

Israeli and Palestinian Diasporas in the Netherlands: Their Political Involvement in the Current Israeli- Palestinian Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This explorative research investigated the political involvement of Israeli and Palestinian diasporas in the Netherlands. Furthermore, it was researched whether the Israelis and Palestinians in the Netherlands feel that their collective identity and intergroup contact have an impact on their political involvement. The interviews conducted among eight Israelis and seven Palestinians demonstrated that they were politically involved in mostly informal, but also formal, ways. The collective identity was a motivator for the participants to become politically involved. Additionally, intergroup contact resulted in an improved understanding of the outgroup and, accordingly, a different fulfillment of their political involvement.

Keywords

Israeli-Palestinian conflict, diasporas, political involvement, collective identity, intergroup contact.

INTRODUCTION

May 14, 1948 - David Ben-Gurion declared the State of Israel when Great-Britain gave up its mandate of then-called Palestine. Over the years many wars occurred and - despite several peace attempts - the conflict still endures without a clear prospect of peace in the future. Many international actors are involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict [3]. This research focuses on two semi-international players, namely the Israeli and Palestinian diasporas in the Netherlands. These two diasporas are in this research conceived as Israeli and Palestinian communities dispersed over the Netherlands.

In general, Shain [9] argues that conflict resolution is not just a two-level game between the national and the international domain as Putnam [7] describes it. There is a three-level game going on in the peace-making process where diasporas form a crucial constituent for homeland leaders. Diasporas function as transstate actors working on behalf of their nation in interactions with third-party states and international organizations. However, they cannot merely be seen as part of the domestic constituency. They have their own ideas which are not always congruent with the views and interests of the homeland [9]. Based on the work of Mohamoud [5], remittances to the homeland, lobbying at the government of the host land and membership of Israeli or Palestinian political organizations in the host land will be taken into

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account during the analysis of the political involvement of the Israeli and Palestinian diasporas in the Netherlands. Because of psychological identification and ties with the homeland the conflict involves high stakes for diasporas [9]. Several researchers showed that the collective identity of a 'we' that is treated unjustly and a 'they' that is responsible for this injustice is an essential motivator for people to engage in collective action [4, 11, 12]. Since collective identification is important for people's involvement in collective action it is relevant to consider whether the collective identity changes when Israelis and Palestinians move to the Netherlands.

In addition to the psychological side of diaspora involvement, there is a relevant sociological aspect that can influence the political involvement of diasporas. Because of the strict borders between Israeli and Palestinian areas the opportunity for Israelis and Palestinians to have profound contact is largely missing [10]. Therefore, it is easier to interact with the outgroup when Israelis and Palestinians are abroad. Besides the frequency of intergroup contact, it is relevant to consider the quality of the contact since Barlow and colleagues [2] showed that, in comparison to positive contact, negative contact is a stronger and more consistent predictor of race based attitudes and prejudice. However, the effect of positive intergroup contact should not be underestimated since many studies demonstrated that positive intergroup contact reduces prejudice and can result in an attitude change towards the outgroup [1, 6]. Consequently, it is relevant to investigate whether Israelis and Palestinians perceive an influence of intergroup contact on their political involvement.

The main research question is:

- In which ways are the Israeli and Palestinian diasporas in the Netherlands politically involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

The sub-question of this research is:

- Do Israelis and Palestinians in the Netherlands feel that their collective identity and intergroup contact influence their political involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

This research is scientifically innovative in the way that it incorporates perspectives of both Israelis and Palestinians. This allows a comparison concerning the way they are politically involved in the conflict and the extent to which both groups perceive contact with the other as positive. Furthermore, this research investigated if the participants have the impression that contact with the outgroup has an influence on their political role in the

conflict. Moreover, the perceived importance of collective identification for the political involvement of diasporas is researched. Additionally, this research is relevant for the society since it investigates whether the Israeli and Palestinian diasporas in the Netherlands have the potential to bring about a positive change in the stagnating Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

METHOD

Design

In this research a qualitative approach was employed. There is not yet much research conducted regarding the political involvement of both Israeli and Palestinian diasporas in the Netherlands, the results of their intergroup contact and the influence of collective identification on the political involvement of diasporas. However, there is some research done on the involvement of other diasporas in conflict situations and on the Israeli and Palestinian diasporas separately in other countries. Additionally, many studies found positive consequences of intergroup contact on prejudice and the importance of collective identification for engagement in collective action. Therefore, the Grounded Theory approach with sensitizing concepts suits this research best. The sensitizing concepts are political involvement, collective identification and intergroup contact.

Sample

The data consists of semi-structured interviews which were taken from eight Israelis and seven Palestinians in the Netherlands. Semi-structured interviews were the best choice for this research. On the one hand, there were several topics that had to be addressed in all interviews. On the other hand, some room for aberration was preferred given the explorative research objective of this study. The interviews took between half an hour and one and a half hours. The aim was to obtain a heterogeneous sample in terms of sex, age, place of birth and number of years they are living in the Netherlands. The respondents were found via Israeli and Palestinian organizations and Facebook groups.

Analysis

The interviews were immediately transcribed after they were conducted. In the transcripts of the interviews the fragments which refer to the sensitizing topics were highlighted in three different colors. Consequently, the main conclusions per interview were summarized. When all the interviews were held summaries per sensitizing topic were made in order to see patterns across cases. These case summaries and topic summaries were employed to analyze the data.

Ethics

At the start of every interview the research objective was explained. The participants were informed about the possibility to withdraw information they gave and to stop the interview if they wanted to. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. The respondents had to agree with their participation in the research and the recording of the interview.

RESULTS

The political involvement of Israeli and Palestinian diasporas in the Netherlands

Political involvement was divided in three components,

namely remittances to the homeland, lobbying at the government of the host land and membership of Israeli or Palestinian political organizations in the host land. The Israelis and Palestinians seldom send money to their homeland and most of the participants did not engage in lobbying themselves. Half of the interviewed Israelis and Palestinians are active in an Israeli or Palestinian political organization in the Netherlands. These organizations mostly aim to inform people, organize events and raise the voice of their group. The fact that no one sends structural remittances, not many interviewees try to lobby at the Dutch government and only half of the participants are active in an Israeli or Palestinian organization might seem like a lukewarm general affiliation with the conflict among Israelis and Palestinians in the Netherlands. However, nothing could be further from the truth since everyone is very preoccupied with the conflict and - except for one Israeli - all the participants stress that they are highly politically involved. Since they see themselves as politically involved, yet, not everyone is involved in the three political activities stated above, it is relevant to make a distinction between formal political involvement and informal political involvement. The three forms of political involvement mentioned earlier are categorized as formal political involvement. Informal political involvement manifests itself mainly through social media. Providing information is seen by the majority as the most important task of diasporas.

"What we - as I can say we, the former Israelis who live here - do is mostly explaining and the PR of the conflict. To tell people things they have never heard of because the media never told them."

It is striking that while not every participant is involved in formal political involvement, all the participants - except for one Israeli - are engaged in informal political involvement.

Subsequently, the question is to what extent the Israelis and Palestinians think that their diaspora's activities in the Netherlands have an effect on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Israelis were divided concerning the effectiveness of the political involvement of Israeli diasporas in the Netherlands. Most participants thought that Israelis in the Netherlands can have some sort of leverage but are not that influential at the moment. However, there might be something changing since an increasing number of Israelis is moving abroad and the Israeli government is slowly starting to realize that diasporas can be used as a source of power - in contrast to their current approach of Israelis abroad as traitors. The Palestinians have been especially successful in changing the public opinion in a more positive direction regarding the Palestinian case which is important for the shape of foreign policies towards Israel and Palestine in the future. The quote below shows the importance of the work of Palestinian diasporas according to a Palestinian woman.

"I think that Palestinians, not only in the Netherlands, but everywhere else in the diaspora, have a very important role to play. We are the ambassadors of Palestine. We are part of the societies where we live in, so we know how these societies function. We're able to communicate on

the political level of the societies where we live in about Palestine. So we're a kind of bridge."

Nevertheless, the Palestinians emphasize that they have to organize themselves in a more efficient way and that the small organizations need to cooperate in order to make a real difference.

The perceived connection between collective identification and political involvement

Notwithstanding the diversity within both people, a strong collective identification with their group can be observed among the interviewed Israelis and Palestinians. Noteworthy, the majority of interviewed Israelis and Palestinians who moved to the Netherlands indicated that their identity as an Israeli or Palestinian became stronger. All the participants were convinced that their collective identity is essential in their political involvement. Furthermore, most of the Israeli participants who mentioned that their identity as an Israeli became stronger when they moved abroad, also stated that they became more politically involved in the conflict. This could imply that collective identification is an important reason for people to become involved in the conflict. This finding is demonstrated by the quote below from an Israeli.

"I also feel that I have never been so Israeli in my life. [...] People [in Israel] just live their lives. You are not busy with that all day. But when I'm outside again with different perspectives then I'm really Israeli. I'm really busy with everything that happens there. I write about it. I was never so busy with Israel or being Israeli."

In short, the collective identity of Israeli and Palestinian diasporas in the Netherlands is very strong and collective identification is an important motivator for the participants to become politically involved in the conflict.

The perceived connection between intergroup contact and political involvement

The Israelis and Palestinians in Israel and Palestine live their lives rather separately despite the fact that they reside, geographically seen, very close to each other. Some people already interacted with the outgroup in their homeland because they actively sought this contact, but most participants had encounters with the outgroup in the Netherlands. The majority of the Israelis and Palestinians stated that intergroup contact changed their opinion about the outgroup. Generally, contact with the outgroup resulted in a better understanding of the other. The interviews revealed that the Israelis who had more contact with Palestinians were more positive regarding intergroup contact while this relationship cannot be seen in the interviews with Palestinians. This is possibly due to the fact that the Israelis had mostly positive contact with Palestinians, while the Palestinians experienced both positive and negative contact with Israelis throughout their lives.

The majority of the Israelis and Palestinians maintained that intergroup contact is important in their political involvement. How intergroup contact influences their political involvement differs per person. However, intergroup contact mainly triggered them to become

politically involved in a different way. A way that does not include violence. This is demonstrated by an Israeli who signed up to become a member of a 'hasbara'¹ organization in the Netherlands.

"So here [the Netherlands] I got really into a deep conversation with two Lebanese which was also the first time. I was really shocked to see what they learn in school about Israel and what we learn in the army and school about Lebanon. It's completely different, two completely separate views. [...] I understand that also Israelis and Palestinians were kind of learned to hate the other side which is not always correct. [...] So it's hard to hate someone or to be against someone when this is how he got raised and that this was his education. It's not his fault that this is his opinion. Also about Israelis, this is what we know. So I kinda understand that you don't have to fight each other we just have to... It opened my mind to talk more. Do more hasbara."

Possibly because intergroup contact increases the understanding about the other group, they take the outgroup's perspective more into consideration. This dynamic is slightly more prevalent among Israelis. In general, intergroup contact resulted in a better understanding of the outgroup and, accordingly, this brought about a different, non-violent kind of political involvement in the conflict.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted with the aim of exploring the field of Israeli and Palestinian diaspora politics in the Netherlands. Concurrently, it was researched what the perceived influence of intergroup contact and collective identification are on the political involvement of Israelis and Palestinians in the Netherlands. First of all, it was remarkable that everyone is very preoccupied with the conflict and that almost all participants described themselves as highly politically involved. The interviews showed that a distinction should be made between formal and informal political involvement. Sassen [8] also differentiates between the formal and informal political system. She underlines that so-called street-level, informal politics enable the formation of political actors who do not have to go through the formal political system. In this way, the ones who lack the power to reach the formal political system can gain presence [8]. Similarly, the results of this research showed that informal political involvement was more prevalent among both the Israeli and Palestinian participants. Informal political involvement encompassed predominantly informing (Dutch) people through social media. Social media provides an outstanding opportunity for the Israeli and Palestinian diasporas, as well as for other diasporas, to stay connected with their homeland and to influence the conflict while they are not at the actual conflict site. Further research is required to understand in which ways diasporas use social media to affect conflict areas and how successful this kind of political involvement is.

There was substantial agreement on the topic of collective identification. The participants emphasized that their collective identity as an Israeli or Palestinian is very

¹ The translation of 'hasbara' is explanation. Some see it as some kind of public diplomacy, others as propaganda for the Israeli mission.

strong. Furthermore, everyone stressed that their collective identity has a considerable influence on their political involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To reinforce this, some Israelis experienced a strengthening of their collective identity when they moved abroad combined with more willingness to become politically involved. This corresponds to the literature which outlines that people's collective identity is an important motivator to engage in collective action [4, 11, 12]. The strong collective identification and the perceived connection between collective identification and their political involvement implies that the Israeli and Palestinian diasporas in the Netherlands have the potential and are willing to become politically involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In accordance with the studies of Allport [1] and Pettigrew and Tropp [6], the majority of the Israeli and Palestinian participants mentioned that intergroup contact changed their opinion about the outgroup. Moreover, the interviews revealed that intergroup contact has an effect on the kind of political activities they engage in. This study demonstrated that positive intergroup contact can change people's understanding about other groups even if they are exposed to one-sided, negative information about the outgroup for a long time. Intergroup contact might not be a direct solution of the conflict because the problem lies at the incompatible group objectives of Israelis and Palestinians. Nevertheless, positive intergroup contact can bring people closer to each other and help them to improve their understanding of the other. The more cooperative kinds of political involvement that arise from this understanding could benefit a future peace process. Therefore, it would be good to promote positive intergroup contact in Israel, Palestine and the host countries of Israeli and Palestinian diasporas.

Given the separated lives of Israelis and Palestinians in Israel and Palestine and the fact that contact with the outgroup is more accessible abroad, the positive effects of intergroup contact are more likely to occur elsewhere than in Israel and Palestine. Accordingly, Israelis and Palestinians abroad are more likely to have an improved understanding of the rationale of the outgroup. Therefore, it is crucial to include them in future peace processes and mobilize them for peace. Governments and grassroots organizations should work together to create an efficient, global network to mobilize the diasporas together with the inhabitants of Israel and Palestine in order to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. The readiness of the Israeli and Palestinian diasporas to become politically involved should be utilized in order to advance the stagnating Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It is relevant for future research to more thoroughly investigate the forms and effectiveness of the political involvement of Israeli and Palestinian diasporas. The focus was on the social psychological experiences of the diasporas. Institutional and sociological aspects involved in diaspora politics are worth researching in the future. Moreover, the influence of collective identification and intergroup contact on political diaspora involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and other conflicts, should be further examined in different host countries using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The sample of this explorative study was not representative for all Israelis and Palestinians in the Netherlands, therefore a larger and more representative sample is necessary in future

research. This will help to draw more solid conclusions regarding the effects of intergroup contact and collective identification on political diaspora involvement and how this shapes the continuation or resolution of a conflict.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Aileen van Leeuwen came up with the research topic. Accordingly, she contacted the participants and conducted, transcribed and analyzed the interviews. The conclusion and other writings were done by her as well.

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