food throughout the gathering:

“For many years the kitchen though vegetarian was not kosher. So for example we have to import or order special kosher meals from nearby wherever the Sulha gathering was...have those brought in and then that created a whole other problem...when I remember in Mghrar, at the third Sulha gathering, one of the Sheikh’s from the Galilee got offended that we were serving the rabbi the meal before everyone else. He didn’t understand that (it) was a special kosher meal that he had ordered separately. But it does make for awkwardness in a big public gathering if you are having a meal where everyone will be eating one meal and then the orthodox rabbis will have to sit on the side and have a separate kosher meal.²⁴”

Changes like adding a separate prayer space for religious leaders to retreat to and making the kitchen kosher were completed to ensure religious leaders and traditional communities would remain an integral part of the gathering:

“At first I figured there would be just one rabbi who would come and maybe just the most liberal rabbis...what’s interesting is that over time and considering how bad the conflict was and how much suffering there

²³ Interview, June 3, 2009.

²⁴ Interview, June 3, 2009.

was, I think that the people who are more prone to peace got used to each other and so the imams and the rabbis who really wanted peace just sort of surrendered some of their taboos and just came anyways.²⁵”

Creating space for traditional religion is not always easy at dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters. Despite the fact that the diverse activities and framework draw a diversity of individuals and communities, a lot of negotiating is required to ensure leaders and participants from traditional religious communities will attend a very nontraditional space.

Debating a Religious Framework

While religion and religious leaders have been integrated into the sulha gatherings, questions surrounding the role of religion in Israel and Palestine remain. Some interviewees sited religion as an essential element that infuses the gathering:

“Religion in general has been playing a very negative role so it’s always good to have any chance for religious leaders to come and try to correct the course of that direction. I think it is important for them (participants) to be able to get a different kind of message and even with people who are not religious I think it is important for them to see a different kind of religious message being given especially with all the negative ones going on outside. I think it creates an alternative to all the negative things going around in Palestine and Israel. To

²⁵ Interview, April 21, 2009.

create an event where religious leaders are always able to come together and speak in a different term is very, very, important.²⁶”

However, some interviewees claim utilizing a religious framework has no indigenous connection especially to the way Palestinians understand the conflict:

“For many of the majority of the Palestinians the issue is not religion...this is an invention or framing of it from outside. If it is framed around human rights, torture, its possible they’ll find Palestinians and organizations around issues of justice...but you are not going to find many Palestinians that say lets go and celebrate our commonalities and culture in order to make peace...very few who do that. I’ve seen some people coming not necessary grounded in the Christianity or Islam or Judaism, but come from sort of new age spiritual spirituality that does not have much grounding in the Palestinian or Arab community.²⁷”

The struggle over the “true” role of the religion in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not unique in protracted conflicts. Identities are complex and multi-faceted which may mean that some Palestinians and Israelis connect with the important role of religion whereas others do not. There is no clear answer in a complex conflict like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The important point is to recognize that religion is critical for a section of the population. By designing a framework that has elements of religion, but is not dominated by “religion,” the “On the Way to the Sulha” organizers try to find a delicate balance. Ignoring the fact that religion has a place at the table could be detrimental since many parties have “weaponized” religion throughout the history of the

²⁶ Interview with Palestinian activist, April 29, 2009.

²⁷ Interview, April 22, 2009.

conflict to justify killings. Having an alternative nonviolent narrative rooted in religion is important.

Participant Motivations

Participant motivations for joining the annual “On the Way to Sulha” gathering are extremely diverse. However, several patterns and themes did emerge:

1. The desire to escape pressures from the conflict and community members.
2. The motivation to positively impact “the other” and change perceptions of their respective group through contact at the annual gathering.
3. Curiosity to see and experience people from “the other” side who are interested in peace.
4. Palestinian motivations to voice frustrations related to the Israeli occupation to their Israeli counterparts.

Interviewees noted that for some Israelis and Palestinians, the annual sulha gathering is a way to escape the stress of the conflict in addition to intra-community pressure. This proved especially true for younger participants. One interviewee said:

“In some ways this is a vacation for Palestinians from a trapped atmosphere so they (sulha organizers) make it very comfortable for people to come and to relax and to be away from pressure and stress. For Israeli Jewish kids, Jewish youth, they provide an atmosphere for people who feel lost, who want a connection, who have a problem with the society...there’s absolutely no pressure on them to conform.”²⁸

²⁸ Interview, April 21, 2009.

At the sulha gathering Palestinians and Israelis can escape community pressure to conform to a certain position about “the other” side or about the conflict to a space where the atmosphere is light during the evening with musical performances or “safe” in listening circles where more deep encounters occur and issues related to the conflict can emerge. Interviewees noted the particularly intense community pressures on Palestinian participants that risk the perception that they are “normalizing” relations, or moving to accept the Israeli occupation as “normal,” by meeting with Israelis. One interviewee explained:

“There is a risk depending on what you are going to say in these meetings...it’s definitely risky in the Palestinian community. You still have a thing called normalization...if you are connecting with the other side you are acting as if the situation is normal and therefore occupation is ok.”²⁹”

Although Palestinians still face this perception by their community through participation in the sulha gathering, the fact that the events are physically held away from their community provides a “safer” space away from direct community pressures. However, perceptions of normalization negatively affect the number of Palestinian participants.

Other participants are motivated by their desire to impact the “other” group. For example one interviewee said:

²⁹ Interview, April 29, 2009

“I think both sides start realizing there’s a possibility of dialogue there’s a possibility if we speak we can convince each other of things instead of any other alternative.³⁰”

Another interviewee described the desire for the traditional religious and new age spiritual participants to have a positive impact on each other:

“I think each side feels that they can have a positive influence on the other, the more spiritual in the new age types feel that its good for the clerics to come and see this...be a little bit more open minded and I think clerics come and say ok its good to inject a little spiritual or a little traditional religion into this environment and that’s the way its developed.³¹”

Similarly, specifically Muslim religious leaders and participants often sited a need to change perceptions about Islam through positive interactions with others which could lead to a shift in perceptions as noted by a Palestinian activist:

“One of the imams from Al Aqsa said it is important to me to show that we are not a religion of terrorism that we want to show that we are normal people and then he said the only way we are going to defend our rights is going to be through these kinds of directions.³²”

Participants seeking to have a positive impact strongly believed through interacting with “the other” they can debunk stereotypes and shift negative perceptions about their identity group. This theme reappeared over and over again as an important

³⁰ Interview, April 29, 2009

³¹ Interview, April 21, 2009.

³² Interview, April 29, 2009.

motivation to the experience of participants from diverse backgrounds. The belief by many participants is that their presence will challenge the “enemy” image that the “other” side has developed. In other words, many participants have bought into the foundational theoretical framework built into the encounter. Through positive and quality contact, groups will experience positive perception and attitudes shifts towards the “other.”

The third participant motivation that emerged through interviews is a sense of curiosity. This curiosity is drawn from a disbelief and desire to see someone from “the other” side who is interested in peace and dialogue. For Palestinians, interaction with Israelis is limited to negative encounters with settlers and the Israeli army and for Israelis the image of suicide bombers shapes their experience of Palestinians. One interviewee explained:

“I think in general Palestinians are curious about these things so there is that element that I want to figure out what is happening because the only thing Palestinians see are the army and the settlers and it is fascinating for them to hear about a different kind of people...a different group of people who are from the other side.³³”

Interviewees noted that participants motivated by curiosity are often positively impacted by these encounters where the participants have positive interactions with the “other” for the first time in their life. During this process, participants are not seeking to present a different image of their group; they are seeking out an alternative image of the “other” to the negative images already catalogued in their mind.

³³ Interview, April 29, 2009.

The last theme regarding participant motivations that emerged through interviews and content analysis is a desire by Palestinian participants to have the opportunity to voice their frustration with the Israeli occupation. While sulha does not ban discussion on politics in the listening circles, politics throughout the annual gathering is muted and avoided. The gathering is organized this way because of the underlying assumptions and theories guiding the organization based on the belief that through minimizing differences, and avoiding politics, Israelis and Palestinians will connect through universal, commonalities. Muslim scholar-practitioner Mohammed Abu Nimer described the importance for Palestinians to voice their frustrations during his research on interfaith encounters in Israel and Palestine:

“For Palestinians who attend these interfaith meetings or any other joint activities with Israelis, not talking about the occupation and its collective and personal impact feels almost like a betrayal of their national identity. There is no justification for their participation if they are unable to address these issues. In fact, this is the primary and meaningful contribution to their community’s collective need for liberation that they can carry back to justify their participation in such activities in a time of war.” (Abu Nimer, 2007: 58)

The desire for Palestinians to discuss issues related to the occupation is connected to community pressures, but also runs deeper. During his research in Israel and Palestine, Abu Nimer found that Palestinian participants of interfaith dialogue feel it is important to address political issues because the political issues embody the day to day life Palestinians face under the occupation and therefore Palestinian participants find it

difficult to engage in a conversation that avoids in their mind “reality.” In other words, to work towards peace for Palestinians is to work towards an occupation-free life. Whereas to work towards peace for Israelis is to work towards a reality where Israelis and Palestinians can see their commonalities and coexist. These different motivations at times can affect the level of impact on participants. This is especially true for Palestinians who have a different understanding of the concept of sulha.

Criticism

One of the criticisms that emerged during this research was a frustration by some Palestinians that utilizing the concept of sulha in the IFD event was extremely misleading to Arab participants. Because political issues including justice are extremely important for Palestinians in dialogue, connecting the dialogue encounter to sulha is a direct link to political reconciliation. Utilizing the term, sulha, means that Palestinians expect to have the opportunity to voice grievances and expect Jewish participants will publicly acknowledge the wrongs they (Palestinians) feel have been done against them. As mentioned earlier, the sulha tradition is normally completed between Arab parties and results in a public acknowledgement of wrong, and a public acknowledgement of the apology ending in reconciliation between two families, groups, tribes etc. However, the concept of “sulha” at the annual gathering is very different. The organizers do not plan to reach “sulha” by the end of the three-day conference. And there is no intention to direct parties to frame a discussion around the acknowledgement of wrong. For some Palestinian participants, they find the encounter extremely disappointing and misleading:

“I mean its like its like you are God forbidden, are being abused in your home or your house your family and the family of the abuser say lets all go out together celebrate woman’s day with no such reflection on the intradynamic at all and you actually amazingly agree and you go and you know celebrate it...that’s how it feels to so many people from the inside.³⁴”

Marc Gopin recognized the importance and power of the sulha reconciliation process in Arab culture; however struggled with the idea of extending the framework to more than one party:

“There is the obvious problem of religious authorities, on both sides in fact, questioning the orthodoxy of extending the process in this way. But there is also a deeper question of how and whether the symbolic process can be meaningful when it has primordial roots for only one side.” (2002: 137)

The challenges embedded in the framework do not necessarily mean the basic principles of sulha must be thrown out. A critical eye and review of the way the encounter is framed and the way sulha is or is not used may provide insights into the way the encounter can be more sensitively framed to ensure expectations of participants will match the reality of activities at the event and the impact possible in a three-day gathering

Measuring Impact

Interviewees agree that the sulha annual gathering has an impact at some level. However, the level, nature of that impact, and ways to measure impact are disputed. Conclusions about the impact of the annual gathering include four major themes:

³⁴ Interview, April 21, 2009.

1. Sulha's holistic model allows it to impact a wider circle of participants.
2. Hosting the event each year is success in and of itself.
3. Impact is limited to some participants and furthermore does not contribute to structural issues like the political level.

As mentioned earlier, interviewees cite the methodology for the sulha gathering to utilize different mediums including listening circles, workshops, and music as a strength and they attribute the diversity of activities to the number of people impacted by the gathering. Organizers and interviewees emphasized the “whole body” approach that sulha has taken to transform individuals. Co-founder Gaby Meyer said:

“The sulha is ‘holistic,’ touches the body, the feelings, the mind, the spirit...that can include secular and religious...a microcosm of what peace is like when it happens between hearts that are open up.”³⁵

The holistic approach is diverse enough that interviewees say it can have an impact on a greater number of participants because individuals experience shifts and changes in different ways. A participant from a traditional religious community may pin point their most impactful experience to a workshop with religious leaders whereas another nontraditional participant may attribute the nightly music, dance, and prayer sessions to their turning point.

³⁵ *On the Way to Sulha*. Dir. Zohar Ron. 2007. *Sulha Peace Project - Part 1*. Youtube. Web. 1 May 2009. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFgMH1TX1SY>>.

In addition to the diverse range of participants impacted, several interviewees attributed success purely to the fact that Israelis and Palestinians were able to peacefully get together for several days. One interviewee said:

“That people can sleep in the same area [with a] couple thousand people...3000 people...Palestinians and Israelis without being afraid I think that’s incredible... without having to worry that’s shows that coexistence is possible...that makes a huge shift in the way I think people think... the reality is that this has been successful a few years in a row is an impact so it shows that it is passing and it is staying somewhere with people and it creates an opportunity that people don’t have I mean Israelis and Palestinians don’t have any opportunity of meeting together so to create any opportunity any possibilities for them to meet together is a way is going to change some kind of perspective.³⁶”

Interviewees attributed the successful hosting of the gathering each year as an indicator of success due to the volatile context of the Palestinian and Israeli conflict that forms the backdrop. For organizers and some interviewees, indicators of impact must be reasonable given the difficult and violent situation.

Although sympathetic to the difficult situation, some interviewees criticized the gathering for only impacting some individuals rather than impacting larger structural issues at the national level that is important to Palestinian participants. As mentioned earlier, this is an underlying tension for many Palestinian participants who attend apolitical IFD gatherings like the sulha gathering and desire to see change at the national

³⁶ Interview, April 29, 2009

level. If the sulha project's goal is to move towards true reconciliation, avoiding politics and the structural or national levels will ultimately make the larger goal difficult to reach if not impossible. Further discussion of moving towards action to address structural issues is discussed further in chapter VIII.

Nature of Religious Interaction

As mentioned earlier, engaging the religious leaders to participate in the annual "On the Way to the Sulha" gathering takes careful negotiations and compromises. What is important to mention further here is the nature of those religious leaders and religious interactions. The religious leaders who join the gathering are not "traditional" in a social sense. One interviewee said:

"If you are in integrity in your own religious practice and especially as a religious leader, you can be a positive example and even go into a place that would be offensive for some of your fellow community members. So it sort of takes a certain type of religious leader who can handle or is open enough."

In other words, the religious leaders who attend the gathering may be religiously traditional, but socially more open, or flexible to attend a gathering where nontraditional activities including music, dance, and mixing of genders occur.

Beyond the unique social flexibility of the religious leaders is the heavy representation by Muslim leaders from Sufi persuasions who attend the gatherings. What is unclear is whether this is by nature of design of the event, a purposeful focus on Sufi Muslim leaders, the focus of many Sufi leaders on peaceful text interpretations, limitations on mainstream Muslim leaders connected to the Palestinian Authority, or a

combination of all four. Based on content analysis and interview responses, the later is probably true...a combination of all four.

First, as mentioned earlier in Chapter II, some orthodox persuasions of Islam do not accept music that is not traditional music limited to religious lyrics and percussion instruments. Additionally, dancing is widely not accepted, especially in a mixed gender atmosphere. Due to the fact that the sulha event by design includes both nontraditional music and dancing in mixed gender settings could explain a lack of representation by some orthodox persuasions of Islam at the gathering.

Second, it is clear that several of the organizers of the sulha event purposely search out Muslim leaders of Sufi persuasions. Due to the kalablist roots of the sulha event's spiritual framework, the perception is that Islam and Judaism can be best reconciled through the mystical traditions...Sufism being Kabala's clear partner in Islam. For example, Eliyahu McLean, the project's interfaith coordinator, during his early days in Jerusalem focused on traveling throughout villages in the West Bank and Gaza searching for Sufi sheikhs "whose emphasis on the heart might open them to encounters with Jews" (Halevi, 2002). Although not mainstream Palestinian Islam, Eliyahu thought that Sufism could later serve as an entrance into mainstream Palestinian Islam. This narrow recruitment has created a negative optic and perception in some cases that the IFD encounter is serving Israeli Jewish interests (Abu Nimer, 2007: 89).

Third, the Muslim religious leaders who do join the gathering focus on and utilize peaceful interpretations of religious texts. One interviewee said:

“We have a lot of strong participation from the Sufis...but the Sufi communities are a very peaceful group. They (the Muslim leaders) do site religious texts...the thing with each religion I think is you can almost always find religious texts for peace and you can find religious texts for war. It takes leadership, it takes being bold to come out with this interpretation because its kind of more heroic to come out and say hey yeah, we should find and defend and kill you know...its kind of more attractive so a lot of leaders have chosen that direction instead of really getting deeper and looking at the theology saying here’s where you can fight and here’s when you cant.³⁷”

Although Sufi leaders have often sited peaceful interpretations of religious texts, they have also remained a mainly peacefully community throughout the conflict.

Finally one of the biggest obstacles limiting the diversity of Muslim leaders is the fact that many religious leaders are employed by the Palestinian Authority. One Palestinian interviewee said:

“A lot of religious leaders are employed by the Palestinian Authority and so they have a lot of times to follow whatever the Palestinian Authority allows them or not allows them to do and that constrains them...a lot of them actually would have been more open to come to these things and do more activities because even though the Palestinian Authority comes across as very peaceful they are not necessarily in that direction always...they got their own interests and their own

³⁷ Interview, April 29, 2009

politic interests...and they don't encourage this kind of movement and that's very disappointing but its reality ³⁸”

The fear of losing their work or being questioned about their participation combined with community pressure dissuades other Muslim religious leaders from joining the annual gathering. However, Muslim religious leaders are slowly recognizing that violent interpretations along with a lack of positive leadership have led to Palestinian intra-violence:

“I think in Palestine they realized only recently the effects of how using these misinterpreted texts lead not only eventually too violence against Israel, but its leading to destroying the full community...the Palestinian community where people are now using it to kill eachother and din Gaza stuff started happening between Fatah and Hamas...people were using the Koran to justify killing eachother and I think that kind of made some awakening for some religious leaders. ³⁹”

Efforts to address limitations by government officials and to continue to negotiate the encounter's space may make more room for more diverse Muslim leader participation.

³⁸ Interview, April 29, 2009.

³⁹ Interview, April 29, 2009.

Chapter VI

Big Hug on Jerusalem⁴⁰

“How can you bring settlers and radical in some ways viewed as radical groups and do the big hug together when every one of us has a different talk about Jerusalem...⁴¹”

Project Description⁴²

The Big Hug on Jerusalem is a young gathering, only three years old, and takes place in the Old City of Jerusalem lasting for most of one day. The gathering is less structured than the sulha gathering and aims to create a space to celebrate the shared love for Jerusalem by Christians, Jews, Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians alike. Many of the religious leaders and activists involved in the annual sulha gathering are involved in the Big Hug gathering. The symbolic encounter serves as a counter to similar annual festivities to surround Jerusalem by Jewish extremists on Jerusalem Day (the day Israel took control of Jerusalem).

The Big Hug gathering starts with participants meeting in several areas around the Old City. At these initial meetings, participants join listening circles, prayer, and music performances. After a large crowd has gathered the disjointed groups merge together

⁴⁰ Data gathered through content analysis and interviews on the Big Hug was limited compared to information regarding the annual “On the Way to the Sulha” gathering and the Fez Sacred Music Festival. This is mainly attributed to several factors including the fact that the gathering is only three years old and the smaller number of interviews regarding the Big Hug encounter.

⁴¹ Interview, April 29, 2009

⁴² Information on the Big Hug on Jerusalem gathering is drawn from two interviews with scholar-practitioners and one Muslim community leader.

hand-in-hand to form a semi-circle around the Old City. The procession is led by drumming. When the procession ends, participants stay joined around the Old City joining in songs, prayers, music, dancing, and drumming to celebrate their joint gathering in the city. Participants are then given the option to join listening circles, meditation efforts, prayer, or music performances following the ceremonial hug and celebration.

Participants

Participation in the Big Hug on Jerusalem is similarly diverse, like the participation in the “On the Way to the Sulha” gathering. At the core, interviewees said there is a cadre of “peaceniks”, or participants who are regular participants in peacebuilding efforts, especially efforts crafted from a New Age spirituality framework, who attend the Big Hug event. These participants are also usually drawn to the annual sulha gathering.

The unique element of participation in the Big Hug gathering is the event’s unique ability to draw spontaneous participants. Due to the fact that the event takes place in the middle of a city, rather than in the desert, hundreds more participants join out of curiosity or surprise when passing by on their way to shops, work etc. One interviewee said:

“They (the organizers) have this incredible capacity to engage everyone at the same time so you have all of these simple passers of you know women shopping with veils whom I sure don’t speak a word of English and are very simple folk and then they have these (Israeli) soldiers...the interesting thing about the hug of Jerusalem is that it can be any passers by and its building on the goodwill and the

talents of these people and the spiritual atmosphere of Jerusalem its kind of an atmosphere that's a bit wild...its almost like a wild west of spirituality...so what they built on is the fact that it's a wild west in a dangerous sense, but its also wild west in terms of spirituality in a positive sense.⁴³”

In a sense, participation in the Big Hug gathering is very different kind than most dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters located in a more formal setting where participants come to the event with the intent of joining the event ahead of time. However, some participation in the Big Hug is driven by a decision to join, for example, as a woman finishes her grocery shopping and happens to pass by the event. Unlike the sulha gathering, spontaneous participation is a large part of the Big Hug experience. This spontaneous participation gives the gathering unique “energy” by expanding the encounter beyond the encounter itself into surrounding the public space. People strolling through the city in a sense become a participant, witnessing the event whether they actively join or not.

In addition to the “peaceniks” and spontaneous participants, the Big Hug gathering attracts more traditional religious leaders and communities than the sulha annual gathering. It's not completely clear what elements of the event draw more traditional religious leaders than other events. Some factors that may influence the wider participation are the importance of the location and slightly shifted format. Due to the religious significance of the Old City, traditional religious leaders may have more of a “stake” in the shape and outcome of the event. After all, the importance of who “owns”

⁴³ Interview, April 21, 2009

Jerusalem is one of the core issues in the conflict and the underlying symbol of the event is the vision of a jointly “owned” and shared Jerusalem.

In addition, religion takes center stage at the Big Hug event. Rituals, prayers, and religious songs dominate the core of the event’s activities. These activities are likely to draw a more religiously conservative crowd because they seem more “safe” and familiar than the sulha gathering where dance and music are an integrated part of the entire event. Dance and music are a part of the Big Hug, but are more peripheral to the framework than the sulha gathering.

Questions of Impact

While information on the Big Hug is still limited due to the limited number of gatherings to date, some interviewees did discuss the question of impact. There is not a clear indication based on the actual impact of the event. Some interviewees, as in the case of the sulha event, suggested it was enough that the event has been successfully held for the last three years and that is an impact in and of itself. However, there is also a sense that the gathering has a huge potential. Several interviewees emphasized that participants may be impacted, but felt the largest opportunity was in the ability to spread the images of the event in a viral effect through the media:

“For me just managing a very positive event where Jews and Arabs are expressing a great deal of love for each other and then they happen to catch a glimpse of the film or they hear about it usually changes something in people because they didn’t think that was possible...that its impossible that Jews and Arabs are working together...its impossible that they love each other...its impossible that they dance

together...its impossible that they study together or that they celebrate each others rituals, its not possible and so I think that the viral impact is very strong because the prejudices that this can't be are very strong.⁴⁴”

It should be pointed out that the event does not have the depth of the annual sulha gathering due to the shorter time length for the event. The Big Hug on Jerusalem gathering lasts for most of one day and has a looser format, whereas, the sulha gathering meets for three days including the evenings where all of the participants sleep in the same area. However, the circle of impact potential for the Big Hug is wider due to the events location in an active public space.

The broader impact of the Big Hug lies in the symbol that the actual event creates eluded to earlier by one interviewee about the potential viral effect of the event. The gathering is the largest example where symbols, gestures, and rituals are embedded in the encounter to positively shift people's perceptions and attitudes, and on a larger scale representing a larger symbol in itself.

Criticism

One of the criticisms uncovered during interviews surrounds the question of utility. Some critics question of the utility of such an event when sometimes groups and individuals viewed as “radical” that attend the event do no have the same understanding of what should be the final status of Jerusalem. One Palestinian activist said:

⁴⁴ Interview, April 22, 2009

“How can you bring settlers and radical in some ways viewed as radical groups and do the big hug together when every one of us has a different talk about Jerusalem...that was the big criticism.⁴⁵”

Critics find the gathering useless and in some cases deceiving because some radical groups could be perceived as pretending to want peace. At the same time, as mentioned briefly earlier, the symbol of what the gathering means transcends all doubts for some:

“It shows that ok, if this group is willing to come and do this together with Palestinians and it shows, at least I hope, that the city is not owned by one group and that what the city needs is a hug is love instead of violence and I think that’s a great direction to go with it.⁴⁶”

⁴⁵ Interview, April 29, 2009

⁴⁶ Interview, April 29, 2009

Chapter VII

Fez Sacred Music Festival

“It [the Fez Sacred Music Festival] was an idea that was not necessarily intuitive...that you would have a dialogue process that was linked to the music festival.”⁴⁷

Project Description

The Fez Festival of World Sacred Music has more of a “global” focus than the “On the Way to Sulha” and Big Hug on Jerusalem encounters. The Festival was established following the first Gulf War in the ancient city of Fez in Morocco. From the beginning, the Festival was built on exploring the intersection of the “soul” and “globalization” resulting in an overarching theme “Giving Soul to Globalization” that underpins every festival since 1994. Artists from across the world gather together for nearly two weeks each summer to share sacred music from their respective countries and spiritual traditions. Music selections have included Sufi brotherhoods from Turkey, Moroccan women’s groups singing traditional religious songs, monks performing Gregorian chants, and gospel groups from the United States. During the summer of 2001, the Festival decided a key component missing in the arrangement of the Festival was a chance for dialogue. The result was the start of the Fez Festival Colloquium in the summer of 2001 which gained increasing momentum following the September 11th

⁴⁷ Interview, April 6, 2009.

attacks (Marshall, 2005). The colloquium was “inspired both by a global vision of a multicultural world where differing cultures and perspectives all find a place, and by a conviction that real dialogue requires new and different approaches” (Marshall, 2004: 49).

According to a pamphlet about the Colloquium the encounter seeks to “bridge the large gulfs in understanding and empathy that separate very different worldviews” (Marshall, 2005). The different approach the colloquium took to dialogue incorporated elements of the music from the main music festival combined with a unique dialogue setting: the historic Batha Museum. The Colloquium, or Encounters, takes place each morning at the Festival. Composed of panelists and an audience of participants drawn to the wider music festival, the Colloquium opens each morning with a short music selection sometimes performed by artists from the Festival and some unique to the Colloquium. Following the musical introduction, panelists introduce themselves with a symbolic object. This unique introduction was noted by several interviewees as an important element that sets a very different tone than traditional dialogue encounters:

“If you ask participants to come to the table with basically something meaningful to them, an object that represents something for them, they start their introduction...why they picked up that very object and what it means for them and what they would want it to represent for others, then you see that person with different eyes because this person has said something quite personal about his

own being. So it improves the quality of the interactions and connections between people.⁴⁸”

In addition to the unique framework setting up the dialogue, the environment of the city of Fez and the Batha Museum makes an impact on individuals. All interviewees attributed the environment to the unique atmosphere created for each encounter. One interviewee said:

“The whole Sacred Musical Festival and the Forum had been constructed to hold events in these historic sites so people experience Fez, they feel it in a way you wouldn’t feel it if you were inside a luxurious five star hotel conference room with climate control. So when it’s hot in Fez, people experience that heat, when it rains, you sit under large canopies and are a little bit cold...so it’s that experience of being, of coming into a culture that is a very, very fabulous culture, that mixture of history, of spirituality, of Fez’s cultural and intellectual cradle, you know not just of Morocco, but of Africa...on a meridian you know that has such a cross pollination of geography, people, and cultures and the greats of world civilization have been in Fez you know at some point in early part of civilization, so it’s so rich as a destination⁴⁹.”

Inside of Fez, the encounters take place under the shade of a Barbary oak tree in the Batha Museum that each interviewee described as “magical.” Interviewees noted that the “visual” and “sensory” nature of the environment serves as an element to stimulate creativity complete with the beautiful tree, birds singing, and open sky.

⁴⁸ Interview, June 19, 2009.

⁴⁹ Interview, June 19, 2009

Participant Composition

The Colloquium draws a diverse range of 200-300 participants and panelists each year over the span of five days. From grassroots activists, to religious leaders, to leaders of the International Monetary Fund, panelists come from multi-disciplinary backgrounds and levels of society. Extremely senior leaders from across the globe are usually featured as panelists. However, one of the unique features of the Encounter is that it asks people to join the dialogue in their own personal capacity, requiring individuals to speak from a personal perspective rather than holding to an institutional opinion:

“For speakers to come and speak not from their institutional hats...putting aside their institutional hats and speaking personally, was very important to us and we made that very clear, which does differentiate it from other forums in that way.⁵⁰”

Although international, interviewees agreed that the demographics of the Encounter are drawn heavily from France and other European nations as well as some Moroccans. And although Moroccans often participated, it was limited to those who had the financial ability to pay for admission to the Festival and Encounter. A complete discussion of a sense of “elitism” follows discussions of participant motivations.

Participant Motivations

Besides general interest in the discussion, the most common reason for participation in the Colloquium dialogue by European and American participants was connected the need to respond to political situations including September 11th.

⁵⁰ Interview, June 19, 2009

Interviewees cited the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center as a turning point and motivation to join the dialogue:

“I went in 2002, so it was the year subsequent to 2001 and I live in Manhattan, so I thought it was kind of a jester of peace, you know to go there. I remember thinking very deliberately okay I have to do something , as in some kind of mission of good will and solidarity in the world and also go to a country like, like Morocco who has been slammed by this awful experience (September 11) you know quite unfairly, but people were scared of traveling.⁵¹”

A sense of the need for a symbolic apology or support underpinned participants who connected their participation with the September 11th attack and other political events. Another American interviewee attributed her participation to the election of President George W. Bush;

“...And plus the timing. Bush had been elected President. It was a horrible time for many of us in the United States. And we needed to sort of apologize to the world, the mixed cultures, the whole thing that was going on with Israel and Palestine, at that time...I mean all the agendas came together and I mean these are things I have been working on all my life, but not on a global international level.⁵²”

Similar to the sense of some Muslims in the “On the Way to the Sulha” encounter, many Muslims who participated in the Fez Colloquium cited the need to provide an

⁵¹ Interview, June 26, 2009

⁵² Interview, May 26, 2009

alternative image of Islam as their motivation for participation in the dialogue. One Muslim interviewee said:

“I thought it was a very important signal that’s being beamed out to again let the world know that Muslims are not just terrorists. It is not just a violent religion, we aren’t born desperados...that there are thinking people who are doing interesting work and gathering together people from all over the world...from different genres from different disciplines to come together to hold thoughtful discussions, about things that matter to us all because we are all in this together.⁵³”

The significance of the encounter being held in a Muslim country was highlighted throughout interviews as an opportunity to provide an alternative positive image and conversation regarding Islam:

“I think having a Muslim place host interfaith dialogue about globalization conveyed a lot of power to the encounter itself because even well informed people tend to fall into clichés you know. I believe that even people at the top of institutions or organizations are just average citizens sometimes when it comes to falling into clichés about each other.⁵⁴”

Elitism

As mentioned briefly earlier, there was a sense that the Fez Colloquium was elitist and did not always reach the full participant pool that interviewees felt the Colloquium

⁵³ Interview, June 19, 2009

⁵⁴ Interview, June 19, 2009

should be reaching. Participants and panelists were drawn heavily from European countries and senior level positions that had the financial ability to travel to the Colloquium to participate or speak. One interviewee said:

“I was extremely privileged to be there and among those to be invited and to be among these really truly wonderful people, spiritually and intellectually and socially committed activists...wonderful people there is no question about it. But on the other hand that's who the crowd was and the audience you know just came to be whatever rich folk who could get themselves to Morocco. So there was an incredible elitism...where a lot of money was spent on beautiful accommodations and dinners that the Queen (of Morocco) did in honor of the speakers and the guests and all of this was glorious and beautiful. And this was the topic by the way all the time. All the time at all the conferences although we were always steered away from it...I mean at first even the music wasn't open to the folk. But then they did public concerts in the square that was free and everything. So that became a very important part of the festival. But there was definitely elitism to it.⁵⁵”

In addition, to keep funding flowing and to keep the Encounter at a certain level of prestige, organizers often had no choice, but to reach out to elites to keep the level of attention needed for success:

“It was very important to Morocco to have that level of distinction attached to that. I mean it's all part of the confusion, you know of not just the world, but all

⁵⁵ Interview, May 26, 2009

the world where you want to do something important and you want the word to get out and it's a great thing you can't do it unless you have the stars.⁵⁶”

Elitism does not only effect European and senior level panelists and participants. Interviewees suggest that grassroots activists that often attend the Colloquium come from an elite level due to the access they have to get invited to the Colloquium as well as their language abilities that provide them a privileged advantage amongst other grassroots activists in their community. One interviewee suggested that the Colloquium includes the people who are doing the work, but not the beneficiaries from that work and that ultimately community members on the ground should benefit from the Colloquium and participate. For example, if two peacebuilding activists from the grassroots level attend the Colloquium, the community members who participate in their activities participate in the Colloquium because they would benefit the most from the conversation. Organizers interviewed attribute a lack of funding to the ability to bring in community members like suggested by interviewees. A more thorough discussion of the impact of funding on dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters is included in Chapter VIII.

Loose Format and Holistic Approach

Similar to the “On the Way to the Sulha” and Big Hug on Jerusalem encounters, the Fez Colloquium has a looser format and is described as utilizing a “holistic approach.” One interviewee described the loose format and free flow of the Colloquium as having a “jazz like” quality:

⁵⁶ Interview, May 26, 2009

“One of the charming, but also frustrating features of the Fez forum over the years was that there was what I call a jazz quality to it. In other words its not programmed very often...you couldn’t tell who was really going to be there...a lot of change, a lot of need to adapt and improvise..⁵⁷”

This looser format provides opportunity for free flowing dialogue because there is a loose agenda formed by the framework of the overarching Fez theme “Giving Soul to Globalization” and an overarching theme for the day that focused on issues like climate change and poverty.

Additionally, like the Sulha and Big Hug Encounters, the Fez Encounter utilizes a holistic framework that combines, art, music, and dialogue into one encounter:

“We wanted a holistic approach that would include engaging the head as well the intellectual capacity, not that artistic programs don’t, but it’s a different approach and in this case it would be head first as opposed to emotions first, and we believed that it was very important.⁵⁸”

As noted by the interviewee, the emphasis of dialogue-by-encounter IFD models includes engaging the “head” and the “heart.” In other words, organizers of the encounter felt it is important to engage both the intellectual and emotional capacities of participants. This follows the earlier discussion of experiential education theory that suggests pairing the arts like music with more cognitive activities engages the right and left sides of the brain.

⁵⁷ Interview, April 6, 2009

⁵⁸ Interview, June 19, 2009

Role of Religion

The role of religion in the Fez Colloquium is similar in some ways and different in other ways than the role religion plays in the Sulha and Big Hug encounters. First, similar to the Sulha and Big Hug encounters, the nature of the city of Fez carries religious importance. As a city with a long history of religious scholarship, and interfaith mixing, the backdrop of Fez provides a spiritual and religious vibe:

“The fact that Fez is a place where people who have had very, very deep experiences for over a 1,000 years...the vibration of the city itself, you know its so powerful, and the architecture, the sounds, the smells, the people and for me the festival and the forum and everything about it is an off shoot of what is already created there by very, very high level souls...so for me the place is a kind of capacity that makes something like the Fez festival and forum possible that there have been people of great, great learning, great culture and great inner experience and so it makes a lot of sense to me that at this particular juncture that when people are in such a state of disharmony and misunderstanding.⁵⁹”

The unique energy of the city places the encounter within a spiritual and religious atmosphere by nature and is seen as an important element of the IFD experience much like participants in Israel and Palestine⁶⁰.

Participation in the Fez Forum is also similar to the Sulha and Big Hug encounters. Religious and secular alike are amongst the participants and panelists in the

⁵⁹ Interview, June 26, 2009

⁶⁰ Fez has a long history of serving as a center of religious scholarship in Islam. For more information on the sacred history of Fez see Burckhardt, Titus. *Fez, City of Islam*. Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1992.

Colloquium. However, unlike the Sulha and Big Hug encounters, joint rituals like prayers are not included in the Fez encounter. Instead, as the wider Festival is organized, the experience of spirituality and religion is accomplished through sacred music performances and the themes guiding each panel that typically focus on an ethical issue with strong grounding in many religious traditions. So while religion and spirituality make up a core of the Fez Forum, its potency is more subtle than the previously two described dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters:

“Well for me that’s (spirituality and religion) the basis of the whole thing, not in an obvious way, its not a declaration of that and its not offensively preaching that at all, but for me the thread is trying to understand and have compassion for the other so in that sense to me that’s all that religion is you know and that’s really basically kindness, and respect so in an unspoken way many performers come from an inner tradition that’s extremely inspiring to them, and that informs their music.”⁶¹”

Measuring Impact

The degree to which the Fez Colloquium has an impact on individuals and wider remains unclear. Interviewees indicated a variety of experiences including a sense that the experience itself is extremely transformative and magical to the feeling that the Forum is full of like-minded individuals and “preaching to the choir.” Similar to other dialogue-by-experience encounters, several interviewees attributed a transformative impact to the Fez Encounter on an individual level basis:

⁶¹ Interview, June 26, 2009

“I think that for many people they would describe their experience as transformative and it helped them to see things in a very different way it gave them new ideas new contacts, but for other people it was another fascinating event but they were they went on with their lives so it’s a spectrum.⁶²”

What types of participants were fundamentally transformed is unclear. However, some interviewees suggested that participants with little knowledge and experience of other cultures would be the most transformed by the experience:

“I suspect that it would impact anyone to some extent... if people went there with a certain kind of lack of knowledge or prejudice...and if that opened something for them.⁶³”

Interviewees said that by the nature of these participants’ limited experiences, they have further to “shift” or be positively impacted, and therefore are the most affected by the Fez Forum which could provide them with exposure to “other” worldviews, cultures, and perspectives. More in-depth discussion of the way the level of experience of participants affects the impact of encounters on them is included in Chapter VIII.

Other interviewees were less confident about the level of impact on participants:

“Well I'm not sure not sure it changes anybody...I think the conference itself draws people to it. They are already committed to change...it's preaching to the choir. I can't imagine anybody does anything differently once you leave you know. But it's a very powerful experience. There's no question of that. It's a combination of extraordinary music and extraordinary people...to be an intimate

⁶² Interview, April 6, 2009

⁶³ Interview, June 26, 2009

part of it... I'm not sure that it's much more than, you know, going to a lecture in a hall. And I don't think it's more than that. Either going to a symposium, going to a panel. I don't think it's anything more than that. But for the people who are apart of it, they're so committed already, it (the Forum) doesn't make their commitment any stronger, it just as I said, it means there are more people to call on. They spread the word.⁶⁴,

While some interviewees are skeptical about the depth of impact and long-term impact of the Fez Colloquium, one thing is clear as mentioned by the previous interviewee: there is a core network of dedicated people who participate in Fez. This network of “like-minded” people may be the crux of where impact or leveraging future impact lies. Further discussion of networks and their potential impact is also included in Chapter VIII.

⁶⁴ Interview, May 26, 2009

Chapter VIII

Overarching Research Findings

This section will explore several cross-cutting themes found while focusing on the three previously described encounters that require more in-depth exploration related to dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters. The four themes are: the role of networks in dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters, the effects of apolitical frameworks on the level of impact of dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters, Gopin's idea of incremental change, and the impact of funding including a lack of funding, or "unpure" funding with strings attached, on the encounters.

The Role of Networks

As discussed in Chapter III, networks play an important role in dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters. These networks are often unusual, connecting inclusive and exclusive networks through one single encounter. This creates the opportunity for a previously considered unlikely encounter between a diverse range of participants that includes important community members, religious and secular, as well as individuals and organizations that may be parties or agitators to the conflict. For example, in the "On the Way to the Sulha" encounter, the participation of an Orthodox Rabbi who is the leader of a prominent settlement, the lead Muslim religious leader of the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, and "New Age" "hippie" youth is a combination unheard of to many. However, all of these individuals and more participate in the encounter every year. The

two religious leaders belong to very exclusive networks to which they are connected to through their religious traditions and institutions that would otherwise not provide them with the opportunity to engage many of the individuals and organizations in the inclusive Sulha network. At the same time, their participation in the inclusive Sulha network does not require them to “drop” their membership or leadership in an exclusive network. On the contrary, much of the energy of the “On the Way to the Sulha” and other dialogue-by-experience encounters focuses on valuing the diverse worldviews and perspectives participants bring to the table and providing the space for participants to experience each other’s worldviews. In other words, dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters provide previously unprovided space for a dynamic relationship between inclusive and exclusive networks that does not exist in other IFD efforts.

The Challenges of Apolitical Frameworks

Dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters often avoid politics by nature of the framework underpinning the encounter. This fact poses both an opportunity and challenge according to interviewees. Interviewees who see the apolitical model as a strength to all three encounters suggested that this fact draws participants that would otherwise not participate in IFD activities. One interviewee said of the sulha encounter:

“Sulha avoids politics in a great sense so they don’t have an agenda of we will convince you of this or convince you of that which to some this would be considered one of the weaknesses yet its in many ways as well one of the strengths because it gives people the freedom to talk about what they want to talk about and it will create a lot of interaction between the Israelis the Jewish

community and the Palestinians who come there on personal levels... so by not talking about it (politics) you get a bigger crowd...more wide range.⁶⁵”

As indicated by the last interviewee, interviewees who feel avoiding politics is the strength of dialogue-by-experience encounters are convinced that the diversity of participants would be diminished dramatically if the encounters began purposely addressing political issues. Additionally, some interviewees indicated that by addressing relations at a personal level and avoiding politics could slowly lead to a shift at a more political level:

“I think the shift happens more on the personal level than the national level 1st so its interaction with the people, meeting them, getting to know them, realizing that basically people are people regardless we are all humans... if you are able to change peoples opinions or perspective in what’s happening then eventually you’ll be able to change the politics of what’s happening.⁶⁶”

This idea of a “spread effect” will be discussed more in the next section on questions of impact.

However, not all interviewees are convinced that avoiding politics is a good idea. As indicated in earlier discussions, especially in highly politically charged environments like Israel and Palestine, avoiding politics can be seen as a major obstacle to success by some participants. Whether it is a minority group motivated to discuss their grievances with the “other” or a desire for participants to link to concrete action, dialogue-by-experience encounters are most often criticized for their apolitical platforms:

⁶⁵ Interview, April 29, 2009

⁶⁶ Interview, April 29, 2009

“[There were] lots of discussions, lots of pain, lots of anguish, but no agenda ever about what we were going to do. And that wasn't the purpose. But it seemed to be a kind of gnawing underbelly of some people.⁶⁷”

This criticism is worth taking a deeper look at to understand the implications of an apolitical model on the impact of the encounter. While, as one interviewee suggested, there is the possibility that the “spread effect” discussed in the next section will affect the political level, there are some tangible steps that dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters can consider to translate networks into actions that can impact the political level while still remaining apolitical during the initial encounter. As discussed in the previous section, networks can be utilized to implement some action steps to affect the political level. The initial apolitical encounters are important, as they draw in a diverse range of participants that may not otherwise participate. Therefore the initial apolitical framework should not change. However, the initial contact does not mean that follow on activities have to remain apolitical. There could be an offer towards the end of encounters to invite interested participants to develop action plans. These could be individual action plans, multiple group action plans, or an entire network action plan. Either way, this might enable participants desiring the opportunity to affect the political level the opportunity to work on concrete actions. Additionally, this would keep the network established mobilized and active. More discussion of these possibilities is included in the next section in the discussion on incremental change.

⁶⁷ Interview, May 26, 2009

Questions of Impact

Upon conducting ten in-depth interviews highlighted in this research, it is clear that measuring the impact of these encounters is difficult. Interviewees cannot agree on the level of impact or how long the impact of these encounters last. Part of the reason for this could be a lack of thorough data. However the most likely obstacle to measuring impact is utilizing the standard metrics frameworks that continue to show peacebuilding efforts as “failing” or having a minimal affect. These popular metrics systems typically measure useless statistics that either do not tell people much about impact, like how many people attended an encounter, or look for “pie-in-the-sky” changes. Metric systems should instead, be established with the given context in mind which may mean that the fact that a successful dialogue event was held may be an important indicator of success in a conflict environment, and may mean nothing in a more stable environment.

Marc Gopin has grappled with metrics throughout his career as a scholar-practitioner. In his most recent book, *To Make the Earth Whole*, Gopin suggests a new metrics system he refers to as incremental change. The idea of incremental change suggests three important concepts to consider when examining the impact of interventions (2009: 64-7):

1. Context matters. Gopin suggests that we must look at each intervention in its own time and place to identify reasonable indicators of success and impact.
2. Networks should be examined and quantified to understand the actual and potential “spread effect” of interventions.

3. Indicators of change should be increments. In other words, they should focus on micro changes that when added up could total a large impact, but which would be missed if indicators were kept at a more traditional macro level.

If these three principles are utilized to examine the impact of the three encounters identified in this research, our understanding of the impact of dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters could shift dramatically. The following questions guide the analysis that follows to examine what the three concepts of incremental change say about dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters:

- What is the context? Is the encounter taking place in a conflict environment? Are there structural limitations that hinder encounters?
- What networks are created through the encounter? What do these networks mean? What is their potential?
- What small increments of change given the context and networks created can be identified for each encounter? Adding these increments up, what does the macro impact picture look like? Could these increments lead to long-term change?

The Role of Context on Impact

Examining the context for each encounter is an important first step to locate indicators inside of the context to understand the full meaning of what each increment of change means. Prior to delving into the wider context, it is important to discuss the context at an individual participant level that affects the nature and level of impact. As indicated earlier, several interviewees concluded that the level of impact on individual participants depends on where they are in a “shift cycle.” There is a sense that

individuals experience positive shifts that move them along a continuum. Participants' world views are "complexified" through their experience at the dialogue-by-experience encounter and therefore fundamentally shifted as their understanding of the "other" becomes challenged and more complex.

Abu Nimer's idea of different IFD worldviews mentioned in Chapter III alludes to this fact. The denial/defense worldview could be seen as located at the beginning of a positive shift cycle where individuals with a defense/denial worldview view their own religion as the one and only true religion, ending at the integration worldview where individuals are able to move fluidly between different religions and embrace a diverse set of beliefs and practices. This research indicates that the different worldviews experienced by participants has much more grey space between the four worldviews presented by Abu Nimer. As a result, further examination should be given to the different stages individuals work through on a "shift cycle." A deeper understanding of this continuum will shape the understanding of each context at an individual level in encounters. If the majority of participants that participate in the encounter are towards the beginning of the shift cycle, the impact of the encounter on them may be significant, whereas individuals towards the end of a shift cycle may experience a smaller shift, which could be still significant given their location on the continuum.

Now, to change focus to the wider context, both the "On the Way to the Sulha" and Big Hug on Jerusalem encounters are located in an unpredictable conflict environment where some days conflict is active, and other days the violence has cooled down. Nevertheless this is an important factor to consider when examining increments of

change because change in a conflict environment will look very different than change in a stable and flourishing environment. What may appear as minor increments in a stable environment could be major positive changes under conflict conditions. As a result of active conflict, both the Sulha and Big Hug encounters face structural obstacles including the need to obtain permits for Palestinians to participate, checkpoints that can hold up Palestinian participants from joining encounters, and freedom of movement issues that restrict encounters to only Israel proper because Israelis cannot travel into Palestine. In addition, overlaid on top of these obstacles are the power structures in place upheld by the Israeli occupation.

In the case of the Fez Forum, the actual encounter is not held in an active conflict zone, but is held in a Muslim country which is of some significance as indicated by interviewees. Interviewees felt the fact that the Fez encounter was held in a Muslim country was extremely significant given the difficult political atmosphere where a perceived “clash of civilizations” between the “West” and the “Muslim World” is active. As a result, activities and actions that take place at the Fez Colloquium are watched with heightened attention. In addition, the Forum is hosted by the King of Morocco which attaches the encounter to a political entity and therefore affects what happens and what is said during the encounter where sometime interviewees suggested that people “self-censored” themselves because of the sensitive context.

For structural issues at the Fez Forum, the encounter’s participation is limited, as mentioned earlier, to participants with financial means that can fund their travel and

accommodations to the encounter as well as purchase admission to the events. The result as many interviewees indicated is a sense of elitism and “preaching to the choir”.

The Potential of Networks

As discussed earlier in Chapter VII, all three encounters are characterized by a dynamic relationship of inclusive and exclusive networks. In the case of the Sulha and Big Hug encounters, networks were established through a diverse pool of community activists, religious leaders, youth, and religious and secular participants. The Fez Colloquium is composed of mainly European and Moroccan participants, drawn from different institutions, organizations, businesses, governments, religious and secular alike. What matters about these networks is the fact that interviewees emphasized the strength of core networks, or a pool of participants and organizers that attend the encounter year after year. Combined with the unusual and otherwise unlikely networks that form between a diverse pool of individuals, lies the potential for serious political action beyond the encounter to continue increments of change that are instead focused on the political situation as discussed briefly in the last section. In some instances, these networks are already mobilizing as indicated by one interviewee:

“A lot of grass roots organizations and people got together and have expanded their activities resulting from contacts.⁶⁸”

There is a lot of potential to increase the level and amount of change these encounters have on political situations if attention is given to mobilizing the networks. Since some participants are already mobilizing, formalizing that mobilization to ensure it is a

⁶⁸ Interview, April 6, 2009

purposeful part of the end of dialogue-by-experience encounters is a critical step to institutionalize longer and sustained increments of change focused on structural issues at the political level that would otherwise not be addressed.

Measuring Incremental Change

Through the current set up of dialogue-by-experience encounters given the contexts and potential networks to mobilize, the potential to measure incremental change is more feasible. First, measuring positive change as a result of the “On the Way to the Sulha” and Big Hug encounters must include a lens that understands the conflict environment, structural obstacles, and unusual partnerships formed through the inclusive and exclusive networks. Several interviewees suggested that successfully hosting the encounter is an increment of success in itself:

“For me just managing a very positive event where Jews and Arabs are expressing a great deal of love for each other and then they happen to catch a glimpse of the film or they hear about it usually changes something in people because they didn’t think that was possible...that its impossible that Jews and Arabs work together...its impossible that they love each other...its impossible that they dance together...its impossible that they study together or that they celebrate each others rituals its not possible and so I think that the viral impact is very strong because the prejudices that this cant be are very strong.⁶⁹”

Also alluded to in this interview and others is the potential “spread effect” of these encounters as an increment of change. The uniqueness of these encounters and the

⁶⁹ Interview, April 21, 2009

unlikely networks they create in some cases cause a positive shift in people who just see the encounter. For the Big Hug on Jerusalem this can be people passing by who are positively impacted by the event, or for others reading an article about the Sulha encounter and learning that a well known Orthodox Rabbi and leader of a settlement joined “hippie” youth and other religious leaders for an event filled with music and dialogue. Therefore some indicators that could be utilized to identify increments of positive change for the Big Hug and Sulha encounters could include the successful completion of the encounter with no acts of violence at the event, and capturing the reaction and number of individuals who see, hear, or read about the encounters and were positively impacted.

Another indicator of incremental change could be the number and nature of new relationships and networks developed through the encounters, and, if steps were taken to include an action component, the nature of those actions, whether they create additional new networks and relationships, have “spread effect” potential, as well as the concrete conclusion of that action, e.g. successfully obtained a meeting with senior government officials to discuss wider participation in election monitoring to increase transparency and reduce the potential for manipulating votes.

Some of the above indicators are also relevant for the Fez Colloquium. New networks are built in the Fez Encounter and should be quantified as well as examine the nature of those networks. The Fez Encounter includes many of senior government officials from various countries who have the potential to affect political change in a significant way due to their positions in society. A simple dialogue on climate change

could turn into a coalition of powerful business and government leaders joining together through their network to take action steps to address climate change issues. The “spread affect” also has potential in the Fez Colloquium due to the fact that the event is being hosted in a Muslim country. Interviewees indicated that this is extremely significant and has a profound affect on shaping what the event means and symbolizes. The Fez encounter has the most potential to result in increments of positive change at the political level if the networks created are effectively mobilized. Participants in those networks have special access to senior officials to positively affect change at a political level.

Once increments of positive change in dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters are identified, consideration must be given to the bigger picture to decipher whether after adding up all of the increments of change, the encounter has had a significant impact on the macro level, and further to examine over time what those increments mean several years later. Is successfully hosting a dialogue event in a conflict zone still a good indicator of positive change several years later? Does this indicator mean there is a positive shift and level of resilience in the populace because despite violence, they continue to meet together every year? If you add up all of the new lasting relationships and networks up over time, is the percentage of the populace dedicated to peace increased significantly? Is there a potential that after enough time there will be a tipping point due to the spread affect of encounters and widening networks to significantly shift the conflict and/or political situation? By examining encounters through an incremental change framework, questions of impact may be answered.

Funding: A Curse or a Blessing?

One of the most important elements of each context that should be considered when examining encounters is the context of funding. For example, is the encounter underfunded, limiting its potential? How does funding with “strings attached” affect encounters? For most dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters two extremes color the encounters experience: either encounters do not have enough funding, or, if they have funding, it comes with “strings attached” and colors the encounter in a negative way.

Interviewees noted that the impact of encounters lacking funding is limited:

“There is no money...the deeper issues of peacebuilding are that the war is being fed by trillions of dollars and many states have an active role in promoting the conflict and then you have the peace builders who are really orphans particularly the religious peacebuilders because religious and spiritual peacebuilders have no basis of support and that’s the real reason because there certainly would be a lot of militant rabbis on both sides and militant imams who would not want to come and some for very pious reasons they just don’t mix in those kind of environments and others for more militant nationalist reasons or notions of not normalizing so this (the religious leaders involved in peacebuilding) is a minority, but it could be 10 times bigger...absolutely I can see for the five imams that have participated there would be 50 if there were a sufficient level of outreach and engagement and making it easier for them to come and all the facilities that would happen I know

there is just at least five to ten fold that would be there if there was the infrastructure to deal with everything.⁷⁰”

Interviewees who noted the negative effects of limited funding see the potential of networks and the “spread effect” as being negatively impacted and ultimately stifled when there are not enough resources to support activities. At the same time, some interviewees suggested that a lack of funding also means that encounters are not bound by political or other interests that sometimes come attached with funding.

In the case where encounters are funded well, some encounters face a different problem when they feel their funding comes with “strings attached” that can dictate what issues are and are not included in dialogues, who serves in leadership or speaking roles, and who is and is not invited:

“Everything is glorious, but pragmatically you have to get down in the dirt with some people who are against what you believe in. And that's the problem with these global spiritual relationships... There's no way to be a purist in any of this. No way. How honest and pure can something be? On the other hand without that (funding) how could you ever bring these people together?⁷¹”

These challenges are not necessarily unique to dialogue-by-experience encounters, but do significantly color the experience and ability of each encounter to positively affect and create change and therefore worth pointing out the negative ripple affect of funding issues on the ability to mobilize the unique networks built in dialogue-by-experience encounters and the “spread effect.”

⁷⁰ Interview, April 21, 2009

⁷¹ Interview, May 26, 2009

Chapter VIII

Conclusion

The evidence, while not conclusive, strongly suggests that dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters provide unique opportunities for peacebuilding and conflict resolution that traditional IFD dialogue lacks. They provide a framework and space for a diverse pool of people to participate, including women, youth, and minorities often closed out of traditional IFD efforts. Additionally they create unique opportunities for individual transformation through unusual contact, organized with the use of symbol, gesture, and ritual, that has the ability to transcend words and foster meaning making. The contact provides openings for new multi-faceted networks and relationships to develop that seem to continue to grow and last despite violence.

This research indicates that there is some positive impact as a result of dialogue-by-experience encounters, and that to date, mismatched metric systems have often failed to identify those increments of positive change. The potential for positive impact is expansive through the unique hybrid networks created and opportunities for the “spread effect.” This potential remains understudied and warrants further in-depth attention. A more expansive study to look at questions of impact is needed to fully understand dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters and their contribution to peacebuilding and conflict resolution. The expansive study should include:

- On-the-ground interviews with participants during encounters. These interviews should focus on the effect of the encounter on participants during and post-encounter;
- Documentation of new relationships and networks formed and the nature of those networks and relationships (are they senior officials? Activists? Youth?);
- Monitoring of the relationships and networks to follow whether individuals, groups, or the entire network mobilize around concrete action items and the result of those actions;
- And an examination of the “spread effect” to see if news or ideas discussed in the encounter are “spread” through participants, the media, or coincidence (participants walking by who are impacted by the encounter.)

Through examining these four areas, the field of conflict resolution can begin to understand the nature of impact these encounters have at a deeper level rather than shrugging them off as “hippie” events lacking substance and impact.

Criticism of dialogue-by-experience IFD encounters, especially regarding their apolitical framework, is worth noting and considering. The wealth of resources the encounters have in the way of networks provides them with the opportunity to keep their initial encounters apolitical, and yet take their efforts a step further towards concrete action. Addressing this criticism will increase the ability for encounters to have wide spread and long-term impact.

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