

## **Peace has now become a comrade**

By Rafiq Zain Al-Din

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is considered one of the most complex and long lasting conflicts in the contemporary world. It has been encompassing intertwined political, historical, religious, and humanitarian dimensions over many decades. While analyses often focus on official negotiations and international resolutions, direct encounters between individuals from both sides of the conflict remain an important, albeit less highlighted, factor in creating a psychological and social environment conducive to any just and sustainable solution. Drawing on personal experiences acquired from participation in such meetings, I shall attempt in this article to shed light on the importance and limitations of such encounters as well as on the role they can play in dismantling the existing deadlock.

Turning the other side into an abstract image devoid of humanity is one of the most serious effects of prolonged conflicts. In the context of the Palestinian – Israeli conflict, many people grow up carrying a single one - sided narrative about the other side, which is often summed up in fear, hatred, or generalization. When managed objectively, direct encounters are capable of providing a unique opportunity to see the human being that stands behind the political or military identity. Likewise, participants in dialogue sessions are likely to discover that suffering is not exclusively inflicted upon one side and that daily pain leaves deep marks on all, even if its causes and contexts are different.

The importance of meetings organized by the Alliance for the Implementation of the “Two - State Solution” stems from the fact that they can shift the relation from the logic of one - sided discourse to the logic of listening. In many experiences that I have personally taken part in, the goal was not to convince the other party of my position, but rather to understand how they perceive reality and how they justify their fears and attitudes. Listening does not mean acceptance or justification; it constitutes a fundamental step to achieve a deeper understanding of the roots of the conflict. When the other side feels you are listening, the need for persistent defense fades while the dialogue becomes less tense and more sincere.

A common criticism of such meetings is that they are viewed to be aiming at an unconditional 'normalization' or aiming at obliterating the core differences between the victim and the persecutor. However, experience shows that genuine dialogue shall not succeed unless it acknowledges the unequal reality and the existence of structural injustice. Serious meetings do not eliminate political differences or overlook fundamental issues such as occupation, rights, and

justice; rather, they create a framework that allows these issues to be discussed with human clarity, away from utter demonization or denial.

These meetings may not bring about immediate political change; nevertheless, they are likely to leave an accumulative psychological and social impact that cannot be ignored. Most participants return to their communities with more complex yet less simplified narratives. This internal change made by such meetings, although limited in scope, contributes in the long run to weakening extremist rhetoric and paves the way for generations more prepared to envisage solutions other than the logic of power as the sole option.

Albeit their importance, meetings between the parties to the conflict should not be assigned more than what they really are. They do not constitute an alternative to political struggle nor end the occupation, and they often face societal rejection and legitimate moral pressures. The greatest challenge is in maintaining a sufficient balance between humanitarian engagement and commitment to the national stance, on the one hand, and between dialogue and awareness of the imbalance of power. Without this awareness, such meetings may turn into a meaningless formal activity.

I believe that the true value of these meetings stems from the fact that they constitute a complementary path, not a substitute, to political and legal work. They overlay the social and psychological ground for any future settlement based on justice and mutual recognition of rights. When these meetings are linked to a clear vision and a candid discourse about ending injustice, they can contribute to building a peace that is not only based on agreements, but also on the preparedness of both societies to accept it..

In the context of such a complex and painful reality, meetings between both parties to the conflict may seem like a small or even a marginal step. Nevertheless, my personal experience has confirmed that when such meetings are conducted with due awareness and responsibility, they turn into a profoundly meaningful human action. Such meetings are not likely expected to put an end to the conflict; however, they serve as a reminder that behind the walls and rigid speeches there are people capable of listening, thinking, and reconsidering. Without this human dimension, any political solution would remain fragile and susceptible to collapse.