

ENRON FALLOUT

THE LURE OF CORPORATE BOARDS

WOMEN AT WAR

JANUARY 19, 2002 NUMBER 3

National Journal

THE WEEKLY
ON POLITICS AND
GOVERNMENT



The conventional wisdom is that Congress will be partisan and unproductive. And sometimes the conventional wisdom is right.

■ A SPECIAL REPORT

Congress 2002: Bad Vibrations

■ JEWS AND PALESTINIANS BEGIN TO TALK, IN AMERICA

RELIGION & POLITICS

BY MARTIN DAVIS

Audrey Galex is a Jewish storyteller from Atlanta who loves to spin a good yarn, or hear one. But shortly after the latest *intifada* began in September 2000, a Palestinian friend of hers, a woman who supports the establishment of a Palestinian state, told Galex a tale that was hard for her to sit through. It was the story of her friend's trip to the Lebanese town her family emigrated from, and her visit to a cemetery filled with the bodies of local fighters and Palestinian boys killed over the years in cross-border raids by Israeli soldiers.

Upon finishing, Galex's friend looked across the kitchen table at her and said, "I hate you."

The words stung Galex, but because they came from her friend, she said she "really began to listen for the first time to the other side of the story." And thus one small interfaith dialogue was born.

In fact, outside the Beltway and across the country since September 11, American Jewish and Palestinian grassroots groups have spent more time listening than shouting at each other, and new dialogues are emerging.

Most of the media in the United States, however, have told few such stories about Jewish-Palestinian dialogues beginning. Instead, they've drawn attention mostly to those that have faltered. In major cities sporting relatively high concentrations of both Jews and Muslims—Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington—interfaith dialogues did appear to fall on hard times after the attacks.

In Los Angeles, for example, Jews and Muslims exchanged sharp public criticisms following the September 11 attacks. The Southern California office of the Council on American-Muslim Relations chastised the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a pro-Israeli organization, for posting a picture on its Web site of Palestinians celebrating the World Trade Center attacks. And Jewish leaders asked that Salam Al-Marayati, director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, permanently remove himself from the L.A. Jewish-Muslim dialogue after he suggested on a radio show that Israelis might have been responsible for the attacks on the trade center.



TERRY SHAPIRO

BUILDING BRIDGES FOR PEACE: This Colorado program brings together young Israeli and Palestinian women to work on conflict resolution and leadership skills.

Elsewhere, public discussions between Jews and Palestinians in America these past four months have often been strained. Disagreements that in pre-9/11 days would have been heated but fairly innocuous, over issues such as the relative numbers of Muslims and Jews living in America, have become political wars playing out on the front pages of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. These arguments between the two communities have been especially pronounced in Washington, where advocacy groups have spent a great deal of their time publicly attacking one another.

But many people long involved in Jewish-Palestinian dialogue in the United States say that the events of September 11 have, on some levels, made it possible for Jews and Palestinians here to work more closely together. Harold Kirtz, who chairs the Community Relations Committee of the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta, is in

the early stages of developing discussions with Atlanta-area Muslims. His group has "been talking about the need to have more cooperation among the communities," he said. But 9/11, he continued, showed how important it was to move from talking about doing it, to actually doing it.

Efforts have also intensified in Chicago, according to Sabri Samirah, who is president of the United Muslim Americans Association, an Illinois-based advocacy group. In recent months, he has been involved with several dialogues with Jewish groups.

Len Traubman, a leading voice in Jewish-Palestinian dialogue, who with his wife, Libby, works out of San Mateo, Calif., identifies eight interfaith dialogue groups in the San Francisco area, and he notes that five new ones have cropped up in San Diego. Joannah Ginsburg, a friend of the Traubmans who works for the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Philadelphia, reports that the calls to start dialogues are coming so quickly that she can't keep pace.

Samirah finds this renewed energy encouraging, but he acknowledges that even the urgency Jews and Muslims feel to get along better hasn't been enough to break through their long-standing problems. "We have different opinions," Samirah says. "The most important [for Muslims] is our struggle in Palestine."

Palestine. Whether Muslims are recent immigrants or longtime American residents, progressive or traditional, liberal or conservative, most agree that if Muslims and Jews are to get along in the long run, the conflict in Palestine must be resolved. And increasingly, Jews and Muslims are betting that America offers the best chance for the two groups to reconcile their differences. That's partly because in this country, they share a common set of problems unrelated to the Palestinian issue—both are religious minorities living in mostly Christian America.

Reuven Firestone, who was heavily involved in Jewish-Muslim dialogues before moving from Boston to Los Angeles to teach at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, argues that in the Middle East, the violence between Israelis and Palestinians

has reached a level that makes it nearly impossible for them to talk openly with one another. But in the United States, he says, Jews and Muslims share a sense of being "excluded ... because they are not Christians," and this brings them to the same table in spite of the Palestinian problem.

When it comes to Palestine, Kirtz says, "we may have to agree to disagree." But, he continues, "there are enough other issues—such as health care, immigrant rights, anti-discrimination laws, civil rights—to enable us to come together and talk openly." That doesn't mean, however, that American Muslims can, or want to, keep the Palestinian question off the table forever, even here. But for now, at least the two sides are talking. And that's significant, because their ability to talk here may actually be the spark that helps move the Mideast peace process along.

Gordon Newby teaches in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at Emory University in Atlanta. He believes that the dialogue here between Palestinians

and Jews has a chance to help jump-start Jewish-Muslim talks in the Middle East. American Judaism, he notes, has long had a significant impact on Jewish religious practice in the Middle East. Both reform and conservative Judaism were American-born—each an attempt to make Judaism applicable and workable in the New World—and both were exported back to the Middle East. "I point this out," he says, "because I feel that as Muslim movements develop in America and rub up against other religious traditions, that Islam is going to develop a similar, American variety of Islam." And this American variety of Islam, Newby feels, could aid the Mideast Jewish-Muslim talks by giving the two groups a new way of talking with one another.

Samirah would probably disagree with Newby that Islam will develop an "American" variety, or even needs to. But he does recognize that the United States plays a central role in resolving the Palestinian question. "Unless the U.S. gets involved," he says, "we will not see peace." Further, he believes that dialogues between American Jews and Muslims are crucial because these two groups can bring the American principles of freedom and equality for all peoples to the debate.

The notion that Jewish-Muslim dialogues here could help ease the war in the Middle East strikes others as perhaps Pollyannaish. Sarah Eltantawi, communications director in the Washington office of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, does not think what happens here will have any impact on the peace process. "There's no connection between [American Jewish-Muslim] dialogue and the Middle East peace process." But when asked what must



REUTERS/GARY HERSHORN

WASHINGTON, 1993: The signing of the Israeli-Palestinian peace accord would not have come about without years of private, unofficial dialogues between Jews and Muslims.

occur to get the peace process moving, Eltantawi states, "We need to get to know each other as human beings."

It is just this sort of change that Newby is talking about. American Jews and Muslims working here will not resolve the Palestinian question, but it's possible that if the two groups can see human qualities in one another here, they can transport that knowledge back to the Middle East and apply the same patterns to start discussions there.

"Laws and treaties are the last step in the peace process," according to Traubman, in California. The first step, he continues, is to get Muslims and Jews to the point that they see each other as humans, so that each wants the best for the other. Then, and only then, Traubman says, will a peace agreement be brokered. The key to arriving at this stage is to sustain the dialogue, and that "takes much longer than people imagine," Traubman said.

Melodye Feldman is executive director

of Seeking Common Ground in Denver, Colo., a group that has been bringing together Jews and Palestinians. SCG's flagship program, Building Bridges for Peace, has since 1994 been bringing young women from the Middle East to Denver for three weeks of work in conflict resolution, leadership skills, and just getting to know one another as people. "If Muslim-Jewish groups in the U.S. can find some common ground, they may be able to influence Middle Eastern affairs. But I don't know that dialogue groups are ready to tackle that," she says. "These groups are young" in terms of their development.

Traubman is nevertheless confident that the members of these dialogue groups will one day have an impact. Once group members reach a level of comfort with one another, they begin to get involved in the democratic process, he says. And that's when political change comes about. At that point, political leaders have people who are mentally and emotionally ready to take their dialogues out of the personal realm and put them into the political world.

The language and ideas expressed by Traubman may sound simplistic and somewhat New Agey. But they are influenced by and rest upon the insights of a seasoned Middle East peace broker—Harold Saunders, director of international affairs at the Kettering Foundation and a former assistant secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, who was key in negotiating several agreements between Israel and the Palestinians. Saunders has been working for years, in several areas of the world, on these kinds of people-to-people dialogues. He told *National Journal* that they play an important role in preparing the ground for peace. "If there hadn't been 20 years of unofficial dialogues between Israelis and Palestinians," Saunders said, "there would not have been a handshake between Arafat and Rabin in 1993."

Traubman, echoing Saunders, recalled something the diplomat told him in July of 1991: "There are some things only governments can do, such as negotiating binding agreements," Saunders said. "But there are some things that only citizens outside government can do, such as changing human relationships." ■