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To cite this article: Michelle I. Gawerc (2017): Solidarity is in the heart, not in the field: joint Israeli–Palestinian peace movement organizations during the 2014 Gaza War, Social Movement Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14742837.2017.1344544

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2017.1344544

Published online: 29 Jun 2017.
Solidarity is in the heart, not in the field: joint Israeli–Palestinian peace movement organizations during the 2014 Gaza War

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ABSTRACT

The social movement literature suggests that social movement organizations that work across difference and power asymmetry are dependent to some degree on shared and unified action in order to construct and sustain a sense of ‘we’. Yet ironically, for two joint Israeli–Palestinian peace movement organizations, sustaining a cross-conflict collective identity during the 2014 Gaza War did not require unified action, but rather, independent action from the Israeli participants. This article makes the argument that in highly asymmetrical environments, and in particular, protracted conflict environments, unified visible action is not always required for maintaining a collective identity. Structural and cultural forces can impede the ability of activists to work across borders or conflict lines. In these situations, what may be required to sustain a collective identity that crosses over traditional community divides is the willingness of the group with more privilege and power to move forward in activity focused on their own community.

Activists are often faced with the task of building [and maintaining] solidarity among a diverse membership, which can require very careful deliberate identity work.

Einwohner, Reger, and Myers (2008, p. 3)

Social movement organizations need to be able to construct and sustain a collective identity – a sense of ‘we’ – in order for collective action to occur and be sustainable (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; Gamson, 1991; Melucci, 1989; Snow & McAdam, 2000). While this is a challenge for all movement organizations, it is particularly challenging for groups that work across difference and power asymmetry since the participants in these groups, in the words of Gamson (2011, p. 257), ‘do not define themselves in terms of their common social location in a class or ethnic group, [thus] the question of who “we” are [becomes] intrinsically problematic.’ As Melucci (1995) indicates, this challenge is especially great in situations of crisis, such as war.

In order to construct and sustain this sense of ‘we,’ the social movement literature suggests that social movement organizations are dependent to some degree on shared and unified action (see Flesher-Fominaya, 2010a; Gawerc, 2016a; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Yet in some unfavorable and hostile environments, unified action may not always seem viable, beneficial, or necessary to all the participants.

Ironically, for two joint Israeli–Palestinian peace movement organizations, sustaining a cross-conflict Israeli–Palestinian collective identity during the 2014 Gaza War did not require unified action,
but rather, independent action from the Israeli participants. While Palestinian activists occasionally participated in Israeli protests against the war, this was not required. Yet, these Israeli actions were critical for maintaining solidarity and a sense of ‘we’ across conflict lines.

Using data collected shortly after the 2014 War in Gaza, this article shows that in highly asymmetrical and protracted conflict environments unified visible action may not always be required for maintaining a sense of ‘we’ within a movement organization. Structural and cultural forces can impede the ability of activists to work across borders or conflict lines. In these situations, what may be required for a movement to sustain a collective identity is the willingness of the group with more privilege and power to move forward in activity focused on their own community.

Following a literature review, I will discuss the methodology and the two movement organizations studied, and provide a brief description of the 2014 Gaza War. I will then discuss how the two organizations managed to sustain cross-conflict collective identities during the war. In conclusion, I will summarize the dynamics by which solidarity was maintained across groups despite the absence of joint actions, highlighting the importance of mutual recognition of asymmetries of risk in this case.

**Theory**

Collective identity is a shared sense of ‘we-ness,’ including understandings of collective agency (Snow, 2001). It involves reaching and sustaining a shared definition of who ‘we’ are, including a mutual understanding of goals, strategies, and the environment in which they operate (Hunt & Benford, 2004; Melucci, 1995). These understandings are then articulated through a common language and incorporated into symbols, rituals, and practices. Melucci (1995) and Featherstone (2012) emphasize that this shared sense of ‘we’ is constructed through ongoing interaction and negotiation; it requires the emotional investment of the activists, thereby enabling them to feel like a collective entity. The understandings that result through the ongoing interaction are not necessarily unified, but complete agreement is not required (Flesher-Fominaya, 2010a). Indeed, as Rupp and Taylor (1999) show, a collective identity that unites across different standpoints, interests, and goals, can allow for a movement – and presumably, movement organizations – to get beyond these differences.

Collective identities are constructed and maintained through latent day-to-day interactions combined with visible and joint actions (Einwohner et al., 2008; Snow & McAdam, 2000). In the words of Flesher-Fominaya (2010a, p. 398), ‘[both of] these types of activities provide crucial arenas in which activists can foster reciprocal ties of solidarity and commitment, and clarify their understandings of who they are, what they stand for and who the opposition is.’

The importance of visible actions and protests for collective identity and solidarity has been well-documented (Gilmore, 2008; Melucci, 1995; Snow & McAdam, 2000). Indeed, some claim that visible joint actions can engender bonds, create memories, foster a shared history, and cement trust, all of which can help sustain a movement (Flesher-Fominaya, 2010a; Gawerc, 2016a; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). At times, even contentious interactions with movement opponents at these events have been found to increase solidarity and the sense of ‘we’ in movements and/or movement organizations (Davenport, Johnston, & Mueller, 2005; Flesher-Fominaya & Wood, 2011).

While constructing and sustaining a collective identity is difficult for all movement organizations that work across difference and power asymmetry (Einwohner et al., 2008), it is even more so for cross-conflict groups in protracted conflict situations (Gawerc, 2016a). Indeed, in protracted conflicts, one’s conflict identity (i.e. whether one is Israeli or Palestinian in the Middle East or Unionist or Nationalist in Northern Ireland) tends to be highly salient and have strong impacts on one’s self understanding (Smithey, Maney, & Satre, 2013).

Moreover, the collective identity work undertaken by these movement organizations takes place within the larger polarized and antagonistically segmented environment. Indeed, Shirlow (2003) highlighted numerous threats and other disincentives that keep people from vocalizing cross-community discourse, let alone engaging in a cross-conflict movement organization that involves people from multiple sides of a conflict (see also Gawerc, 2012). In addition, peace movements are often seen by
ethno-national minority insurgents, and the communities from which they garner support, as collaborators who have ‘crossed over’ to support the enemy (G. Maney, personal communication, August 2015). This poses significant challenges for peace activists working with the other in ethno-national minority communities (i.e. in the conflict groups with less power).

Cross-conflict movement organizations face even greater challenges in times of war: ‘Political violence in the form of war or terrorism often functions to unite citizens against external enemies … In times such as these it becomes even more difficult for national [peace] movements to articulate dissent and mobilize legitimacy and support. It therefore becomes equally if not more difficult, especially at moments of heightened nationalism, to build [and sustain] alliances [with those constructed as the enemy other]’ (Bandy & Smith, 2005, p. 236). In asymmetrical contexts, the radically different war-time experiences also tend to breed misunderstandings, while the informal boundary policing (see Maney, 2016) greatly increases the risks of participation. Furthermore, the need to project a collective identity can further exacerbate tensions given that individuals identify with disparate communities whom are at war, and what works for one external audience can hurt a movement organization’s chance of success with another (see Neuhouser, 2008). These contradictory pressures greatly challenge cross-conflict movement organizations during war and their ability to sustain a collective identity (see also Melucci, 1995; Featherstone, 2012).

Further complicating the process of constructing and sustaining cross-conflict collective identities in situations of protracted conflict – and especially, during war – there is often no neutral space to meet, which Wood (2005) argues is critical for groups working across difference. There is no possibility for symmetrical relationships, which Kay (2005) argues is fundamental. There is difficulty when it comes to freely discussing the activists’ identities, which Lichterman (1999) sees as essential. And finally, trust which is deemed critical (Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta, 2004; Wood, 2005) takes a long time to build and is an ongoing process, often requiring shared and sustained action (Gawerc, 2016a).

Notwithstanding these immense challenges in protracted conflicts, Gawerc (2016a) found that two cross-conflict Israeli–Palestinian peace movement organizations – the same two being studied here – constructed and maintained a collective identity by slowly building trust through sharing personal stories \textit{and} engaging in joint actions that confirm the constructed identity. The visible confirmatory actions were particularly critical and needed to meet the emotional and rational needs of the participants (Flesher-Fominaya, 2010b) in both communities and not simply the needs of the more dominant group (i.e. the Israelis). Recognizing and being cognizant of the asymmetrical reality (i.e. that there was an occupier and an occupied) and the resulting differences in terms of experiences, perspectives, needs, and the risks involved in participation, was fundamental for this process (see also Einwohner et al., 2016; Tabar, 2016).

But what about in environments where joint collective action is not possible? As Smith (2002, p. 507) indicates, structural – and I would add, cultural – forces can prohibit organizing across boundaries. Can movement organizations sustain a collective identity when they cannot take joint action because it is impeded by the environment? Or are there times when a movement organization may decide that even if joint action is possible, the action of members belonging to one national and/or ethnic group is sufficient?

While the literature shows that unified action is an important tool for sustaining collective identities, it is not clear why it is perceived as a requirement. Isn't it possible that at times, the actions taken by the more dominant group in asymmetrical conflicts (i.e. the politically and militarily stronger conflict party) may be \textit{more} important than joint action?

Indeed, in these situations, dominant group members often have to prove themselves to their colleagues on the other side (Gawerc, 2013, 2015; see Myers, 2008 for this tendency in non-protracted conflict settings), and uninalional action becomes one way to do so. Action by the dominant group in a movement organization also takes the pressure off the ethno-national minority group, which is important, since the risks tend to be greater for the latter (see Wood, 2007). Palestinian activists, for instance, are more likely to be harassed by the Israeli military for their anti-occupation activism, they face a more closed and punitive legal system if arrested, and are more likely to experience significant
backlash from their community given that cross-conflict activities have effectively been stigmatized as ‘normalization’ or acquiescence to the status quo of occupation (Abu-Zayyad, 2016; Barakat & Goldenblatt, 2012). Furthermore, if actions by the dominant group gain media attention, it may legitimate (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993) the involvement of ethno-national minority activists in the organization, by making clear that these activities are not normalizing the status quo, but rather, challenging it (Gawerc & Lazarus, 2016).

For dominant group members, the recognition of the asymmetrical risks (Gawerc, 2012), combined with the pre-existing ties and relationships (Hunt & Benford, 2004), could theoretically be enough to maintain the collective identity, in the absence of joint action. The validation they receive from their minority group member colleagues, the symbolic binational representation at events when possible, and their strong value commitments (Oliver & Johnston, 2000), could further aid this for the dominant group.

This article will make clear that for cross-conflict peace movement organizations, in times of war, joint action is not always required. In these cases, what may be required to sustain a collective identity are protest actions by the dominant group.

Methodology and groups studied
This research focuses on the two major joint Israeli–Palestinian peace movement organizations in Israel/Palestine during the 2014 Gaza War: Combatants for Peace (CFP) and Parents Circle/Families Forum (PCFF). While there are a handful of other major peace/anti-occupation movement organizations in the region, these other organizations identify as either Israeli or Palestinian, even if they work together at times. Thus, these two organizations are unique in that they define themselves as binational movements (i.e. joint Israeli–Palestinian movements). This binational component is critical as it allows us to examine how social movement organizations, whose identity is based on working across conflict lines, are able to sustain a sense of ‘we’, in the absence of joint action.

PCFF consists of Palestinians and Israelis who have lost a first-degree relative in the conflict (e.g. a child, a parent). They meet to show both publics that reconciliation is possible and to put pressure on the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority to engage in negotiations that will ensure ‘basic human rights, the establishment of two states for two peoples, and the signing of a peace treaty.’1 PCFF was founded in 1996 as an Israeli peace organization, but became joint involving Palestinians as equal members in 2004. Since then, the group has implemented a semi-symmetrical organizational structure, which is headed by two Co-General Managers (an Israeli and a Palestinian).

CFP was jointly founded in 2006 by former Israeli Defense Force soldiers and Palestinians who were formerly engaged in the violent struggle for Palestinian liberation. CFP, which uses nonviolent protest, seeks to ‘educate towards reconciliation and non-violent struggle …; [and] to create political pressure on both Governments to stop the cycle of violence, end the occupation, and resume a constructive dialogue.’2 CFP similarly embodies a symmetrical organizational structure that includes two coordinators (an Israeli and a Palestinian) at the national level.

As part of a larger study about constructing and sustaining collective identity, I collected data on these two organizations in the three-month period before the war in Gaza (April-June 2014), and a three-week period several months after the war ended (December 2014). In the three-month pre-war period, I conducted 46 interviews with Israeli and Palestinian peace activists in the two organizations (23 Palestinians and 23 Israelis) as well as observed events, actions, and meetings. These activists were from different locations in the occupied West Bank and Israel, and included 30 men and 16 women between the ages of 30 and 85.

Given the impact the July–August war in Gaza had on the joint organizations, I returned for three weeks in December to learn more how the organizations managed during the war. I interviewed 21 participants (11 Israelis and 10 Palestinians) whom I had met with during my previous visit to the region. During this round, I interviewed only the key informants – those who were most knowledgeable about their organization – which were disproportionately male. The 17 men and 4 women interviewed were aged 35–65 and were from different geographical locations in Israel and the West Bank. These
semi-structured interviews were conducted in English or Hebrew. I also offered Palestinian activists the choice of conducting the interview in Arabic with the help of a translator, which four Palestinian interviewees chose to do.

This paper relies largely on the data collected in December 2014, but the interviews prior to the war were critical in providing a sense of where the organization was and the perspective of the interviewees prior to the conflict's rapid escalation. Throughout this paper the names of research participants and interviewees have been anonymized.

The data were coded and analyzed using Atlas.ti; individual themes were utilized for the unit of analysis. This required coding single sentences, single paragraphs, and groups of paragraphs. Although the coding was largely inductive, I also coded concepts derived from the literature. The inductive generation of codes was important as it allowed me to recognize unforeseen themes and patterns. Indeed, the inductive coding revealed that joint Palestinian–Israeli protest was actually not needed for maintaining a collective identity, while uninational protest action by the Israeli participants was necessary.

This next section will describe the 2014 Gaza War and the challenges it posed for both the Jewish-Israeli and the Palestinian activists.

The 2014 Gaza war

On 8 July 2014, Israel launched a seven-week military operation into the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. Israel's stated aim was to halt the rocket fire from Gaza into Israel. Rocket fire had increased after Israel carried out a large military campaign against Hamas in the West Bank, in response to the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank, for which Israel blamed Hamas. During this military campaign, Israel arrested hundreds of Hamas activists, closed offices, and raided homes (CPT, 2014; Thrall, 2014). Further escalating this tense pre-war situation, right-wing Israelis then abducted a Palestinian youth and brutally murdered him in a revenge attack for the murder of the three Israeli teenagers. With Palestinian anger high due to these events and the 50-year-long military occupation, Palestinians in Jerusalem and Israel began to protest, militants in Gaza fired rockets in solidarity, and Hamas leaders in Gaza called for a third intifada (Thrall, 2014).

While the war was far from symmetrical, Hamas had its own goals, which centered on improving the conditions in the Gaza Strip. Hamas's primary objectives were for Israel to release Palestinian prisoners arrested during the summer's military operation in the West Bank; open the crossings into Gaza thereby ending Gaza's closure; and honor the 2014 Hamas and Fatah reconciliation agreement, which would among other things, allow for construction materials to enter into Gaza, for the Palestinian Government to staff its own borders, and for Palestinians employed by the Palestinian Government to be paid their salaries (Thrall, 2014).

The 50-day-long war consisted of heavy Israeli aerial and navy bombardment of Gaza, Palestinian rocket attacks, and ground fighting. More than 2200 Palestinians and 70 Israelis were killed in the war, with thousands more wounded, predominantly on the Palestinian side. The scale of destruction and devastation in Gaza during the war was unprecedented, with 500,000 Palestinians displaced at the height of the fighting (OCHA, 2014). When a ceasefire was established on 26 August 2014, Gaza lay in ruins. The UN estimated that approximately 18,000 homes were destroyed and 108,000 Palestinians made homeless (OCHA, 2014).

Seen as a just war by 95% of Jewish Israelis, most Israeli peace groups supported the war or remained silent until the rockets ceased and the Israeli troops were brought home. Israelis who dissented were deemed traitors and left-wing demonstrators against the war faced harassment and physical violence (Raz, 2014).

Given the horrors of what was happening in Gaza and the highly asymmetric death toll, Palestinian joint anti-war activism with Israelis was stigmatized as ‘normalization’ or acquiescence to the occupation and ‘the killers,’ with significant consequences for individuals in terms of societal legitimacy.

CFP and PCFF nonetheless each managed to sustain a collective identity as organizations that involve Palestinians and Israelis working together to end the cycle of violence and the occupation.
Indeed, participants in both organizations postwar articulated an unabated emotional and cognitive identification with their group, as well as a renewed sense of energy and solidarity. The question then becomes, how did they manage to sustain a cross-conflict identity and the sense of ‘we’ during the war; after all, they chose, given the circumstances, to not engage in joint Palestinian-Israeli action and there was limited contact across the conflict line?

This next section highlights how these organizations sustained a cross-conflict collective identity during the war.

**Sustaining cross-conflict collective identities and solidarity during war**

**Combatants for Peace**

In the early days of the Gaza War, CFP sought to organize a large joint Israeli–Palestinian protest. Binational protests had long been their signature activity and modus operandi for this group of former combatants now committed to ending the Israeli occupation and the conflict.

Several CFP members selected an area of Jerusalem that was accessible and felt relatively safe to both Jewish Israelis and Palestinians living in Jerusalem for the demonstration site. However, only a few Palestinian members of CFP attended, largely due to the asymmetrical risks they faced, and it began a new pattern during the war of largely uninational Israeli protest with only minor Palestinian representation. Reflecting on it, Doron noted,

> The whole thing with the summer is that we were forced to change the nature of our activity. It wasn't possible to initiate a non-violent activity in East Jerusalem or the West Bank [where we typically hold our activities]. It was too dangerous according to the Palestinians … So, we had to … give up, temporarily, our binationality.

Consequently, Tel Aviv became the center of the protests for CFP. The Israeli side of the organization co-led two large protests in the largely Jewish city with several thousand people in attendance. Shai, who was responsible for organizing these protests together with representatives from other organizations, noted, ‘It was exciting … and it was a challenge, in that there was a very violent oppression of anything that was outside of the consensus …’ Continuing, he noted, ‘We had half Jews, half Arabs on the stage, so it was a very good line up of speakers. Around 30 CFP members came, only from the Israeli side, of course, except for Marwan and Khalil who were spokespeople.’ As can be gleaned from Shai’s quote, the Arab/Palestinian representation on the stage was important and meaningful for the Israelis. As several interviewees highlighted, it was because it symbolized the organization’s binational identity.

Meanwhile, as Shai noted, anti-war protesters faced significant violence during the war in Israel. Doron confirmed this: ‘It was clear that people were coming to these demonstrations to hurt demonstrators … I had to think twice if I wanted my girlfriend to come … It was like the feeling that if you’re bringing someone you’re putting them in some danger.’ Reflecting the informal boundary policing that was taking place (cf. Maney, 2016), Yael similarly stated, ‘It was the first time I was scared to go from home to a demonstration with the banners of CFP. People saw us putting them up, and they shouted at us, “Go to Gaza! You’re traitors!” It was very scary.’

Some Israeli members – mostly newer members – consequently stepped back from activism during the war. Several CFP activists in turn organized a meeting in Tel Aviv for the Israeli members with the goal of strengthening their sense of togetherness. According to Yael,

> It was a few days before the demonstration and there wasn't enough feeling of togetherness in the movement on the Israeli side. The leaders did stuff, but other members [weren't so active] … So, it was very good to sit together … and to see that we are on the same page – and we are together.

During the war, there were no joint protests. Early on, some of the Israelis attempted to convince their Palestinian colleagues to have a joint protest in the West Bank against the war in Gaza. The Palestinian activists made it clear, however, that they did not want to be confronted with the taboo against normalization during this time. As Ihab noted,

> The war was very difficult for the Palestinians. There was a lot of violence, the situation was bad, and many Palestinians couldn't comprehend that there was a war, but there were also meetings [occurring] between Israelis
and Palestinians... There was a lot of pressure [on us]... They were telling us, 'You see, your friends and everything they make [in Gaza]? You still believe in them? They are killers!'

Khalil similarly shared,

The issue of tatbiya [normalization] is always present, but it was more difficult during the war. Because how can you come and talk to the Palestinians about peace when there are 3000 [Palestinian] martyrs, especially when you are faced with a military machine that keeps perpetuating violence, destruction, and death?

Several Palestinians also made it clear that the message, 'stop killing,' needed to be for the Israelis and not the Palestinians; that any appearance that the message was for the Palestinians, would not resonate well with their Palestinian audience. For instance, Haitham noted,

The activities were frozen during the war on the Palestinian side. We didn't do anything because you can't go to the Palestinian side and say 'Stop killing.' To whom are you speaking? When the Israelis say to me, 'let's make a demonstration,' my question for them is, 'For whom?!'... The message 'stop killing' should be said to your side! You kill our sons, you kill our daughters, you kill our wives, and then you come to our area and you say, 'Stop killing?!' So we told them, 'it will kill Combatants, it will destroy it!' They said, 'No, we want to do this to show solidarity.' We told them, 'Nobody will understand it like this. You want to make solidarity, go to your president, go near his home, near the Knesset, and make them stop killing, because the message is not for us, it's for them!'

The challenge was that a Palestinian–Israeli binational protest against the war that presented the message, 'stop the killing,' to both the Israeli government and Hamas, would have been, in the eyes of many of the Israelis, more effective for their Israeli audience and more in line with their desired collective identity.

During this period, the only binational management meeting occurred via Skype. The Israelis wanted to meet the Palestinians in the West Bank, but the Palestinians said it was not safe for the Israelis and they met via Skype instead. Speaking to the importance of the meeting, Shai noted,

The binational steering committee meeting on Skype was very moving, very important... It was important for us to know... that the Palestinians didn't move an inch in their position or solidarity with us... It was important for us to hear. It was also important for us to know that they know and acknowledge the effort that we're doing in the violent atmosphere to stand with a clear voice against the war.

Noam similarly relayed,

[The Skype meeting] was amazing... Each side updated what was going on their side and through that it was easier to understand that we face the same problems [albeit to different degrees]. They say it's very difficult for us to criticize Hamas now. We said it's very difficult for us to criticize the government and the army... and we feel like traitors more than in ordinary times. In a way it made us feel closer and more together and there was more bonding and solidarity between us...

As the above quotes make clear, the communication of confirmed solidarity, the validation received from their Palestinian colleagues, along with an explanation from the Palestinians for their inaction, assisted in maintaining the cross-conflict collective identity for the Israelis.

Nevertheless, with few meetings and no joint activities, several of the newer Israeli activists felt that the two communities were disconnected. While the leadership spent more time on the phone talking to colleagues across the conflict lines and old-timers had few problems picking up the phone to speak to their colleagues, newer members did not always feel as comfortable doing so.

Moreover, several Israelis were saddened that the Palestinians did not undertake any actions in the West Bank, similar to what they did in Israel. In the words of Yael,

It was very sad to see that they didn't do anything in Palestine. I know it's not the same situation. I can organize a protest here in Rabin Square [in Tel Aviv] but if they will do ... a protest against the war [in the West Bank], it will be difficult for them. So I know ...

With some frustration though, Yael added,

But during the war we were very busy and even if we succeeded in organizing this protest in Rabin Square, the Palestinians said, 'Okay, but it was very small. They could not understand the meaning of protesting in Israel during the war. And they didn't understand how scary it can be to be a left-wing activist in Israel today. At the same time, they saw that we are making a big effort to do something in Israel [which was important].
While it was not easy, as the above suggests, awareness of the asymmetrical risks was critical for Israelis to accept the inaction of Palestinian colleagues. At the same time, Yael’s frustration also shows the unavoidable misunderstandings that resulted from the participants’ different social locations.

Notwithstanding the inevitable gaps in understanding and the disconnection felt by some, the relations between the two groups after the war were as strong as they were prior to the war. For the Israelis, this was largely due to the preexisting ties and relationships, and the strong collective identity forged prior to the war. As Doron noted, ‘What wasn’t lost [in the war] is the feeling that there is a strong connection between the people … People trust each other from the movement.’ One of the old-timers, Noam added,

I must say that this is where I saw the huge development and difference. In the first [Gaza war], there was a lot of anger and fury in the room … This time it was so clear that we are on the same side … and that we are together standing in front of this deterioration [of the situation].

The strength of the Israeli members’ value commitments – combined with their awareness of the asymmetries – also helped to sustain the cross-conflict collective identity for the Israelis in the absence of joint action. As Shai commented,

It's amazing how quickly we picked up on the place in which we were before the war … I think that the war gave us the impetus, rose the motivation, and left us with an urge to become stronger … This crisis was deep and our solidarity appeared to be working, so it made us more integrated, even though on the grounds, concretely, we were only Israelis [protesting]. But the solidarity, which is in the heart, not always in the field, withheld.

Most of the Palestinians, in fact, were quite pleased with the actions taken by the Israelis inside Israel. They recognized that their Israeli colleagues did all that they could to get the several thousand people out that they did. Ih hab shared,

[When I saw the protests via the pictures and through the media], I felt proud and identified with the organization more because they actually undertook these activities by themselves, not necessarily with the Palestinians. And it showed what they believe in, their convictions, and their identities, which are against the war, which was very good.

As the above suggests, the willingness of the Israelis to undertake these activities, which affirmed publicly the solidarity and indicated their strong commitment to the organization’s goals, reinforced and even strengthened the Palestinian participants’ identification with the organization.

Palestinian identification was further strengthened and legitimated by the media coverage. As Marwan noted, ‘The reactions we got from the demonstrations were positive, because Palestinians received them as anti-war demonstrations. They were even on Al Jazeera. So people received it positively – not just in the organization, but in the wider society.’ Reflecting on it, Marwan added,

In CFP, we get less critique in our society than other organizations, but that’s mainly because of the Israeli partners – the refuseniks. They don’t serve in the occupied territories, and they do sympathy (sic) actions or demonstrations of this kind. So people accept them more than other [joint] organizations that do [mostly] dialogue. So I think this is very important. The Israelis’ actions are to our credit on the Palestinian side. I think we depend a lot on their action … [And in part because of this, I feel that] CFP is my political home. This is a kind of solidarity, a kind of brotherhood. We see ourselves in the same ship with differences.

As the above makes clear, the uni-national actions undertaken by the Israelis and the resulting media coverage were critical for the Palestinians, and strengthened their identification with the organization.

As the next section will highlight, PCFF similarly managed to maintain a strong sense of ‘we’ during the Gaza War with no joint action. In fact, PCFF actually managed to come out of the war more united than they were prior, largely due to the protest actions by the Israeli members.

**Parents Circle/Families Forum**

During the run-up to the Gaza War, some Israelis from PCFF met to decide what they should do. The Palestinian members of PCFF were not able to join as the Israeli army had imposed a closure on the West Bank. Nonetheless, the Palestinian co-General Manager was aware of this uninational meeting
and approved. Prior to the war, PCFF’s work centered largely around joint educational lectures in the schools and community centers, but with the violence intensifying around them, this no longer seemed sufficient for this binational group of bereaved parents and children dedicated to ending the Palestinian–Israeli conflict.

At the meeting, the Israelis decided to set up a Peace Square in central Tel Aviv, where they could engage with people on the street. Highlighting the depth of their value commitments, they decided to sit in the Square every evening until the current cycle of violence subsided. Ironically, on the day they received permission from the Tel Aviv municipality and the Israeli police to set up the Square, the war began. Every evening during the 50-daylong war, Israeli members set up 50–100 chairs in a circle, hung their banners which read, ‘It won't stop until we talk.’ They spoke into a microphone about what was happening inside Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories and about their personal stories of bereavement. A common theme was their collective belief that military action is not the answer. The audience was invited to join in and space was made for people who joined the circle to ask questions and share their thoughts, fears, and anger.

Given the central location of the Peace Square, many passersby saw the Square. While some were supportive, many others disagreed and asked critical questions such as, ‘How would you deal with the missiles and the tunnels?’ and ‘What would you do?’ Others just yelled, ‘traitors,’ ‘you’re naïve,’ ‘shame on you,’ or ‘move to Gaza!’

Palestinian members were not able to attend for the first few weeks of the war since the West Bank was under closure by the Israeli military army. Sometimes, however, Palestinian members would be Skyped in to speak. And after the first few weeks, Palestinian members would occasionally venture to speak in the Square. While this did not happen often, it was incredibly meaningful for the Israelis when it did since it confirmed their solidarity and made their message to their own community more powerful.

Due to the normalization taboo in Palestinian society and the verbal abuse Palestinians sometimes faced in Tel Aviv, it still was difficult for Palestinians to participate in the Square. As one noted,

You don't know how hard it is for me to come here. I go back to my refugee camp afterwards and people say to me: ‘You’re meeting Israelis? Ninety percent of them are for the war!’ I told them, ‘Even if there’s only one percent [advocating for an end to the war and occupation], I would go.’

It was also challenging for Israeli members. Indeed, regularly participating in the Square meant sharing one's story of loss on a regular basis and enduring abuse from nearby pedestrians. Moreover, with their multiple identities, some of the Israeli members had loved ones, including children, serving in Gaza. In the words of Nava,

It was very difficult taking a stand in the midst of the war when such a large part of Israel Jewish population supported the war … And [it was hard] facing all the comments! They shouted ‘traitors,’ ‘stupid,’ ‘you’re naïve!’ The most complicated thing though, was dealing within me, with the conflict of caring about my dear ones who were there [in Gaza], and then … hearing stories about what's happening [there] and the terrible loss [of life].

Notwithstanding the challenges, several Israeli members found the Square to be an island of sanity during the war: ‘The only hours where I felt I was sane were when I attended the Square, because that's where I felt like I belonged … It felt like the right place to be – the only right place to be.’ Just as it had in CFP, these gatherings strengthened for the Israelis their sense of togetherness and increased their identification with the organization.

The Palestinian Co-CEO of PCFF declared that all other activities aside from the Peace Square would cease. Zaid explained,

We froze everything else … It doesn't mean that we stop believing in peace and reconciliation. It means we have to be connected to the situation! I told all the [Palestinian] staff and the management, ‘you have to keep yourself connected to the vision, and you need to stay connected to the [Palestinian] members, so they don't feel, ‘There is a war, there is no organization.’

One of the events that the organization postponed was the summer peace camp for kids of the members. While Israeli members wanted the camp to continue, the Palestinians insisted that this was not acceptable during war. In the words of Samir,
We always have this challenge. We are not equals. And many Israelis asked to do things that don't suit us, for example to send our kids to Tel Aviv during the war for a camp. We said, 'Why not send your kids to Bethlehem?' They said, 'It's not safe' and 'The parents will never agree.' I said, 'Yeah, we will never agree too … Not during a war! You need to be wise! Don't ignore the normalization issue!'

Zaid added, 'We have built a very good base [between us though]. They have started to understand that if I don't agree to the summer camp [at this time], it means there are sensitive things [i.e. the normalization taboo] … And then they don't ask me again and again about this issue and about this subject.'

While there were a few Israelis that were frustrated that they could not do more activities together during the war – and wished that Palestinians would not be so concerned with being considered normalizers – they recognized the asymmetry in the situation, and accepted it, which was key to sustaining a strong cross-conflict collective identity during the war.

Despite the overall lack of binational activity during the war, relations in the organization were actually strengthened. This is even more remarkable given the significant organizational conflict between the two sides prior to the war. As one Israeli jokingly noted, 'All we need is war!' Similar to CFP, the tension that marked the previous wars in Gaza was not as strong. One of the old-timers, Mati, suggested the importance of having a shared perspective on the war.

The most amazing thing is what did not happen. I mean if I look back, usually when there were clashes, Israelis did all their effort to put Gaza under the table and Palestinians did every effort possible to put Gaza on the table. It created a lot of tension in 2006 and 2009. The Israelis tended to adopt the Israeli explanation, the fact that they're shooting rockets at us … and there is no reason for it. This last summer the big difference is that there were no arguments! Most of the Israelis felt exactly like the Palestinians from day one!

Even more critical from a Palestinian perspective, the Israeli side of the organization had a clear voice against the war. Indeed, many Palestinians expressed pride with what their Israeli colleagues were doing, which was important for the Israelis to hear. In the words of Samir, 

'It was very important – and not easy … It was not easy [for them] to sit in a tent in Tel Aviv in the middle of the war and to talk about peace and reconciliation. Once I was there and a few settlers came, and they got crazy, 'What are you doing? You are traitors! You are like horses for the Arabs!'

Similarly, Zaid noted, 'It was very good for the organization to be in the media [and] in the [Israeli] street and to meet the people.' Mati additionally stated,

'It was all around the media. We were from day one, one of the few, very clear and very loud voices against the war, which is extremely important for the Palestinians because it's very easy to say, 'We want peace and we have to get together … and we justify the bombing of Gaza.' It doesn't go together. I mean this is tatbiya [normalization]. So, I think [this anti-war action] made a big difference.

For years, Palestinian members wanted their Israeli colleagues to participate in more political protest in their community. Indeed, several months before the war, Mais argued, 'The most important thing is for them [the Israeli side] to demonstrate against their government … If they can't go against their government, then what's the point? They should definitely be more active within their society.' This sentiment was widely shared among the Palestinian interviewees at the time (see Gawerc, 2016a). While all the Palestinians believed in the lectures, many were frustrated that the Israelis were not more active in protest activities inside Israeli society. Several Palestinian interviewees even indicated in the months before the war that they were feeling less connected to the organization as a result. As one noted, 

'Even though most of the time we are doing everything together … it's a very limited [sense of] 'we' [right now]. At the end of the day, I have to go back to my [refugee] camp and the Israelis go back to Tel Aviv. I have to go back to face my life again, which is the occupation, which is the conflict; and he will go back to his life, which is easier. Everything going on politically affects this sense of 'we'… The [lectures in the] Israeli high schools … is really coming from our needs and our beliefs. But also, the action on the ground is a need; and it's becoming more so. I want to see my partner, as an Israeli, as part of this 'we,' tell the Palestinians in my [refugee] camp [and show them] that they are against the occupation. When I come back to my community alone [I'm told … 'it's normalization!'] We need action on the ground! It would reflect, build, [and strengthen] the 'we!'

Remarkably, every Palestinian interviewee I spoke with post-Gaza War felt that, the Peace Square, with its clear anti-war message, was an appropriate action (see also Gawerc, 2016b). In the words of Samir,
The organization had a loud voice for the first time through the website, the Internet, and through the Peace Square, which was the most important activity … For many long years, the Parents Circle met each other [and brought others together for dialogue activities] … but we never had this [critical] activity on the ground.

Uri, the Israeli Co-CEO of PCFF who participated regularly in the Peace Square noted,

The Palestinians told us once, ‘We are so proud of you.’ I mean, what it did to relations between Israelis and Palestinians in the organization! … We were never considered like an activist organization. They always said, ‘Look at CFP … they’re doing the real stuff. We sit in offices. We go to classrooms. We don’t dirty our hands.’ This time, one of the members told me, ‘I was walking in Bethlehem and someone told me, ‘You are from the Parents Circle. I saw [via the media] what you did in Tel Aviv. All the honor to you. Bravo!’

Similarly, Baruch related,

The effect was really emotional on them, and they said that this activity was really well perceived on the Palestinian side because it’s an act of solidarity. We just stood there every day. They knew that we did it in part for them, to stop the war. At some point, the Palestinian press covered it … [which] was really important [to them] … And when they came to talk in the Square, they said that it’s very important that this Israeli manifestation is taking place every night.

As the above makes clear, it was crucial for the Palestinians to see the Israelis affirm their commitment to the organization’s goals via visible protest activities. The media coverage further strengthened their identification with the organization, as it helped them to legitimate their involvement in the organization, given the positive feedback they received from it. For the Israelis, the preexisting relationships, their strong value commitments, their consciousness of the asymmetry, the validation they received from their Palestinian colleagues for their actions, and the binational representation when possible all aided their ability to maintain a cross-conflict collective identity in the absence of joint action.

After the war, PCFF had a members meeting near Bethlehem. While expecting 50, more than 150 showed up – 100 Palestinians and 50 Israelis, including some new members who discovered the organization during the war. Samir commented, ‘It was very difficult for the members to meet each other after the war … But they [the Palestinians] understood that they cannot blame the Israeli members … and that they came to support us.’ In the words of Uri, ‘We felt strength at that point, being together. And because we came from a place of strength [a result of our actions during the war] we could continue.’

As the above suggests, the war provided an opportunity for the dominant group to demonstrate its commitment to the values and the collective identity of the organization. And as it turned out, action by the dominant group – and solely the dominant group – was required to sustain the cross-conflict collective identity.

**Discussion and conclusion**

These two movement organizations managed to sustain a cross-conflict collective identity and solidarity during the war even though there were no joint collective actions. The collective identity, in the case of CFP, was that of former combatants and/or those who had previously participated in the violence or maintenance of the Israeli military occupation, but who are now participating in a joint struggle to end the occupation and the conflict. Collective identity was manifest in the continued emotional and cognitive identification of the participants to the organization, the deep trust among the participants including across the conflict line, and the clear recognition, as Noam noted, ‘that we are on the same side … and that we are together standing in front of this deterioration [of the situation, even if on the ground it was only Israelis that were protesting].’ It was also manifest in the feelings of many, articulated by Marwan, that ‘CFP is [their] political home … [and it’s a type] of brotherhood.’

The collective identity, in the case of PCFF, was that of bereaved parents and children – those who have experienced violence at the hands of the other – who come together in one organization to say the conflict, violence, and occupation need to end. Similar to CFP, the collective identity was manifest in their ongoing identification with the organization and their sense of belonging to it even in this hostile environment, their sense of mutual obligation to each other epitomized by the actions
that each took for the other (e.g. the Israelis manning the Peace Square every evening during the war, and the commitment of some of the Palestinian members to attend the Peace Square occasionally notwithstanding all the difficulties they faced doing so), the trust in their shared commitments, the pride of the Palestinian members at seeing the Israeli members take such a strong action, and the feeling of strength, postwar, in their togetherness.

Their ability to sustain their collective identity and sense of solidarity is rather remarkable given that wars have a tendency to foster great tension and often times hurt relations in cross-conflict groups (Gawerc, 2012), including, as the interviewees noted, in these two movement organizations in the prior two wars in Gaza. So what allowed these two organizations to emerge stronger and feeling more united this time?

Ironically, what was needed during the war was the Israelis being willing to come together on their own – with no or only minor Palestinian representation – and to clearly articulate to their own public through protest activities in Israel that the Israeli military operation was not justified. Palestinian participation in these protests was not required. Indeed, as Shai had noted, the solidarity was in the heart, not in the field.

This allowed the Palestinian activists to see the Israelis, in a high-risk environment, affirm their commitments to the organization's goals and collective identity. When they witnessed the Israeli protest activities on Al Jazeera, Palestinian television, and/or Facebook, or saw it first hand as a representative of the Palestinian side, they tended to feel proud of their Israeli colleagues, and affinity and identification with their organization. The media coverage of the protest activities was significant as it legitimated their involvement in their cross-conflict organization. Since the Palestinian community often sees cross-conflict work as normalizing the occupation, the anti-war and anti-occupation protests were fundamental because they showed that the organizations are not normalizing the occupation, and are indeed, a critical part of the struggle to end it. Even though they were on the sidelines, from the perspective of many of the Palestinian participants, these were some of the most important actions their organizations had ever undertaken. And these actions, which met the emotional and rational needs of the Palestinians (cf. Flesher-Fominaya, 2010b), further strengthened their identification with the organization.

For the Israelis, solidarity was largely a product of the relationships established before the war and the trust that was already built. While some Israelis were disappointed that Palestinians were not willing to participate in joint actions and/or did not engage in uninational action in line with the organizations’ mission in the occupied West Bank, they accommodated to this, recognizing the asymmetry and the disproportionate risks to their Palestinian colleagues. However, it was important for the Israelis to feel that their efforts to lead the anti-war protests in Israel were acknowledged by their Palestinian partners. The symbolic Palestinian representation at some of the protests was also meaningful as it helped to manifest publically a critical aspect of the collective identity, namely, the binational component. This made their message to their own community more powerful, as it confirmed that they do indeed have partners on the other side. Furthermore, this representation helped to reassure the Israelis that their Palestinian colleagues were still committed to joint activism with them. Finally, their strong value commitments to their organizations and working cross-conflict aided their ability to maintain the cross-conflict collective identity of their organization, even in the absence of joint action.

Thus, this paper makes clear that for cross-conflict peace movement organizations in asymmetrical conflicts, the action does not always have to be carried out together or include activists from both (or all) sides of a conflict line. Indeed, ironically, in certain situations, uni-national collective action by the dominant group may be what is needed to maintain a joint binational collective identity.

The literature clearly documents the potential benefits of visible actions for collective identity and solidarity. Indeed, it can engender bonds, create memories, foster a shared history, cement trust, and clarify a social movement organization's understanding of who they are (Flesher-Fominaya, 2010a; Gawerc, 2016a; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). But it is not clear why it is perceived as a requirement. This study indicates that in certain cases – most notably, for cross-conflict peace movement organizations
in periods of crisis – the actions taken by the dominant group may be more important than joint action. Indeed, it becomes an opportunity for dominant groups to prove themselves, while also taking pressure off minority groups, which often face more pressure in these contexts. Strong actions taken by the dominant group may also help to legitimate the involvement of minority activists in joint organizations, further strengthening their commitment and identification with the organization. For the dominant group, the collective identity can be maintained through the preexisting ties and relationships and recognition of the asymmetrical risks, combined with the validation received from minority colleagues, the symbolic binational representation when possible, and their strong value commitments.

It is even more remarkable that these two joint Israeli–Palestinian movement organizations were able to maintain a strong collective identity without joint action, since they lack several features that scholars have argued are critical for groups working across difference and inequality including: a neutral space to meet, symmetrical relationships, and the ability to freely discuss their identity with the other during the war (Kay, 2005; Lichterman, 1999; Wood, 2005). In less polarized and asymmetric conflict settings, activists from both communities may have been able to meet in person to discuss the situation – something that was difficult to do in Israel/Palestine – which could have further aided the solidarity and the sense of 'we', in the absence of joint action.

While there is no way to know what would have happened had the Israelis not engaged in significant anti-war protests or required the presence of their Palestinian partners during the war, it is very likely that the organizations would have become engulfed in conflict and the sense of solidarity would have been shaken, as it had in previous wars. During the previous wars, in which there were no significant Israeli uninational actions, there was much more conflict and tension in the organizations, and particularly on the Palestinian side, commitment lessened, and activists withdrew their participation. This is not surprising, because as noted above, war tends to challenge cross-conflict alliances.

There are, of course, some costs and risks to this approach – most notably, a sense of being disconnected among the activists who were not in contact with colleagues across the conflict line. Indeed, if they protested together, they could have viably developed some shared memories during the war (Flesher-Fominaya, 2010a). On the other hand, this would not have honored the Palestinian activists’ desire to not have to participate in joint protests or activities during this time, which would have inevitably fostered tension. Indeed, many of the frustrations expressed by Palestinians in both organizations revolved around the Israelis pushing – at least, in the beginning – for joint activities. Moreover, these uninational protests (with at times minor Palestinian representation) allowed for other shared memories – namely, the moment when Israelis took strong action focused on their own community and largely on their own, powerfully presented their organization’s binational collective identity.

Without meaning to minimize the risks and costs associated with non-shared action during war, this paper suggests that when the more powerful and dominant group engages in action which supports the stated organization’s goals – and the less powerful group agrees – then they can somewhat more easily reconnect once it becomes logistically feasible and is deemed viable. Until then, solidarity may just need to exist in the heart.

Notes

3. It should be noted that ‘left-wing’ in the Israeli context is defined by political attitudes toward peace.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
Notes on contributor


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