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Israelis and Palestinians: Does Bringing Them Together Keep Them Apart?

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In the last year, decisions have been made by United States Government (U.S.G.) officials within the Trump Administration to withdraw support from programs providing aid to various groups of Palestinian civilians. Within the context of initiatives such as recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, planning to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, re-directing \$200 million set aside for Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza, ending funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency which supports many services for Palestinian civilians, re-directing \$25 million intended for East Jerusalem hospitals serving mainly Palestinians, and seriously considering the reduction of the number of people formally identified as Palestinian refugees by where they are born and live, is the re-direction of funding from the Conflict Management and Mitigation Program. This program is intended to promote tolerance and understanding among Israelis and Palestinians. In turn, tolerance and understanding is assumed to be induced through working on issues of common concern and cross-border projects such as those involving almond farming, as well as supporting soccer games for girls, workshops, home visits, community service activities, and religious holiday events (1).

Regardless of what one might think about the political implications of the above, there's a scientific question as well, does bringing people together *bring* them together or keep them apart? There are studies based on something called realistic group conflict theory (RGCT) suggesting the former hypothesis. RGCT explains how intergroup hostility arises as a result of conflicting goals and competition over limited resources, with accompanying feelings of prejudice and discrimination towards the outgroup. Feelings of resentment arise especially when the competition is viewed as zero-sum with only one group possible as the winner. According to RGCT, positive relations between or among groups can only be created or restored if interaction and, then, cooperation occurs towards some superordinate goal (2). This theoretical orientation has been supported with *de novo* and pre-existing groups wherein conflict is first engendered or pre-existing (3).

However, appraising contemporary research on the effect of adversaries increasing even the most well-intentioned, reciprocal contact yields many complexities. Initiatives based on variants of RGCT can succeed or even make matters worse based on factors such as whether different group identities are based on religion, ethnicity, socio-economic class. Or some real or imagined stigma; how long the conflict has endured as well as the import of what's involved; how specific, cooperative behaviors are interpreted; what goals, if any, are truly desired and superordinate; dynamics within each group; and the larger socio-cultural, economic, and historical context (4). Unfortunately, the notion that one can come up with a prescriptive plan of cooperation among adversaries with a high probability of reducing conflict is but a notion—a notion with the definition of an impulse or desire, especially one of a whimsical kind.

So, back to Israelis, Palestinians, and Trump Administration initiatives. While there are many clear political positions on the initiatives' soundness, there is only one clear conclusion from scientific psychology. In the context of an allegedly sure psychological fix, there is no clear way forward. This is a conclusion unsurprising to security, intelligence, and political experts who have long studied the Mideast.

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Abstract/Description: This article identifies psychological complexities when interaction and cooperation among adversaries are presumed to reduce conflict.

Disciplines: Other Psychology, Philosophy, Political Science, Other Political Science, Psychology, Defense and Security Studies, International Relations

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