



In Ireland, Israel's Religious Right Engages with Ideas for Peace

Our Israel Senior Analyst Ofer Zalberg joins nine leaders of Israel's national religious community as they seek ideas for peace in meetings with the architects of Northern Ireland's peace process. Unexpectedly, he finds the trip inspires subtle shifts in their thinking – and in his own.

BELFAST, Northern Ireland – So much is stuck in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process that it makes sense to question habitual premises and take a new approach. For me, that means deepening my engagement with one of the constituencies traditionally seen by outsiders as one of the most intransigent: Israel's national religious Jewish community.

The more I interact with them, the more I see how detrimental it is that they are excluded from peacemaking. An opportunity to address this exclusion arises when I talk with the British organisation Forward Thinking, which organises study trips to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland for parties in conflict to meet two diametrically opposed communities in the north of the country and their interlocutors in Belfast, Dublin and London. After decades of violence, Northern Ireland is managing to implement a peace settlement. I discuss with Forward Thinking the findings of our research about the importance of this

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constituency. They agree to back a study visit for leaders from this community, if we can pull it off.

There are many reasons this seems like a highly unlikely proposition for all concerned. One is that most of the leaders of the national religious ideological core have never left the borders of Israel due to its sanctity. Some rarely even leave their yeshivas, or religious colleges, where they focus almost exclusively on the study of sacred texts in Hebrew and Aramaic. Most don't read other languages, and many have a real reluctance even to engage with mainstream Jewish academic literature.

In Israel, this community is perceived by many to be the hawks, the fundamentalists. They are powerful, representing about 15 per cent of society and 20 per cent of the governing coalition. Most of them – though not all – support the settlements that have proliferated in the West Bank, which the Palestinians see as the core of any future Palestinian state, and which Jews view as Judea and Samaria and as the mainstay of their ancestral homeland. The ideological core of this community believes redemption will come when, bluntly put, the People of Israel (Jews) rule the entire Land of Israel according to the Torah of Israel. This notion of organic wholeness leaves no room for Palestinian statehood. It also challenges many liberal notions about separating state and religion and protecting minority rights.

Yet after seven years of Crisis Group work, it is obvious to me that there is no hope of a peace deal at all without engaging religious communities. Up until now, they have been excluded

by peacemaking that is essentially a secular project couched in the language of diplomacy and international law. These are wonderful things, but they are not part of the world view of the traditional religious populations. This has led religious communities to view the negotiations as an attempt to override not just their own concerns but also their own legal systems, Jewish and Islamic. For Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking to succeed, this will have to be change; indeed, to the extent the three legal systems are incompatible, they will need to evolve, as harmoniously as possible. If a way is not found to make peace that allows religious populations to operate within their worldview and to adjust it, they will fight it and peace efforts will likely continue to fail.

A Neglected Constituency

I first became aware of the national religious right as a community in 2013, while researching a Crisis Group report on their role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I have come to understand that they are certainly interested in peace, but that they have a different view of what that peace will be. I also know many of them quite well now. They occasionally know of me too, because the national religious media is mentioning Crisis Group as the first international actor to try to bring their community into peacemaking efforts. I join hands with an energetic well-connected national religious rabbi whom I have known for years, Doron Danino, to convene the group because ownership of the process must be in the hands of the community itself. Approaching leading figures one by one, based on Rabbi Doron's priorities, we bring the group together: two politicians, the deputy defence minister and the deputy speaker of the Knesset, and six prominent rabbis, including one of the community's most influential spiritual leaders.

In their minds, the only reason that can overcome their reluctance to leave Israel is if it will do the Jewish people good. For instance, spending four days in Ireland means four days not teaching the Torah, which in their eyes

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certainly does good for the Jewish people. Two prominent rabbis decline, saying they are certain in their beliefs and there is nothing to learn from outsiders. But among others is a sense that their new political power means they have greater responsibilities. Ultimately, a prominent rabbi says he will go “because we are really trying to save lives, the lives of Jews. We should do anything in our power to avoid bloodshed”.

Myself, I don't want to go. When the preparation work is completed my work is done, I tell the participants and Rabbi Danino. But they insist that I join the group, as someone with experience bridging Irish and Middle Eastern conflicts, and who speaks Hebrew and English. The clinching argument is that they are only nine people, and in traditional Judaism, we need ten men (a minyan) to hold a public prayer. I have to say yes. For the next week, I pray with the group three times a day. As the days go by, unexpectedly I feel more a participant than organiser. Soon I too begin to look at the conflict in Ireland through a new lens. I see things I have not seen when I visited over a decade ago as a peace activist, taking part in facilitating disarmament workshops. My impression strengthens that religion is being re-interpreted all the time – whatever the religious fundamentalists claim – and that I should do my part as an agnostic person to become more post-secular, in the sense of not thinking that my secular beliefs should be imposed on others.

Mapping New Worlds

I'm not the only one to make new discoveries. A few of the members of our group have never flown in an airplane before. They are excited to discover Israel's place in the world on the little airplane TV map and to experience the minor

modern miracle of airport baggage retrieval belts.

We begin with a guided tour along Belfast's lines of conflict. My group has a really big surprise. They ask: we are being told there is no violence, so why are these walls still here? On the other hand, they are almost happy to discover that you can end violence and still keep communities apart. That peace doesn't lead into full, harmonious integration. That you can address a conflict in a way that does not bring the kind of full resolution that leads to assimilation. And for them, this is actually reassuring. Culturally, they are afraid that peace will lead to Jews marrying outside the community, immersing themselves in non-Jewish culture and then stopping being Jews.

In Belfast, we meet religious leaders, political leaders, activists, former negotiators and former militia fighters. It's a very complex conflict and it's hard to follow all of the nuances. Broadly, we all gradually get it, and not just on one level. I quickly realise that every question my group asks has two layers: about the conflict in Ireland, of course, but also another about our own conflict and what it means for the reality back home. We naturally contrast the way the Irish employ the term "sanctity of land" and the way national religious Jews do it. When we ask about the way the Irish believe in divine promise we think about what we Israeli Jews believe about divine promise.

Our rabbis have their beards, kippahs, curled hair, and long-held views. It is very challenging for them to listen to pastors and priests, because for most of them Christians are heretics engaging in idolatry and abandoning pure monotheism with their doctrine of the trinity of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. And the history of Christian persecutions of Jews, since the early days of the Catholic Church, is ever present in their minds.

Still, the atmosphere in the meetings with the Irish soon becomes relaxed. The actors in the Northern Ireland peace drama meet a lot of visitors, but these are still people with a mission, who really feel that they managed

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to do something good that they want to share with others. Forward Thinking has us meet the top people: the heads of churches, a former prime minister, people who actually signed the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement. After you go through such a peace process you understand how very complex your conflict is and how easy it is from the outside to misjudge others who are entrapped in conflict.

The Israeli participants prove to be superb listeners, which is more than I expected. Forward Thinking as well said at the end of the trip that the group was exceptionally inquisitive and sharp. Perhaps it's because there is no need to talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and defend their own positions. But there's something else. They are really struck by a priest who discreetly hides his cross in his pocket. They find his attitude toward them is very respectful and it helps develop a deep empathy. They discover that Catholicism has changed dramatically from a few decades ago. Specifically, it no longer argues that Christianity replaces Judaism or that God no longer views Jews as the chosen people. One pastor does offend the rabbis, saying: "Jesus is the messiah and we believe in it and that is the true faith". But the Forward Thinking organiser apologises profusely without being asked to. Such kindness from non-Jews impresses the rabbis. They came to study Catholics and Protestants killing each other, and they end up thinking about Christian-Jewish relations. One of the rabbis turns to me and says: "I have to revisit everything in terms of our attitude to Christianity. We need to issue new rulings about the kind of interaction that is permissible

with Christians. They systematically treated us very decently”.

The Israelis also begin to project their own national religious mapping of their Middle Eastern conflict onto the Irish one. For some of them, our next destination, Dublin in the Republic of Ireland, is Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. They see the Catholic Irish as the indigenous population of Ireland, just as they view the Jews as the indigenous population of Israel. They consider the Jewish homeland extends from parts of modern day Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea – the land God promised to the Jews in Abraham’s time. The Jews of Israel have just come back home, they are not colonial settlers. For them, Northern Ireland is the West Bank. It is the Protestants who are perhaps there without a good reason, as settlers. And Britain is the Arab hinterland, the Arab states. This is ironic, given that in Northern Ireland, it is the Protestants who tend to be pro-Israeli and the Catholics who tend to be pro-Palestinian.

A Subtle Shift

Along the way, my companions tease out other lessons. We’re just on a study tour of Ireland, so of course we’re very far from doing something that is going to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in any immediate way. We’re not expecting new answers with a capital A for those seemingly intractable issues like Jerusalem, refugees or security. But as we go from meeting to meeting, I see a group that has little experience either internationally or with other conflicts begin to broaden its thinking and question some fundamental assumptions. People see that it’s not just in Israel that talking to three people can produce ten opinions.

For instance, the urge of Israeli and Palestinian negotiators for the last 25 years has been to get an agreement that formally ends the conflict and resolves competing claims once and for all. For Israel’s religious right, this is very problematic and part of a secular package. They want an end to the killing. But the kind of peace they pray for is about getting much more.

For them for example true peace is linked to Isaiah’s prophecy in which swords are turned into ploughshares when a Temple is erected at the center of what today Muslims consider to be the al-Aqsa Mosque. So when they find out that the Northern Ireland conflict seems resolved both without transferring people out of their homes and also without formally conceding any fundamentals of the positions of either party, these features seem very good from their point of view.

In short, my companions experience what it means for Irish people to reach an agreement on something that, after centuries of violence, had seemed entirely impossible to them. That “final status” is something that can be left for the future. And that compromises and in-between positions can be agreed if the mere possibility of the peace they pray for is not negated.

The national religious right, at least in terms of the voices that were in the group, is in any event divided on what the end goal should be. One side says: look, we have to find some modus vivendi with the Palestinians, not based on defeating them, but also not based on accepting to give up our claims to the land indefinitely. But the other side still thinks: the Palestinians must be defeated, and the only problem is that Israel is not trying to do so; that any talk about two states, even if nothing is being done about it, still leaves room for Palestinians to hope that there will be a Palestinian state; and that any separate treatment of “settlements” by the Israeli state is disastrously wrong. They say the Palestinians must be made to understand that there will be no Palestinian state and must acquiesce to live under Jewish authority with “equal rights except the right to

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vote”. Of course these are not equal rights, but this is how they describe it.

So if there is a shift I observe during the trip, it is in some of the group’s approach to the problem of eradicating Palestinians’ sense of national identity. We left Israel with a wide range of national religious right ideas. And when we return, that spectrum narrows somewhat. Even participants who still talk of defeating Palestinians now think that for these Palestinians to accept the new reality, maybe it is better for Israel to recognise some kind of Palestinian identity. Interestingly enough, we in Crisis Group are witnessing much the same trend of accepting gray areas in final status issues in our contacts with a Palestinian Islamist organisation, Hamas.

Britain’s Different Kind of Muslim

On the way back, we stop in London. This is the result of one of our conversations to secure the participation of the rabbis. As the rabbi put it: “With all due respect, we want to hear what the Protestants, the Catholics have to say. But our conflict is not with the Protestants and not with the Catholics. The conflict is not even an Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is a Jewish-Muslim conflict, it is a theological conflict. So, can we meet Muslims?” It’s true that between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea there are very few mainstream Muslims who would agree to meet this group. And there aren’t many Muslim leaders in Belfast.

So on the way back, we stop off in England. We arrange to meet Muslim scholars, an imam and Muslim experts. Some of the Muslim experts are serving members of the British Army, who thus provide a different perspective on Muslim participation in state and society. The dialogue is significant because the answers to my group’s questions are much more nuanced and self-critical regarding Islam than what they hear back home. It helps them see that Palestinian motivations that they see as religious may actually stem from Palestinian national aspirations. For instance, when it

comes to Jerusalem’s contested Holy Esplanade, which Jews call the Temple Mount and Palestinians call the Noble Sanctuary, my group is shocked to hear the London Muslims say that they see no problem with Jews praying in the sanctuary’s al-Aqsa mosque.

Another insight is that much of the talk about Europe being secular and marked by full separation of state and religion is false. They learn that England has a queen who is the head of the Anglican Church and that this is not necessarily problematic for non-Christians. All the members of our group see Israel as a Jewish state, but some of the rabbis in our group end up strengthened in their view that the problem in Israel might lie in the organisation of state and religion, and that new approaches might help address the religious layers of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They feel that Israelis should look more at European countries to learn what such models mean for the rights of the dominant nation, freedom of religion, status of minorities, and public education.

The Plane Back Home

On the plane ride back home, my group animatedly debates all the ideas they have encountered. Some see similarities with the conflict in the British Isles and others say “Northern Ireland is totally different. The people have given up on their faith, they are largely secular, they have compromised on things they shouldn’t have”. But I hear a new counter-argument too: “Look, they are not killing each other, they are not rearming. And at the same time, they aren’t giving up on their major aspirations. What does it mean politically for us when we go home?”

All of the group enjoy the chance to consider and analyse a conflict in a way they can’t at home, where they can’t meet many Palestinians or Muslims on the other side. Talking to all the stakeholders from another conflict, hearing the dialectics between enemies and peacemakers, seeing escalation and de-escalation, experiencing the way saying something affects the other makes a difference. It helps them see a much

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more complex picture, for instance what the important roles played by Dublin and London might say about outsiders’ roles in the Middle East, the need for the elite to stay in touch with the people, or that concord between purported extremists is possible. They are able to compare the points of view of negotiators who deal with law and draft treaties, and those of religious leaders who have drafted complementary sermons for the churches.

The group gains confidence too. Going, they want total discretion. Coming back, they share their impressions with the main national religious newspaper in an article entitled “Northern Ireland as a Parable”. Suddenly the rabbis with the big beards are all over social media standing next to Ireland’s peace walls, talking heads want to know what’s going on, one of the rabbis gets on the biggest radio program in Israel to share trip insights, it’s a big thing. To

outsiders it may appear as if the hawks at one end of the Israeli political spectrum are all the same, but within this community there is a very serious conversation about the theological possibility of compromise, about whether we have the mechanisms that allow for peace, about connecting the political and religious layers of the conflict.

Pushing back against critics, they are creating a new space to discuss ways out of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One rabbi gives a talk on the Northern Ireland trip to 300 yeshiva students, which trickles back to all their families. The all-male character of the group comes under attack, so later this year a group of prominent women from the national religious community will go to Ireland too. One critic in the WhatsApp group of a right-wing political party challenges the group: “You are going to the Europeans to learn from them. Christians! What are they trying to do? To convert us?” And one of the group members retorts with what all peace activists of Israel have been saying for the last century: “You have to do whatever you can for peace.”



The group listening to a talk on the history of the Irish conflict from Professor John Brewer at Belfast’s Queen’s University, in February 2017. CRISIS GROUP/Ofer Zalzburg