

# How to Cure a Deficiency of Empathy During Conflict

by [Mohammed Dajani \(/experts/mohammed-dajani\)](/experts/mohammed-dajani)

Mar 3, 2016

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/kyf-ymkn-maljt-nqs-altatf-fy-zl-alsra\)](/ar/policy-analysis/kyf-ymkn-maljt-nqs-altatf-fy-zl-alsra)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mohammed Dajani \(/experts/mohammed-dajani\)](/experts/mohammed-dajani)

Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi is the former Weston Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and is Director of the Wasatia Academic Institute in Jerusalem.



Articles & Testimony

**M**arch 3, 2016

As a professor of politics, I see violent extremism as a disease, and those infected with it suffer from what I call ‘empathy deficiency.’ Violent extremists in Palestine and Israel are infected with this disease; they look at their opponents and see ghosts ready to be eliminated rather than the living. The effect of this disease also impacts the general community, whose members are unaware and fail to understand the valuable effects of empathy on the reconciliation process.

When a moderate Israeli becomes aware that the Charter of Hamas, a defacto governing body of the Gaza Strip, calls for the killing of all Jews, then his feelings of empathy for the other drop dramatically. The charter states, “Israel will rise and will remain erect until Islam eliminates it as it had eliminated its predecessors.” And contradicting the Quranic text, it continues, “Hamas has been looking forward to implementing Allah’s promise, whatever time it might take. The prophet, prayer and peace be upon him, said: ‘The (Judgment) time will not come until Muslims will fight the Jews (and kill them); until the Jews hide behind rocks and trees, which will cry: ‘O Muslim! There is a Jew hiding behind me, come on and kill him!’” Statements of a similar nature by Fatah leaders closes the circle, potentially dropping the empathy of an Israeli moderate to zero. This call for a new Holocaust is a vivid reminder of a horrible past.

On the other side, the same process is taking place. Moderate Palestinians listening to Israeli political and religious leaders, who one after the other assert that there is no such thing as a Palestinian people and that there will never be a Palestinian state, will also have their empathy for the other side drop precipitously. In this dangerous cycle, a Palestinian student trip to Auschwitz to learn about the Holocaust becomes treason to the cause of liberation and an act of collaboration with Palestinians’ mortal enemy.

These feelings are encouraged when an Israeli lawmaker in the Israeli Knesset states that, “There was no such thing as a Palestinian people, since Arabic doesn’t have the consonant ‘P’.” While Aristotle would have been amused by the flawed logic of the argument, I was stuck on the premise of the argument that “there was no such thing as a Palestinian people.” This argument is not new. It has its roots in Zangwill’s mantra of “land without people for people

without land.” Golda Meir, among other Jewish leaders made similar remarks. But many had hoped this issue of non-recognition had been resolved by the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accord, where each party to the conflict acknowledged the existence of the other and pledged not to seek extermination of the other. The lawmaker's statement raises the question: why do we get agitated when others deny our state, our existence, our national identity, and our historic calamities when we give ourselves the right to deny their state, their existence, their national identity, and their historic calamities?

When one is void of empathy, it is difficult to understand how hostile and even evil one look from the other side. When the Arabs used to deny the existence of Israel and would refer to it as the ‘Zionist entity,’ crossing its name from their maps and refusing to use its name in their political discourse, these actions widened the gap for reconciliation and peace between both enemies. Similarly, denial that Palestine exists amounts to denying that the Palestinian people exist, similarly hurtful to Palestinians themselves. But both people do exist and are full of life and humanity. Neither are phantoms or ghosts but human beings, with similar hopes and dreams for themselves and their nations. Morality and humanity allows one to look at the other and see these traits. When one has neither, the image of phantoms and ghosts reappears.

While political, religious, and economic factors have received much attention to account for what divides Palestinians and Israelis into two warring camps, it is remarkable that the breakdown of the ability for one to empathize with the other has failed to receive similarly noticeable attention.

People’s response to ‘collective persuasion’—when people are convinced to do things that are perceived to be good for themselves and for society— the resulting actions are usually friendly. Collective persuasion has been used to implement the ideas of wearing seatbelts, stopping smoking, keeping the streets clean, and giving to charity. However, the same social pressure makes any negative reaction to those attempting to persuade a society to accept and tolerate hard ideas, including those of violence and exclusion, are often perceived unpatriotic and are unpopular on the collective level. This is especially true for Palestinians and Israelis when dealing with taboo topics. Taboo breakers on complex and sensitive issues such as Palestinians cooperating with Israelis on security matters to prevent anti-Israeli terrorism or Palestinians including Holocaust education in their educational curriculum become emotionally charged betrayals of the state. Similarly, for Israelis, criticizing Israeli policies, calling for an end to the occupation, or disapproving the ban on Nakba education have polarizing issues attributed to Jew-haters and anti-Semites.

This then raises another question: How can we deal with this important aspect of the conflict? Will the ability to show empathy for the other and to identify with the suffering of the other help in resolving this problem and if so, to what extent?

Generally speaking, empathy centers about one’s feelings for the other. One can empathize with his friend, neighbour, colleague, or even a stranger. But it is much more difficult to feel empathy with one’s own enemy.

Thus the visits of thirty Israeli students to a Palestinian refugee camp and of twenty seven Palestinian students to Auschwitz in March 2014 aimed to fill this gap by finding a way to build it back up. As far as the Palestinians are concerned, it aimed at helping them understand how the psyches of their enemy or partner in peace have been swayed by a long history of suffering and persecution of anti-Semitism culminating in the Holocaust.

This is accomplished by having each become aware of the feelings of victimhood. The aim is to have them see the inhuman atrocities inflicted on innocent people during a tragic episode of their history. It intended to have them live the experience to study if it makes them feel as if what had happened concerns them personally, and if not, why not. They did not necessarily have to feel the same feelings of the victims but to feel as if the suffering and pain is their own.

The whole idea of empathy in this specific case is to understand the Holocaust from the Jewish and human perspectives; to have Palestinians put themselves in the shoes of the victims whether Jews or non-Jews in order to be aware of what they felt. Empathy would heighten the tendency for re-conciliatory feelings. As a result of the conflict, Palestinian and Israeli socialization process tends to mold both people into becoming more nationalistic and anti-other rather than humanistic and empathetic. That is why both Israeli and Palestinian students were concerned about public reaction to their engagement and did not want their people to mistake the empathy they felt with the suffering of the other with with consenting to the present political claims of the other.

Both went on this educational journey to learn and to seek knowledge and in doing so to become better persons equipped with their own personal experiences. The painful portrait of the Holocaust Nakba caused both of them much distress and sorrow whether they wanted to express it or depress it.

The empathy gesture by the Palestinian students was well received by Jews and the emotions expressed by Palestinians students did influence positively those Jews who learnt about it. The fierce uproar that greeted the Palestinian professor and his students upon their return from Auschwitz showed that though our empathy is innate much is instilled in us by our environment and our political culture.

While the Jews move on away from the Holocaust though keeping the memories alive, the Palestinians are still blighted by the occupation. Restriction of movement, confiscation of land, denial of human rights, the expanding settlements, the imprisonments, the unemployment and the despair, misery, and poverty that accompany all that are daily reminders of their Nakba.

Thus Palestinians and Israelis would not necessarily display equal amounts of empathy when learning about the suffering of one another since the magnitude of the Holocaust is incomparable to the Nakba. Also, while the perpetrators of the Holocaust were not Palestinians, the perpetrators of the Nakba were Jews. When both read about the suffering of other people such as in Rwanda or Cambodia or Sri Lanka — people with whom they were not in direct conflict — they may show empathy more than they do each other. Some even may feel indifference because of a tendency for the need to monopolize victimhood.

The Israeli resistance to Palestinian commemoration of the 1948 Nakba was forceful enough to trump national law forbidding it. The Palestinian resistance to acknowledgement of the Holocaust was forceful enough to pressure the resignation of the Palestinian professor from his academic and administrative posts at his university.

In his theory on empathy, Emile Bruneau explains this: “When considering an enemy, the mind generates an “empathy gap.” It mutes the empathy signal, and that muting prevents us from putting ourselves in the perceived enemy’s shoes.” He argues that even the most deeply empathetic people could mute their empathy signals under the right circumstances and so it is difficult to determine what role empathy plays in group conflicts. Increasing empathy might be great at improving pro-social behavior among individuals, but if a program succeeded in boosting an individual’s empathy for his or her own group, he reasoned, it might actually increase hostility toward the enemy.

Empathizing across groups is much more difficult than that with individuals and empathizing across two national groups in midst of a violent conflict is even much more harder than across two ethnic groups in peaceful coexistence. However, for conflict resolution and peace to materialize, empathy is an essential ingredient to the promotion of reconciliation to change the feelings of both people from hatred and enmity to compassion and understanding. Some peace-building measures that would be potentially beneficial are people to people activities as well as conducting training workshops on critical thinking, moderation, reconciliation, conflict resolution, tolerance, empathy, and peace and then applying the skills acquired in the field. Increasing empathy is a key goal of conflict-resolution programs.

Some may argue this is easier said than done but with persistence, goodwill, and determination it can be done. In

Ireland and South Africa, peace-building initiatives were not always successful but eventually, in Ireland a peace agreement was signed and South Africa witnessed the end of apartheid. Reasonable people brought themselves to consider the opposing side's perspective, and as a result could muster empathy and compassion for their suffering paving the way for reconciliation and peace. It's what the students would do with that information they learnt in the concentration and refugee camps that determines to what extent empathy may play a role in reconciliation. Here, as in other reconciled conflict areas such as Ireland, reasonable people could bring themselves to consider the opposing side's perspective, and as a result could muster compassion for their suffering. Building trust and empathy between Israelis and Palestinians may not be enough to achieve peace but at least it will open the channels of dialogue and reconciliation paving the way for peace and prosperity.

*Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi, Weston Fellow at The Washington Institute, founded the Wasatia movement of moderate Islam and is director of the doctoral program in ethics, reconciliation, and moderation at the Wasatia Academic Institute in Jerusalem. This item was originally published on [the Fikra Forum website](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8778&lang=en#.VtnkvfkrLIU) (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=8778&lang=en#.VtnkvfkrLIU>). ❖*

Fikra Forum

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

♦  
Sana Quadri,  
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)