

Canada's New Middle East Peace Footprint

Lisa Van Dusen

Notwithstanding recent observations to the contrary, the Middle East Peace Process is complicated. Indeed, it has been every unprintable term for complicated that you can think of, in English, Hebrew or Arabic. Meanwhile, a program funded largely by Canada has been overcoming obstacles, solving problems and building interpersonal and organizational peace between Israelis and Palestinians—with Jordanian collaboration—in storefront social work centres across the region and in classrooms at McGill University.

For at least half a century, Canada's role in the Middle East has seemed less significant than its positions on the Middle East. Lester Pearson's diplomatic tour de force in resolving the 1956 Suez Crisis and 1957 Nobel Peace Prize for the effort represented the apex of Canadian influence in the region. It consummated Canada's relationship with a young United Nations, launched the country's modern identity as both a peacemaker and peacekeeper and gave it credibility in a volatile neighbourhood long after Pearson's passing.

Canadian governments since then have generally defined the country's interests in the region in terms of development assistance, support both for Israel and for a two-state solution to its conflict with the Palestinians (until the Harper government made unconditional support for Israel a showpiece of both its foreign and domestic policy). Canada is not the major power and party-of-the-third-part United States, not a Quartet member like Russia, not a member of the Eu-

ropean Union with its significant funder footprint and not a Scandinavian middleman like Norway. Canada's notable contribution has been as chair of the Refugee Working Group established in Moscow in 1992 (for peace process geeks...between Madrid and Oslo), a role still appreciated by Palestinians and the peace establishment on both sides.

In diplomatic terms, the Trudeau government has returned to Ottawa's conventional balance in the region, if only by not making a point of taking sides beyond Canada's longstanding support for a two-state solution and support for Israel's right to "to live in peace and security with its neighbours" in the language of Global Affairs, known in blunter U.S. terms as "Israel's right to defend itself." But Justin Trudeau's post-election assertion that "Canada is back" was interpreted by many as an indication that—along with a return to multilateralism, globalism, assiduous diplomacy and respect for the United Nations, notwithstand-

ing its flaws—new possibilities could be entertained for a more balanced, constructive role in the Middle East (referring, for the purposes of this article, to Israel and the Palestinian Territories as opposed to the Greater Middle East including Syria, Iraq and Canada's military deployments to both, which is a separate discussion).

After the official Middle East Peace Process launched by the United States and Russia in Madrid in 1991, the tantalizingly hopeful Oslo years and ultimate prematurity of every subsequent re-launch photo-op, two-staters on both sides have been left supremely skeptical of progress, at least as long as Benjamin Netanyahu, who seems uniquely convinced of the sustainability of the status quo, is prime minister of Israel. The insertion of embattled President Donald Trump into an already volatile dynamic has done nothing, at least so far, to change that. But as diplomatic efforts to end the bilateral conflict have waxed and waned in the past two decades, Canada has been funding a program that has established a network of professionals and volunteers who are proving that peaceful coexistence isn't as elusive as the political intractability would have you think.

The McGill University-based International Community Action Network (ICAN), formerly The McGill Middle East Program in Civil Society and Peace Building, trains Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian fellows in a rights-based community practice social work MSW year at McGill followed by a year spent in one of 11 storefront centres in the region. Rights-based community practice social work combines



Palestinian poet and activist, ICAN graduate and founder of the ICAN An-Najah Community Service Center Sami Al-Kilani (left) and ICAN founder Jim Torczyner (right) in the program's McGill offices. *ICAN Photo*

legal aid and social justice by empowering underserved communities to access their rights and solve their legal, social and economic problems. ICAN has built a successful network of nine academic and civil society partners—from Ben Gurion and an-Najah universities to the Jordan Hashemite Fund (JOHUD) to Shatil—and of hundreds of committed staff, volunteers and clients on the ground in the region who advance the Canadian values of democracy, human rights and inclusion while alleviating economic inequality and building resilience in the poorest neighbourhoods of the Middle East.

ICAN founder Jim Torczyner, the New York-raised son of Holocaust survivors, ended up teaching in the McGill School of Social Work after graduating from Berkeley in the 70s.

He started Project Genesis, a rights-based community practice social work program serving the low-income residents of Côte-des-Neiges. Torczyner, who had worked in Israel as a social worker and activist in his youth, felt increasingly compelled to harness the principles of rights-based community practice social work as a means of building peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Convincing institutions in the region to buy into the concept was, in itself, a peace-building exercise. “When people have been hating each other for that long, they don’t just jump into bed,” Torczyner recalls. “When we started the program, we had to make sure there was something in it for everyone that was powerful enough to transcend the entrenched paradigm of suspicion and mistrust with enlightened self-interest and tangible collective benefit.” That the program

was Canada-funded (with an initial grant of just \$150,000 for the first class of four fellows) and McGill-based was key. “The fact that we were flying a Canadian flag gave everyone a safe space in which to embrace both our collaboration and our tensions, which were an inevitable part of the process,” says Torczyner. Bedouin and women’s rights activist and program graduate Amal el-Sana Alh-jooj has taken over from Torczyner as executive director of the program, which now assists more than 120,000 individuals a year.

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Full disclosure: I worked as a communications consultant for the program more than a decade ago because, having written frequently about the peace process as a columnist in Washington, I fell for the concept instantly. While working for ICAN, I met Israeli and Palestinian fellows who’d never known anyone from the “other side” at home but became part of each other’s lives in classrooms and around dinner tables in sub-zero Montreal. I met volunteer architects rebuilding homes in Nablus, Israeli women in West Jerusalem organizing their own food cooperatives and newly divorced mothers in Amman learning computer skills. From the grassroots volunteers to the fellows to the university presidents whose involvement was crucial to the inception and survival of the program (including An-Najah President Rami Hamdallah, now Palestinian prime minister), the commitment and moral consis-



The ICAN Mobile Rights Centre now serves over 8 cities around Nablus in the West Bank including Tulkarem, Jenin, and Qalqilia. ICAN Photo

tency of everyone associated with it were breathtaking. I still provide occasional *pro bono* communications advice when asked.

Palestinian poet and member of the 1991 Madrid negotiating delegation Sami Al-Kilani was one of the first Palestinian fellows in the program and founded the Nablus centre in 1999. Al-Kilani spent five years in Israeli prisons and three years under “town arrest” between 1977 and 1986. After being acquitted on charges of “poetic incitement”, Al-Kilani refused to stop writing and was jailed repeatedly for his defiance. In prison, he became a passionate proponent of nonviolent resistance, learning Hebrew and preaching the inevitability of a two-state solution to his interrogators. Al-Kilani, who was adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience, is now a visiting professor in the School of Social Work at McGill. He recalls how the program’s unique combina-

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tion of results on the ground and collaboration across the Israeli-Palestinian divide perfectly embodied his beliefs. “I was always looking for ways to turn my suffering and pain into something constructive,” he said recently in a joint *Policy* interview with Torczyner at ICAN’s Mc-

Gill offices. “It was important for me to show that you don’t need to stay a captive and prisoner of your pain and turn it into hatred and desire for revenge—to continue the cycle of action and reaction...the relationship between occupied and occupier damages both sides.”

In the 20 years since its inception, the Canadian government has invested \$15 million in the program through CIDA, the Quebec government has invested \$2 million and \$13 million has come from private donors, foundations and other governments, the total of which has generated, according to ICAN, \$75 million in direct benefits to the region. Merav Moshe Grodofsky, a McGill PhD graduate who is now Chair of the School of Social Work at Sapir College in Israel, wrote from Sderot, “The values that underpin our work are Canadian values reflected in our daily struggle to ensure basic human rights, to advance relationships between multicultural communities and to promote conflict resolution and peace building through the preservation of human dignity and opportunities for human development.” In 2016, ICAN graduated its first Syrian fellow, Adnan Al-Mahied—a democracy activist who fled Syria on foot through ISIS territory to get to Istanbul and on to McGill. The program is now proposing a five-year vision for the region that includes expansion into post-conflict Syria, a country with no history of social work but where the pro-active, conflict-seasoned brand of the profession practiced by ICAN would likely deliver disproportionate results. Which seems like the perfect instrument of Canadian foreign policy in the region. **P**

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