



The ultra-Orthodox women visit the Rabin Center and look at a wall with graffiti that was done by youth the week after the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin.

Photo credit: Base for Discussion (B4D)

Peacebuilding in practice #1

Influential ultra-Orthodox women are change agents for peace

Interpeace's engagement with ultra-Orthodox women aims to promote the emergence of a new women leadership that is representative of the ultra-Orthodox population in Israel and at the same time committed to dialogue and peace.



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The ultra-Orthodox women visit the Rabin Center and meet with Rabin's daughter, Dalia Rabin, who is pictured fourth from right.

Photo credit: Base for Discussion (B4D)

Peacebuilding in practice #1:

Influential ultra-Orthodox women are change agents for peace

Background

Up until now high-level peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine have lacked broad-based public participation. Without that support, all outcomes from the negotiation table are at much higher risk of failure. Within Israel, there are key sectors of the population that have not been involved in peace initiatives, but who have an influence on the peace process. Most peace initiatives have focused on those in Israel who are already part of the peace camp. If a future accord is to bring lasting peace, it is essential that sidelined groups are brought into the peace process, especially as there will potentially be a referendum on the subject. The talks initiated by United States Secretary of State, John Kerry which have reached a dead-end suffered from the same limitations.

Our work

A different approach: working with key sectors within Israeli society excluded from the peace process

Base for Discussion (B4D) is Interpeace's programme in Israel run in collaboration with the United Nations. B4D engages key sectors of Israeli society who have been excluded from peace efforts but who have a stake in making or breaking peace efforts. The overall aim is to develop the long-term visions of these groups in regards to the peace process. By bringing greater coherence within Israeli society, future peace processes will have a stronger basis and potential for legitimacy and success.

B4D is currently working with the Jewish ultra-Orthodox population, the Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel, and the Russian-speaking community. These three groups, who have been excluded from all past peace processes, make up 56% of the Israeli population.¹ The B4D team is made up exclusively of Israelis who have deep connections within each of these communities and is thus able to engage with them in a way that outsiders cannot. In order to have a greater

influence within these communities, B4D works with the mid-level leadership, who are already in 'mid-rank' positions of social leadership and exercise some influence on the higher leadership, but at the same time also have a direct influence on the grassroots. Additionally, the mid-level leadership is most likely to become part of the top leadership in years to come.

In the case of the ultra-Orthodox population, the B4D team has been engaging with: Rabbis, who have a large following, influential social activists, and most recently with a select group of women.

This case study tracks the engagement first with the ultra-Orthodox community and then specifically the work of B4D with the ultra-Orthodox women.

Engaging the ultra-Orthodox community in the development of a vision for peace

B4D has been working with the ultra-Orthodox population since 2005 and supporting this community in the development of its own long-term vision of the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Including the ultra-Orthodox

1. Palestinian-Arabs (20%) + Russians-speaking community (16%) + Traditional Religious Population (20%).



community is vital for reaching a solution to the conflict in the Middle East because religious issues, such as the status of the holy sites, land, cemeteries, and mixed marriages (between Muslims and Jews) are key factors to be addressed in any peace agreement. A large part of the existing mistrust between Israelis and Palestinians stems from fears and beliefs with fundamental religious implications. Defusing mistrust amongst these groups will enhance the possibility of dialogue in the future.

In addition, the ultra-Orthodox community has a deep influence on Israeli society. The tension between the law issued by the state of Israel and the religious laws is demonstrated by the fact that 20 % of the Israeli population gives precedence to religious decrees passed by the Rabbis over national law. Any kind of future peace, if it is to be representative, will have to ultimately include the ultra-Orthodox population.

- 1) B4D is helping this community develop its own vision for the resolution of the conflict.
- 2) This community's education is "an exclusively religious education with almost no exposure to secular subjects or to civic education".²
- 3) Therefore B4D is broadening the participants' knowledge about the conflict available options to settle the conflict.

In order to ensure that the change in this community is systemic and doesn't involve only a handful of individuals, the programme is engaging this community through Shas. Shas is one of the main social and political movements of this community. It has both political power (since it usually plays the king-maker role in government coalitions)³ and a very strong spiritual influence since the community's spiritual leader guides its actions (the late Rabbi Ovadia Yosef used to hold

2. http://works.bepress.com/gila_stopler/12/

3. Shas currently holds 11 seats in the Knesset and exit polls indicate a potential expansion to 17.

**«One of the most important skills honed
was the ability to listen to the narrative of
the “other”»**

Ruth Ben-Chaim

this role).⁴ As part of the engagement and coordination with Shas, all the actions and activities of B4D with this community have Shas' approval.

Engaging women leaders within the ultra-Orthodox community

In this context, B4D engaged a group of Rabbis and social activists in an 18-month educational process that included courses on dialogue and conflict resolution, as well as the history of the region, the peace processes, and other conflicts. As a result of the engagement with the Rabbis and the social activists, the participants requested that their wives and other ultra-Orthodox women could undergo the same transformative and empowering experience. As a response to this request, B4D expanded its work to include the ultra-Orthodox women and in 2012 launched a Master's programme in Conflict Resolution. The engagement with ultra-Orthodox women aims to promote the emergence of a new women leadership that is representative of the ultra-Orthodox population in Israel and at the same time committed to dialogue and peace.

4. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, was the founder of Shas (in 1984 and later on became its spiritual leader, becoming one of the most powerful voices for the Sephardi community (those originating from North Africa and the Middle East). His funeral on 7th October 2013 was the largest funeral to ever take place in Israel: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/jerusalem-closes-down-for-rabbi-ovadia-yosefs-funeral/>.

The ultra-Orthodox tradition puts women in a key position to influence others: they must invest energy in their children and home, but they can also pursue professional and academic careers, if they so wish. Due to the fact that the husband often only receives a stipend from the kollel (advanced Judaic studies institution) to continue studying Torah and does not work, it is widely accepted that the wife becomes the primary breadwinner of the family (61% of ultra-Orthodox women work, as opposed to only 52% of men). Thus, they exercise their influence in their family, in schools (as most of them work in the education sector) and in the workplace.

Most of the participating women have only attended religious schools and were never taught anything about other countries' histories or examples of other conflicts that have been solved. Before the educational programme they had limited knowledge of the geography of the region and the Israeli settlements. Consequently, B4D's educational programme exposed the women to new ideas and viewpoints when they were learning about key issues that relate to the conflict such as the status of Jerusalem, previous peace processes, the history of the region and the Palestinian perspective. In addition, the women acquired negotiation, mediation and conflict resolution skills.



They also met with Palestinians and learned how to influence the different stakeholders in the peace process in meetings with Members of the Knesset and United Nations officials. In short, the 30 ultra-Orthodox women now have the necessary tools to become agents of change.

The work with the ultra-Orthodox women is a result of the following strategies of engagement:

- ***B4D gained trust among the ultra-Orthodox community by engaging them in a long-term process***

It took approximately five years of discrete collaboration with Shas, until the group decided to make it public. This move indicates the level of trust and respect that they have developed for B4D. The overall programme was made public in 2009 when an article was published in the weekend magazine ("Israel this week") of the

daily newspaper "*Israel Hayom*" ("Israel Today").⁵ In this article Shas openly acknowledged the collaboration with B4D, which resulted in a number of requests for access to this community from numerous key organizations, such as UNSCO⁶, SHATIL, the Geneva Initiative, and The Elders. It is based on this trust that the work with the ultra-Orthodox women developed. The project is implemented together with the Jerusalem Haredi College that was established by Adina Bar-Shalom⁷, who is a respected Rabbi, the daughter of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and recipient of one of the most prestigious awards in Israel, the Israel Prize for lifetime achievement for her work in advancing higher education for the ultra-Orthodox women. The Jerusalem Haredi College is a venue where women and men can

5. "Israel Hayom" reaches 255,000 households in Israel (more than 1 million people).

6. UNSCO: United Nations Special Coordinator Office for the Middle East Peace Process.

7. Adina Bar Shalom is the daughter of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Adina Bar-Shalom is widely regarded as an influential figure in Israel.

separately benefit from academic studies in a religious environment.

- ***B4D engaged with influential members of the ultra-Orthodox community***

The 30 female participants in B4D's educational programme were selected by Adina Bar-Shalom and include influential figures from the ultra-Orthodox community such as: Yaffa Deri, who is the manager of a social organization and wife of the leader of Shas, Arie Deri; Mazal Amar, who is the wife of the former chief Rabbi of Israel, Shlomo Ameer; and Zipora Lau who is a social activist and wife of Israel's Ashkenazi⁸ chief Rabbi, David Lau.

Results

The project has transformed 30 influential ultra-Orthodox women into positive change agents for peace. This constitutes a key step for the realization of the overall project objective of promoting the emergence of a new women's leadership, representative of the ultra-Orthodox population in Israel, committed to the language of dialogue and peace and practicing by example.

8. Ashkenazi Jews originate from Central and Eastern Europe.

How did these women become change agents?

A) The women were exposed to the realities on the ground and met with Palestinians

First ever visits to East Jerusalem: 80% of the women who participated in the educational programme live in Jerusalem. None of them however had ever visited East Jerusalem before their involvement in the educational project. The women were exposed to the legal status of the Palestinian residents in East Jerusalem. Given the central role that the status of Jerusalem plays in any solution to the conflict, this visit was a crucial learning experience as many of the women acknowledged and witnessed the complex realities of Jerusalem for the first time. As a participant, Nofar Danan, said: "I've been living in Jerusalem for two decades, yet when Interpeace organized the field trip to East Jerusalem and the Muslim quarter, I discovered a whole new world [...] I realized that one minority, us, the Haredim, can better understand another minority, in this case the Arabs."

First ever meetings with Palestinian women:

During workshops in Nazareth, Belfast, and London the women met for the first time with Palestinian women. They were exposed to their perspectives, hopes and fears. One of the par-



ticipants, Hani Shimoni, the daughter of Adina Bar-Shalom, explained: "In any past meeting with Palestinians and Arabs I did not have the capacity to handle the information. I always left thinking they are wrong and we are of course right. But I suddenly was able to acknowledge that they have a right to exist and that we have to dig deeper and find solutions. I am even able to say the words "two state solution" now, something I couldn't before. Now I understand that there is no other way. Through all the educational courses, the tours we took and the trainings we attended I reached a point in which I could be in the same room and have a true discussion with them [the Palestinian women]."

B) The women were given tools to bring about change

Conflict resolution and mediation tools: As part of B4D's educational programme, the women met with conflict resolution and mediation experts who taught them about skills and techniques used in conflict resolution. They are

now willing to use these tools since "the next generation of children trusts us, and it is our duty to educate people about love and the pursuit of peace," explains Esther Attias, chief educational supervisor and the wife of Knesset Member Ariel Attias.

History lessons: A visit to Northern Ireland taught the women about other conflicts in the world and how agreements were reached and violence was stopped in other conflict situations. By talking to the key actors involved in the Irish peace process they found out what it means to achieve peace. One of the participants, Zipora Lau, mentioned: "We have become ambassadors of peace. We learned during the process and the Northern Ireland tour that the whole peace process has to come from the people, from the bottom up." In addition, experts educated the women in the history of the Middle East including the viewpoint of the Palestinian people.

Knowledge of political institutions in Israel:

«the 30 ultra-Orthodox women change agents play a pivotal role in shaping the young generation which will constitute the majority of Israeli Jews»

The education programme included a visit to the Knesset and meetings with Members of Parliament. This allowed them to learn how the Israeli parliament functions, how their voice can be heard and how they can make a difference. Esther Attias, stated: "We are empowered and feel ready to work on this [on reaching peace] with patience until we get results. Two years ago none of us would have said so with such enthusiasm."

C) The women bring about change

All 30 participants were open and willing to attend all the activities of the educational programme despite the fact that it required them to overcome their fears and prejudices. This is already proof of their commitment to becoming change agents. In addition, the women have already demonstrated their commitment to change through concrete actions:

Influence on Shas' peace policy: This happened during the coalition negotiations between Shas and the Likud parties after the 2013 elections.

1) In 2013 Shas demanded for the first time to become a part of future delegations that will participate in the peace process.

2) This was identified by one media outlet as an

important step in the way to peace: "the sharp turn to the left of the ultra-Orthodox parties is likely to give a significant boost to negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians."⁹ This is a groundbreaking change because, until now, Shas has mostly focused on the allocation of the national budget. Although Shas is not part of the current governing coalition, it remains committed to participating in the peace talks. This change in policy was possible in part thanks to the efforts of two people responsible for the coalition negotiations on behalf of Shas and actively connected to the B4D programme. They are Attorney David Glass¹⁰, "the legal advisor to the Shas party" and Itzik Sudri, an influential member of Shas and responsible for this project with the ultra-Orthodox women¹¹. They briefed the leadership of Shas (including its co-chair, Mr. Aryeh Deri, whose wife was part of the programme) of the capacity of both the Rabbis and the women to become Ambassadors for peace, which enabled Shas to demand its participation in the peace negotiations.

9. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/ultra-orthodox-abandon-israeli-right-wing.html#>

10. Specific mention of Mr. Glass participation in the coalition negotiations: <http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/PM-calls-on-all-factions-to-join-unity-government>

11. "Itzik Sudri, political adviser and former Shas spokesman, serving today as ultra-Orthodox affairs adviser at B4D": <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/ultra-orthodox-abandon-israeli-right-wing.html#>



6.

The ultra-Orthodox women visit the Knesset (Israel's Parliament)

Photo credit: Base for Discussion (B4D)

Influence on their community: Participants have passed on the learning experiences from this project to their colleagues and the broader ultra-Orthodox community. Dganit Fahima, a participant in the process and Director of Haredi youth and sports division of the Jerusalem Municipality told the young people she works with: “We have to live together. I learnt that I am in a position of control. Right now the Arab sections [of Jerusalem] are under our aegis and we have to be knowledgeable about them and distribute the resources equally”. Moreover, Dganit Fahima has requested that the Mayor of Jerusalem establishes a platform for Palestinian women so that the municipality who is responsible for East Jerusalem can interact with them and discuss budget allocations.

Following the completion of the 2-year Master’s programme the 30 women decided that they wanted to become mentors to a new group of students of this Master’s programme. They have

now launched a mentorship programme in which they discuss with new participants how they can bring about change.

Gaining recognition

Media outlets have reflected upon the transformative experience the ultra-Orthodox women have undergone. Notably, *Al-Monitor* published an article called “Israel’s ultra-Orthodox key to peace”¹² which it describes the tour of ultra-Orthodox women to Northern Ireland. The article also contains an interview with Itzik Sudri.

The programme’s work has been further highlighted when Itzik Sudri and Adina Bar-Shalom were invited to the most popular TV talk show in Israel. They spoke about their work within the ultra-Orthodox community, the visit to Northern Ireland and the challenges for peace¹³.

12. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/itzik-sudri-interview-ultra-orthodox-community-peace.html#>

13. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlEadOYzsh8>

Also a written Journal “Ami” published an article titled “Catalyst for Peace: Peace-Makers with Advanced Degrees in Conflict Resolution, Are Becoming Involved in Peacemaking Between Palestinians and Israelis”, by Shira Leibowitz Schmidt. This article contains extensive information on the transformative effect that this educational experience has had on the group of women, with many quotes from the participants, as well as from Itzik Sudri and Zachi Gabay (B4D’s Programme Coordinator). The article highlights the fact that **“the women students carried a heavy load, since many continued to work while pursuing their degree”** and goes on to mention the example of participant Ruth Ben-Chaim who said that **“one of the most important skills honed was the ability to listen to the narrative of the ‘other’ [...] seeing the other side of a story had the effect of making us more moderate. It’s a process. And the trips we took allowed us to meet people with very different approaches from ours.”**

The impact of this initiative has also been recognized by its key donor, the European Union, which conducted a mid-term evaluation mentioning the following: **“The project has definitely contributed to the revisiting of narratives by key communities previously side-lined or ignored in peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes. This undoubtedly contributes to the achievement of the project purpose, which is the development of community-based visions for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, increasing understanding of the complexities of the conflict among key sectors in Israeli society and providing support to existing and potential leaders who can commit to non-violent options.”**

Impact at large

The engagement with the ultra-Orthodox women has not only contributed to changing the agenda of a political party (Shas) in regards to the peace negotiations, but it is strategically positioned to influence the society at large. The demographic weight of the ultra-Orthodox population in Israel is increasing. Therefore, these women have the capacity to influence a key sector of the population, particularly the younger generations, through their roles as mothers, educators and public figures and through their influence in the political sphere. These changes will be reflected in the outcome of the elections and of the peace negotiations.

What is more, this project with the women is a continuity of the previous action with the Rabbin and was an organic development based on the participants’ request. This demonstrates the potential of replicability and multiplication but also the sustainability of the impact in this community.