

Emerson College

Digital Commons at Emerson College

Emerson Authors, Researchers, & Creators

2009

From Sulha to Salaam: Connecting local knowledge with international negotiations for lasting peace in Palestine/Israel

Mneesha Gellman
Emerson College

Mandi Vuinovich

true

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.emerson.edu/arc>

Recommended Citation

Gellman, Mneesha; Vuinovich, Mandi; and true, "From Sulha to Salaam: Connecting local knowledge with international negotiations for lasting peace in Palestine/Israel" (2009). *Emerson Authors, Researchers, & Creators*. 1358.

<https://digitalcommons.emerson.edu/arc/1358>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons at Emerson College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Emerson Authors, Researchers, & Creators by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Emerson College. For more information, please contact melissa_diberardino@emerson.edu.

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227653063>

From Sulha to Salaam: Connecting local knowledge with international negotiations for lasting peace in Palestine/Israel

Article in *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* · September 2008

DOI: 10.1002/crq.227

CITATIONS

21

READS

149

2 authors, including:



Mneesha Gellman

Emerson College

31 PUBLICATIONS 193 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Education, Citizen Formation, and Cultural Resilience: Indigenous and Spanish Language Politics in California and Mexico [View project](#)



Education, Citizen Formation, and Cultural Resilience [View project](#)

From Sulha to Salaam: Connecting Local Knowledge with International Negotiations for Lasting Peace in Palestine/Israel

MNEESHA GELLMAN

MANDI VUINOVICH

In this article, we survey conflict resolution in the Arab world and then turn to sulha, a Palestinian peacemaking process, for an in-depth analysis to distill lessons for Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. We identify key features of the community-based practice of sulha that could be invoked at the international level: restoration of honor and dignity, reconciliation in the wider community, and public demarcation of the end of violence. Our argument is that culture is crucial in fostering mutual understanding in conflict resolution, and that ensuring the basic human right to dignity should be an essential component of international third-party interventions. Sulha is promoted as a technique for addressing the right to dignity within contentious multiparty discourse through the tactic of education and community exposure at both the local and international levels. We conclude that reembedding the essence of dignity and honor expression at the community level is a critical component of sustainable nonviolent coexistence sought through international relations.

NOTE: The authors would like to thank Reneé Worringer, Morgan Brigg, and Joshua Dankoff for comments on previous drafts of this article.

This article explores the conflict resolution practice of *sulha* in Arab communities in Palestine/Israel and its potential to offer a more culturally informed reconciliation mechanism for international negotiations. Contrary to popular perceptions of the Middle East, the Arab world has numerous conflict resolution practices that harken back to pre-Islamic times. Assumptions about the nature of social reality in Arab societies tend to stereotype Arab people, and especially Arab men, as violent and profiting from perpetual violence (Abu-Nimer, 2003; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall, 2005). Instead, we interpret violence as a survival tactic, employed when peaceful cohabitation is arrested by consistent threats to identity and security. This survival-based violence is initiated by both Palestinians and Israelis, manifesting in various forms such as suicide bombing, military and civilian initiated attacks, and displacement.

Accordingly, this article strives to assess a conflict resolution practice of Arab communities in Palestine/Israel and analyze aspects of *sulha* that could be incorporated into standard negotiation techniques by international actors. First-hand experience of the dilemmas of the “other” is difficult to come by in conflict resolution, but *sulha* ritual offers a nonbinding forum for parties to explore the cultural constraints and human needs operating behind the stated positions of international-level negotiations. If this experience is mirrored on the local level, with Palestinian and Israeli peace builders implementing ritual aspects of *sulha* as role play exercises in meetings, cross-cultural encounters, and in peace and conflict-based academic curricula, then the larger affected populations on both sides may see their own experiences reflected internationally. Through school curriculums, community education workshops, and ritualized peacemaking events, *sulha*’s essence can be locally transmitted. At the international level, prenegotiation seminars on *sulha*’s history, along with presentations of its myriad rituals, would expose high-level peacemakers to a conceptual toolkit that has proven successful throughout the Middle East for generations. The gap between international and local peace initiatives in Palestine/Israel has been vast, but in this article we plumb the range of possibilities for engaging *sulha*’s lessons on the path to peace.

In our survey of the literature on Jewish-Israeli and Arab conflict management techniques, we generally found that the Arab side of conflict resolution practice has been underrepresented. As such, we have chosen to focus our research on filling in a missing piece. Simultaneously, we recognize that the very essence of conflict resolution processes necessitates exploration of Israeli Jewish and Arab practices together to work collaboratively. This is

because, ultimately, inclusive negotiation practices are needed to reduce violence and validate each other's narratives. Also, we acknowledge the distinctiveness of secular Israelis and the spectrum of religiously Jewish culture, law, and practice in the Diaspora, but we cannot cover this vast angle in the purview of this article. Instead, we focus on *sulha* as a ritual to change the patterns of conflict, while affirming that for peace building to be successful in the long run it must include all people who are affected by the conflict (Whitney, Liebler, and Cooperrider, 2003).

Sulh or *sulha* is used consistently throughout the literature referring to the process of reconciliation. Equally, the term *sulhab* is employed in some regions to refer to the "event or ritual of reconciliation rather than the process" (Abu-Nimer, 2003, p. 99). For the purpose of this article, *sulha*, as noted by Irani and Funk (1998), will be employed "to refer to a ritualized process of restorative justice and peacemaking and to the actual outcome or condition sealed by that process" (p. 52). Fundamental to *sulha*'s process is the reembedding of dignity into the social relationship web. Dignity is enshrined as an essential component to human well-being in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article One, and in the Preamble (United Nations, 1948). Safe guarding this basic human right to dignity could take place in international negotiations not only when awareness of its importance is increased but when dignity is perceived as an integral part of conflict resolution. Thus far, international mediations of Palestinian-Israeli conflicts have lacked the ability to transpose dignity from the community to the international level. Conversely, by incorporating dignity into elite discourses, representative negotiators will address the need of their constituencies for increased recognition of this basic human right.

The research question we unpack is, Can the traditional Arab conflict resolution practice of *sulha* inform mediation techniques by offering insight into how people understand conflict in their everyday life? Moreover, might conflict resolution practitioners at the international level use these insights to address entrenched perceptions among parties in their quest for reconciliation within international negotiation processes?

Sulha, a Palestinian peace-making process historically related to wider Arab conflict resolution practices, has evolved to meet specific changing societal and cultural needs depending on location. The *sulha* practice and process embodies "ideals of cooperation, negotiation, honor, and compromise" highlighting interpersonal conflict management strategies that influence the larger community through "indigenous sociopolitical interaction" (Lang, 2002, p. 53). This practice is a conflict management and reconciliation

process that is employed to resolve an extensive range of disputes, often times dealing with inter- and intrafamilial conflicts such as divorce and murder.

Sulha reconciles individuals and communities who have been hurt and offended, by “stressing the link between the psychological and political dimensions of communal life through its recognition that injuries between individuals and groups will fester and expand if not acknowledged, repaired, forgiven, and transcended” (Irani, 1999, p. 9). Furthermore, in Palestinian society “it is the only acceptable way to begin the healing of deeply wounded people, who, with time, will eventually return to the natural course of their relationship” (Jabbour, 1996, p. 99). Christian, Muslims, and Druze Arabs embrace sulha to resolve disputes among individuals, families, groups, and villages (Shihade, 2005). Lang (2002) notes that this type of mediation “is employed widely to resolve disputes, however trivial or serious, between (and sometimes within) families” and has cultural moral authority to handle grave offences such as murder (p. 53).

After a brief historical overview, we theoretically situate and define contentious terms that we operationalize throughout this essay. Next we give a brief survey of conflict resolution in the Arab world and then turn to deeper exploration of *sulha*, to distill its lessons for international negotiations. The role of mediators, the truce agreement, social rituals, and the closing ceremony within the sulha process are highlighted. We then identify three key lessons of sulha: restoration of honor and dignity, reconciliation that engages the wider community, and public demarcation of the end of violence. These social interactions have proven themselves over time to transform volatile relationships into ones of nonviolent coexistence. Because international negotiations regarding Palestinian and Israeli territory have historically crumbled in the face of violence, we turn to sulha for possible interactive techniques that can inform more enduring negotiations. To conclude, we reassert that the role of culture is crucial in fostering mutual understanding in conflict resolution. Furthermore, we state that sulha’s reconciliation methods be understood as a technique for addressing the basic human need for dignity through three specific intervention processes—the *jaha*, *hodna*, and *sulha*—which are described further on.

The purpose of this article is exploratory, not prescriptive. We do not intend to offer a generic solution for peace in the Middle East, but we do believe there is space to incorporate indigenous Arab conflict resolution practices in international peace negotiations. Although we desire the sulha process to be fundamentally integrated into international negotiations, until

further in-depth research is conducted we refrain from making specific suggestions for model integration. Instead, we offer only general ideas for sulha's promotion with the goal being to emphasize the importance of bridging rational and emotional dialogue to address the human need for dignity at the international level. An overview of sulha's historical background is now presented as a departure point for contextualizing the culture of *sulha*.

Bridging History, Theory, and Language

Sulha's historical underpinnings are rooted in the religious writings of the now dominant faiths in the Palestine/Israel region. Notable works include early Semitic writings, later Christian scriptures dating from the first century C.E., and more specifically later pre-Islamic and Islamic Arab literature (Jabbour, 1996). *Sulha* originated as a conflict resolution method roughly two thousand years ago between warring desert tribes in the Middle East. At that time, two conflicting parties would agree to resolve an issue assisted by a mediator (Shabi, 2003). Today sulha is understood by community leaders in Palestine as a ritualized process of conflict resolution to manage and contain a wide range of conflicts (Irani and Funk, 1998). Sometimes this takes place in the absence of state authority, and other times in conjunction with judicial systems.

It is noteworthy, with the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent implementation of martial law, that many Palestinian communities reinstated tribal laws and customs to manage and reconcile conflict (Moussalli, 1997). For the purpose of this article, we focus on the Arab population of the Occupied Territories (the West Bank and Gaza Strip), which we refer to as Palestine, and on Arabs living within the current borders of Israel. The majority of the literature available on the practice of sulha focuses on the Galilee region of Israel because of the work of House of Hope, founded by Elias Jabbour, whose work is seminal in documenting contemporary *sulha*.

In the modern-day political state of Israel, sulha has a unique embedded relationship with formal justice mechanisms. Sulha does not replace civil or criminal state law; rather, it is employed in conjunction with it. Arab crime victims often choose to pursue justice through the state court system and sulha simultaneously (Tsafir, 2006). This modern adaptation of sulha reflects its ongoing societal importance and malleability. During pre-Islamic times (*Jahiliyah*), sulha acted as the exclusive tribal law and was typically the only means for resolution of disputes (Jabbour, 1996). Brown

(1997) highlights the unique relationship between modern state justice mechanisms and *sulha*, stating that disputants often pursue traditional reconciliation in tandem with arbitration. Ultimately the court issues the final binding outcome, but *sulha* offers culturally appropriate mechanism for long-term reconciliation. When the state is unwilling or unable to intervene, Arab and Islamic communities have sustained indigenous conflict resolution practices, which offer reconciliation in ways that address the need for honor and dignity (Shihade, 2005).

We next analyze a number of terms and their conceptual underpinnings. For the scope and purpose of our argument, the term *Arab* describes people of Arab ethnicity representing mixed religious backgrounds. *Western* is used to refer to all cultures directly derived from Europe that are Christian and historically not socially bound by village kinship systems (Salla, 1993). (We acknowledge that *Western* is a problematic term that cannot capture the complexity of the relationship between cultures and nation.) In the context of Palestine/Israel, we take conflict to be a struggle to define identity and security, although ontologically we hold conflict as neither positive nor negative but rather as a dynamic force for change that can destroy or construct social relationships (Galtung, 1989; Liebler and Sampson, 2003). Conflict resolution involves a third party with varying degrees of potential neutrality or impartiality. Such a person can assist disputants as they move through conciliation, facilitation, mediation, or other problem-solving techniques to change the dynamics of interaction. Like reconciliation, “where concerns about both the past and future can meet” (Lederach 1997, p. 27), the negotiation process is characterized by relationships.

Culture influences both how relationships are built as well as the norms and values that socially create meaning. Social constructivism is the basic foundation of conflict resolution, which emphasizes the importance of culture in meaning making. In other words, people “use locally received or constructed common sense to perceive, interpret, evaluate, and act on and in both internal and external reality” (Avruch and Black, 1991, p. 31). Culture is composed of experiences, “more or less organized, learned or created by the individuals of a population, including those images or encodement and their interpretations or meanings transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves” (Abu-Nimer, 2001, p. 687). Avruch and Black (1991) confirm that the “culture question” and cultural variation in conflict resolution are of paramount importance (see also Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall, 2005). If people’s needs are culturally specific, it follows that conflict resolution processes should address human

needs with culturally specific means. However, the field of conflict resolution continues to grapple with the question of where to infuse cultural needs within reconciliation processes.

Social norms fundamental to culture are integral to everyday life and are also present in conflict. Conflict is often seen as a negative obstacle that must be overcome, rather than a resource to be drawn on in conciliation. Yet “culture is not posited as the cause of conflict, instead, it is intertwined with conflict and the processes of resolution” (Avruch and Black, 1991, p. 31). We understand conflict as part of the social relationship web, as constructed at the individual, communal, and international levels, which must incorporate culture to be sustainable. Indeed, dignity is a universal thread running through cultures involved in the negotiation process, and awareness and enforcement of this basic human right is essential for non-violent coexistence. For Arab communities, part of meaning construction is engendered by culturally embedded rituals such as *sulha*, due in large part to honor and dignity restoration.

Sulha, as ritualized behavior, creates a space for regaining dignity and honor where it has been lost. Ritual is a technical, aesthetic, and communicative process that plays an important role in conflict resolution and reconciliation (Irani and Funk, 2001; see also Edmund R. Leach, “Ritual,” in Sills, 1968, pp. 520–526). As an interpersonal strategy, *sulha* permits micro-level relationship mending that has the potential for macro-level impact. This article seeks to promote the creation of dignity and honor as cultural and ritual resources that are underrepresented in contemporary Palestinian-Israeli negotiations.

Situating *Sulha* in Arab Conflict Resolution

A survey of contemporary literature exposes the breadth and historical depth of conflict resolution in Arab culture, offering insight into traditional, political, and religious dispute resolution practices throughout the Middle East region. Because of *sulha*'s applied adaptability, we find it to be an encouraging point of departure to connect community reconciliation and wider negotiations.

We first recognize the seminal work of Elias Jabbour, founder of the House of Hope Peace Centre in Galilee, who has ceaselessly participated in, promoted, and documented the intricacies of *sulha* (Jabbour, 1996). He identifies the arduous task of “returning the rights and dignity to the families of both the offender and the offended” (p. 95), which rests on the

mediators, who must be highly culturally attuned to avoid mistakes that could plunge the disputants back into violence.

Jabbour's work is complemented by the recent examination of the state's role and lack of ability or willingness to respond to conflict, presented by Shihade (2005) in her research centered on Palestinian Arab communities in the Galilee region of Israel. Shihade documents successful contemporary containment and management of conflict at the community level through *sulha*, importantly proving that *sulha* is not a lost cultural practice. More broadly, Abdalla's examination (2000–01) of Islamic and Western conflict resolution literature focuses on Islamic interpersonal conflict resolution. Accordingly, Abdalla highlights the interdependence and "culture of relatedness" that often act as a corner stone in Middle Eastern communities. He stresses that such characteristics should not be overshadowed by models for interpersonal conflict intervention that stem from assumptions of individualism and independent existence (Abdalla, 2000–01).

Paul Salem (1997), in addition to Irani and Funk (1998), assess the applicability of conflict resolution approaches to Arab cultural, social, and religious methods of conflict reduction and management. They make the important distinction that although *sulha* is not universally legitimized by all Middle Eastern states because of political and religious differences within states, nevertheless ritual remains a fundamental method to control conflict and maintain harmony within and among communities. Ritualistic reconciliation practices such as *sulha* help groups acknowledge, repair, forgive, and transcend conflict on the psychological and political levels. Ritual expression of conflict through *sulha* allows honor and face saving to pervade interactions and reach beyond political and religious demarcations. Such expression is typified within a communal setting, but we suggest it could offer international mediators an avenue for culturally meaningful engagement among disputants.

The ritualistic component of *sulha* has been isolated for too long at the village level. Academically, its use has been positively explored in international water conflict negotiations (Wolf, 2000) and modern urban settings (Drieskens, 2006). Smith's work (1989) complements the native Arab voice of Elias Jabbour, whose insider's perspective is an invaluable gateway to understanding local conflict resolution traditions in the Galilee. Our research also draws on the continuous work of Abu-Nimer (1996a, 1996b, 2001, 2003) and his writings on conflict resolution from Western and Middle Eastern perspectives, Islamic conflict management, and peace building.

Finally, a notable point of contact between modern state-centric justice mechanisms and *sulha* is examined by Tsafir (2006) in his paper focusing on the complex relationship between the Israeli legal system and *sulha* agreements. Interestingly, Tsafir notes that *sulha* agreements between an accused and a victim or victim's family can influence the judge's decisions during criminal proceedings. *Sulha* agreements tend to work in favor of the suspect in respect to detention and sentencing, but they can also work against the accused when its weight is attached to the verdict. Lang (2002) examines *sulha* as well in relation to state law and order practices, noting that "these systems generally are not in opposition, and neither has replaced the other" (p. 62). Because state systems do not reconcile disputing parties, they ultimately lack the ability to adequately rectify a situation of injustice caused by an imbalance of honor. The key component of *sulha* in relation to state justice mechanisms is its ability to "create an environment in which people feel emotionally able to resume peaceful relations and continue living together in close quarters" (p. 62).

We see the potential of *sulha* to be incorporated into international dialogue to recreate this emotional sense of honor throughout the negotiation process. Furthermore, Palestinian people may feel more included in international discussions concerning their own fate if their human right to dignity is acknowledged through culturally based ritual. The literature just mentioned offers a solid foundation for our further exploration of needs expression and management through ritualistic aspects of *sulha* and the potential for practitioners to integrate these elements at the international level for more holistic and culturally meaningful negotiations. Educational activities at both the local and international levels have the potential to revitalize *sulha*, and ritualized role play is a potential medium. One advantage of education through role play is that the power of direct experience may help channel reactions to conflict toward greater understanding of the "other." Furthermore, *sulha* enacted in role play opens a door to the creative, experiential self that touches the core of the conflict issue: feelings have been hurt, dignity compromised, and this emotional context will have to be addressed to assuage the violence.

The Sulha Process

Basic assumptions that underlie the *sulha* process are outlined by Abu-Nimer (2003) in his discussion of peace-building frameworks. First, disputants must be persuaded to invest power in the *sulha* process through norms and

sociocultural understandings of morality. These norms imply that to seek harmony is more noble and correct than to pursue victory, as victory entails limited benefits to the community. In other words, compromise is prioritized over individual gain. Intervention by a third party is necessary in the majority of cases. Finally, with meaningful control and execution of *sulha*, reconciliation and social harmony is not only possible but preferable to Islamic or civil courts because of its ability to restore order in the society.

Mediating Actors: Jaha

We now turn to the three main elements of the *sulha*: forming the mediating body (*jaha*); securing the truce (*hodna*); and closing the ceremony, also referred to as the *sulha*. Because the *sulha* process is not incorporated into current international negotiations, we find it important to offer the reader a comprehensive understanding of its details. We can then speculate as to the role of *sulha*'s underlying themes when separated from its circumstantial characteristics.

The role of the *jaha* is to petition the offended household on behalf of the aggressor and plead with the aggrieved family to seek reconciliation through *sulha* in place of violent revenge (Jabbour, 1996). Forgiveness and honor are the primary underpinning sociocultural assumptions employed by the *jaha* to encourage certain behaviors of tolerance and respect between the families (Abu-Nimer, 1996a). Thereafter, the mediators—often Muslim, Christian, or Druze notables—are chosen for their embodiment of moral authority. The composition of the *jaha* reflects the Arab approach to the preferred third party being an “unbiased insider with ongoing connections to the major disputants as well as a strong sense of the common good and standing within the community” (Irani and Funk, 1998, p. 61). Additionally, the *jaha* members are chosen for their honesty and decency (Smith, 1989), experience, status, and leadership (Irani and Funk, 1998). Age is another prominent feature of the *jaha*'s composition, as older community members are highly venerated in Arabic society.

The size of the *jaha* depends on the severity of the case. The “persuasion power” of a larger group is sometimes necessary, particularly if a smaller *jaha* is not able to influence the direction of the negotiations (Smith, 1989). *Jahas* can be as small as one member or as large as twenty; again, the conflict dictates composition (pp. 385–398).

The *jaha* members then proceed with “honor-laden gestures” (Lang, 2002) that reassure the family the *jaha* is working to restore their family name. Smith (1989) also expresses the connection between power and language:

“When the parties have decided to reconcile through sulha it is imperative that the party state it openly and clearly” (p. 388). The party might say they accept that their case will be in the mediator’s hands, as well as on the mediator’s conscience. At this critical moment, the psychological, emotional, and communal burden of the conflict is shifted to the mediating party. This transposition is done through a clear, well-articulated announcement that is understood to be a public declaration by the parties. Although such a direct transfer of responsibility between parties and mediators may be impossible at the international level, the necessary investing of legitimacy in the mediator that this process requires offers important insight for those hoping to mediate internationally. Mediators must be trusted enough by the parties to hold the burden of the dispute and therefore be perceived as capable of setting an equitable agenda.

Jabbour (1996) also notes that a unique characteristic of jahas is the ability to function as “anger absorbers” between parties (p. 46). The jaha acts with great tolerance and patience in engaging and listening to the bereaved family members, who are often filled with sadness and resentment. Notably, jaha members are not neutral outsiders, but rather intimately familiar with the history of the community as well as its prevailing customs and norms (Abu-Nimer, 1996a). Jaha members can create political capital through the process, which is important for building prestige and moral authority (Lang, 2002).

Internationally, mediators have historically relied on persuasive political authority but perhaps been too “outside” the culture of the disputing parties to gain the trust typically afforded insider-partial mediators. Sulha shows us the utility of an insider-partial jaha, which challenges conceptions of neutrality and impartiality in mediation.

The Truce: Hodna

Following establishment of the jaha, the subsequent step in the sulha process involves granting consent, or hodna, which holds considerable symbolic significance for the facilitation process. Hodna is an agreement wherein the jaha specifies a certain amount of time during which the aggrieved family will not retaliate; likewise, the offender’s family will avoid any further confrontations with the victim’s family (Lang, 2002). The hodna is considered an act of humility, demonstrating the willingness of all parties to reconstruct a relationship without the threat of violence.

During the agreed truce period, the jaha acts in utmost confidence and neutrality, sharing information exclusively with the involved parties or

among themselves (Jabbour, 1996) while they undertake fact-finding missions by visiting affected parties in the community. Any information gathered by the *jaha* must not reveal or disclose information given by witnesses as it could damage their reputation and the community's trust in them as reliable mediators for future disputes. Interestingly, this parallels the tradition of ensuring confidentiality in the mediation process.

Narrative story telling is the primary communicative channel the *jaha* employs. This highlights the assumption that, as Abu-Nimer (1996a) observes, many cases are resolved without face-to-face negotiations to avoid the risk of further escalation of the conflict. Instead, story telling is implemented as a tool for each party to communicate privately with the mediating body to present their interests while avoiding antagonism. In conclusion of the *hodna*, disputants come together after the *jaha* has arbitrated on the appropriate compensation to create a climate for reconciliation.

The Closing Ceremony: Sulha

The primary objectives of the conflict resolution rituals embodied by *sulha* are restoration of honor and granting of forgiveness. These objectives are achieved through a closing ceremony, shaking hands, and sharing a meal together (Jabbour, 1996). Once a final decision has been arbitrated by the *jaha*, invitations are sent to the family members, special guests, and the wider community. Generally, the final *sulha* ceremony takes place outdoors in the village center, because restoration of honor relies on public view (Lang, 2002). Additionally, the final *sulha* ceremony is usually punctuated with a "heavy silence" (Jabbour, 1996, p. 55) and is a scene of temporary humility. Both parties demonstrate this feature; the aggressor's family humbly accepts the wrong doings and offers compensation on behalf of their family member, and the bereaved family respectfully forgives the aggressor's family as an act of magnanimity and humbleness.

If all is performed correctly, the victim's family will feel that honor has been restored through passing compensation and shaking hands. When the families put their hands together, parties understand that "tensions must ease" as this is often the most volatile moment of the *sulha* process (Lang, 2002, p. 59). This handshake also acts as a public demarcation of the end of violence between the families. Afterward, the victim's family invites the offender's family to drink bitter coffee in their home, paying respects to the tradition of hospitality. Finally, as documented by Irani and Funk, the head of the offender's household concludes the *sulha* process by hosting a feast wherein the two families share bread, an age-old symbol of

fidelity. Both families must then eat together to signify the reversal of the tragedy and restoration of peace (Irani and Funk, 1998).

Lessons from Sulha

The ruling assumption of sulha is that peace and cooperation rather than conflict are valuable and normal. Although we understand conflict to be a neutral transformative energy, many conflict resolution practitioners perceive conflict as being negative, disruptive, and threatening to maintenance of the normative order. Sulha is not employed as a means of addressing root causes of conflict, but it does recalibrate communities for peaceful coexistence. The practice of sulha can therefore be described as a ritualistic representation of assumptions about the kind of relations that ought to exist between people in Arab society. Drawing on this premise, Lang (2002) asserts that such views of social order are developed repeatedly with every sulha as they are represented, retold, and reinscribed in the minds of participants. Sulha's effect on conflicting parties calls into question whether conflict can be resolved as opposed to transformed.

Sulha is future-oriented, and an interpersonal strategy that can be used at the community and international levels. The potential for relationship among disputants determines the intervention procedures and their nature, size, and settlement. Furthermore, a future focus offers a platform for valorizing peace, in which the sulha ceremony demarcates the end of violence and acts as a "persuasive force to forgo future feuding" (Lang, 2002 p. 64). This is of particular importance in conducting the sulha between powerful groups who could upset delicate regional stability if the dispute is not contained (Abu-Nimer, 1996a). Sulha is concerned with restoration of the social web rather than changing power relationships or the status quo. Importantly, Abu-Nimer (1996b) asserts, the same values that underpin the sulha—honor and forgiveness—can also "prevent or obstruct the process of reaching a just resolution; instead it may contribute to the preservation of an asymmetrical power relationship that exists between the parties" (p. 32). Therefore, its potential to repair relationships is strong while its ability to challenge structural violence is weak.

The final ceremony is centered on forgiveness and emphasizes peace and compromise for the greater good of society (Smith, 1989). A prerequisite of a meaningful sulha is openness for both the disputants and the wider community. Smith observes that the sulha necessitates witnesses who can validate the end of violence through their presence. The ceremonial

shaking of hands between families during the *sulha* validates the peace for all those present as well as those who were absent (Smith, 1989). Although this process has been attempted diplomatically by publicizing photos or video footage of historic handshakes, the larger community is relegated to the role of observer, rather than active witness to the resolution.

Reconciling with Dignity

As previously discussed, the values most applicable to *sulha* are honor, saving face, wisdom, generosity, respect, dignity, and forgiveness (Abu-Nimer, 2003). *Sulha* furnishes a culturally appropriate means for restoring values. We also find that cultural symbols and rituals such as *sulha* are not only preferred but necessary for societal constructions of peaceful coexistence. In Palestine, *sulha* is a means of communicating the need to resolve a conflict, but more importantly to create a future-oriented sociopolitical relationship in which parties can live together. *Sulha* achieves this end through symbolic and ritualized language and acts of forgiveness and reconciliation (Smith, 1989).

Regarding adherence to the “peace” or restoration of honor created through *sulha*, Lang (2002) comments that “sincerity is irrelevant because by participating in the *sulha* the actors enmesh themselves in a web of social relations that will constrain them to observe the peace” (p. 64). Breaking bread, even if done with resentment, is still the ritualized enactment of sharing vital nutrients, and the psychological implications of such an interaction will linger on. It is imperative to recognize that *sulha*’s primary function is not to address historically underlying or latent causes of conflict, including structural or economical factors. Thus, as a first step in the international arena *sulha* could initiate dialogue but would not resolve the grievances of Palestinians. What *sulha* is able to offer more broadly is a systematic process for recognizing a basic human right to dignity through restoration of honor. Though *sulha* in its original form was enacted with clear divisions between victim and perpetrator, there is potential for mutual apology and forgiveness to occur at the international level because the ritual can be enacted with each party representing both roles. Because Israelis and Palestinians often see each other as being the perpetrator, the ability to validate this perception, while simultaneously requiring each party to relinquish their place as the victim, may increase awareness of challenges that both sides of the conflict face. Application of this process at the local level may begin with *sulha* incorporated into school curriculums in combination with other conflict resolution trainings in the larger community.

Internationally, it will take dedicated mediators with both cultural awareness and commitment to the spirit of Article One to apply this resource to international discourse, whether in the form of *sulha* seminars as warm-ups to dialogue or as a larger ritualized component of the dialogue itself. The focus point of these activities is promotion of *sulha* as a technique for addressing the right to dignity through education at both the community and the international levels. Furthermore, such activities are avenues for re-embedding the essence of dignity and honor as critical components for sustainable nonviolent coexistence.

Intercommunal Conflict Necessitates Intercommunal Reconciliation

The unique opportunity *sulha* presents to conflict mediators is its ability to address the loss of honor and dignity in a manner contextualized by culture and interpersonal relationships. Conflict resolution discourses analyze the appropriateness of potential strategies depending on the conflict setting. Those tactics, which are guided by problem-solving philosophy, allow more space for variegated dialogue techniques than originate from power-bargaining paradigms. As noted by Burton, it appears that “the traditional processes of power bargaining and mediation are themselves an additional reason for conflicts to be protracted. It is they which lead to temporary settlements without tackling the underlying issues” (1986, p. 52). Standard international relations have indeed inadequately assessed the role of power, and despite repeated intervention by high-profile mediators Palestinian-Israeli negotiations have not led to lasting conciliation. This predicament opens the door to *sulha* operating within an international framework.

To gain acceptance of *sulha*'s operating protocol, a key feature of Western mediation must be challenged. Western mediators tend to prize neutrality or impartiality, which, as seen previously with *sulha*, is not the norm in Palestine. In contrast, communities that employ *sulha* incorporate mediation as part of conflict resolution processes within relationship webs, meaning that conflict and its resolution occur within interconnected social associations:

In the West where neutrality typically suggests the mediator should have no past relations with the disputants, a mediator for Middle East disputes is often a community leader who may be well acquainted with the parties. Furthermore, such a mediator is often more active in

suggesting solutions—even exerting strong pressures toward recommended outcomes—than is the mediator of the West [Schellenberg, 1996, p. 184].

Despite these differences, there is common ground. The *jaha* can act with neutrality, and in some Western mediation third-party interveners will also try to sway disputing parties. Thus, notwithstanding conceptual clashing, *sulha* can be employed in the international arena. Another way the role of the third party can be modified is by pairing traditional mediators from each party with an ostensibly more neutral Western-style mediator, so that each may be informed by the other's approach to the mediation. These traditional mediators may serve as co-facilitators, advisors to a sole mediator, or coaches for a *sulha* role play within the agenda of a more conventional mediation, depending on the needs of the conflicting parties. By allowing third parties to be informed by culture, rather than act as agents of cultural suppression, mediators can take a step closer to peeling back the layers of positions and interests to arrive at the core needs of conflict actors.

Incorporating *sulha*'s restoration of honor and dignity into international negotiations may partner with a reevaluation of Western mediation standards. Both processes require reflection on the part of Western mediators about how they transpose their own values onto the people they are mediating, and what deleterious effect this may have. To highlight another point of disparity in cultural norms, relations in the Arab world are all too often understood by Western negotiators as state-to-state rather than one community to another (Swisher, 2004). State-to-state relations imply a distinct set of normative interactions that take other forms in community-based relations. This is a potential gateway for *sulha* to positively affect and facilitate meaningful international conflict resolution. Clearly, to infuse *sulha*'s positive characteristics with the progressive threads of international negotiation requires thoughtful analysis of Western conflict praxis.

Sulha's Contribution to International Negotiations

Today, with increasing attention in the conflict resolution literature shifting to transformational, elicitive models such as those proposed by John Paul Lederach (1997), space is opening in conflict resolution practices to address the emotional and perceptual sides of conflict. *Sulha* offers a model of community-based reconciliation using honor restoration as the basis for a return to nonviolent coexistence. Further research is necessary to fit

sulha's micro-level honor restoration into culturally appropriate mediation training seminars prior to international negotiations. In the meantime, community and school-based peace curricula could include sulha in order to re-embed honor and dignity into social interactions.

Notably, sulha is not an exclusively Muslim practice, but its incorporation into international negotiations might cause alarm for Jewish and Christian participants in future peace talks because it is associated predominantly with Muslim communities. However, if sulha's ability to restore honor and dignity can be actualized through multicultural ritual and diverse dialogue, then the consequential shift in Palestinian-Israeli relations could be significant. Security and identity issues shadow fundamental assumptions of the groups involved in the conflict. The search for shared restoration of honor could embed emotional and perceptual needs in the negotiation process.

Mutual Solutions?

In the quest to creatively seek solutions to an intractable conflict, civil society has organized itself to fill in the gaps left by elite negotiations. Many interfaith dialogue groups have formed in the last decade to offer civil society peace-building initiatives where diplomatic leadership has failed. Peace Now, Seeds of Peace, PeaceXPeace, and others bring Israelis and Arab Muslims, Christians and Druze together to interconnect them with each other.

It is increasingly clear that multiple discourses exist in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and no single discourse can adequately incorporate all voices. Archaic power politics has tried and failed, and track two diplomacy can wield only a certain amount of influence by embedding its dialogues into state infrastructure. We do not advocate an unrealistic project of sulha being used instead of Camp David negotiations, but we do look to indigenous Arab conflict resolution processes such as sulha to rehumanize the dialogue. Sulha is capable of restoring honor and pride in communities too fearful and oppressed to negotiate as equals. By reaching people at the community level, elders and village leaders can mobilize their populace to engage wholeheartedly in conciliatory ritual. The state-based international negotiation protocol must shed its mechanical skin and open itself to the population it intends to serve.

Sulha embodies the cultural glue that binds people to their communities. By understanding the indigenous Arab processes of resolving conflict, interveners may better identify the kinds of needs and interests that must

be addressed to foster reconciliation with the Arab community. The current situation in Palestine/Israel reflects a conflict in which mediation may not be appropriate, but it does not have to stay that way. Mediation itself can be transformed into a culturally embedded process that all conflicting parties can invest in.

Conclusion: A Plea for Genuine Dialogue

There is no formula for peace. Rather, it is an organic process based on the unique individuals who make up the conflicting communities. Understanding their constructions of conflict, with meaningful culturally based approaches to conflict management, is integral to constructing sustainable resolutions. The parties who construct the conflict will ultimately be the parties who build the resolution. Exclusive negotiations brokered by elites continue to fail in the Middle East because they do not use all the cultural conflict management tools at their disposal.

We do not expect the Palestine-Israel disputes to be able to leap into a reconciliation process with the new (old) mechanisms we describe. Rather, initiating genuine dialogue in space that includes variegated approaches to conflict is a first step toward perceptual change that could reduce violence. Safe space will be challenging to foster if human needs continue to be neglected. Thus, including community and jaha voices that represent a multifaceted constituency may enable a more conciliatory tone to be set.

The closing ceremony of *sulha* includes the wider community. Through openness and inclusiveness, the moral authority of *sulha* enmeshes the community in a social web that then serves as the foundation of peace in Arab communities. This expansive notion of inclusiveness incorporates people across time and space who may not have been personally present for the *sulha* ceremony. Inclusiveness understood at this level is a pillar that gives *sulha* the moral authority to reconstruct a nonviolent social situation. Importantly, the *sulha* process does not necessarily create lasting peace; rather it recalibrates the social web for nonconflictive interactions among community members. This type of shift relies on the moral authority of the *jaha*, and it is this authority that international peace negotiators lack today.

One suggestion is to include those who have been involved in the *jaha* in international negotiations. These may be different kinds of people from those traditionally chosen to represent Arabs externally in international relations. Yet *jaha* members, representing civil society, are figures of moral

authority in their communities, and thus their compromising abilities could hold the prospect of increased community-supported negotiations. Another option could be to have former *jaha* members serve as advisors to those political representatives who do the actual negotiating. In this way civil society could infuse cultural significance in the international process, though clearly practitioners should be wary of incorporating *sulha* in solely a tokenistic manner. Additionally, increased communication between local and international peacemakers who are familiar with the core principles of *sulha* would offer a *lingua franca* for improved expression of community needs.

Other characteristics of *sulha* that are lacking in international negotiations are greater openness and transparency. Although mediation and accords do bring a limited degree of “management” to the peace process, ultimately negotiations should be more inclusive, addressing perceptual and emotional needs that are not reconciled by legal or diplomatic means. Moreover, transparency is a vital aspect of reestablishing social webs (Witty, 1978). It can foster spaces that allow communities to re-enforce the restoration of honor at various levels and thus strengthen themselves positively.

Finally, engagement between elite negotiators and the wider community may catalyze a broad demarcation of the end of violence and a reorientation toward nonviolent coexistence. Here we see application of the principles of honor and dignity restoration as a key lesson learned from *sulha*. This should not be mistaken for advocating direct ritual application to the international negotiation process (Smith, 1989).

The cultural framework of mediation also serves as a site of power where language and assumptions are manipulated to serve distinct interests. Both the intervener and the terms of dialogue can determine how parties engage with each other. Western rational frameworks can negate emotional and social rituals of reconciling that have proven themselves valuable within Arab communities. Though we do not advocate direct transfer of these symbolic ceremonies to the international negotiating table, space for emotional and perceptual issues in conflict should be created.

Cultural appropriateness need not hinder advances in international negotiations. Rather, contemporary Arab and Western conflict resolution literatures and processes should be analyzed in an effort to extract principles and practices that can assist in the evolution of a model significantly representing the parties. This model should engender time-honored practices such as *sulha* to invoke the specific cultural conditions needed for reconciliation.

Despite our hope for constructive evolution of the Palestine-Israel conflict, we recognize that not all conflicts are solvable, and that the role of the third party may vary widely, whether or not it is in the confines of power-brokering mediation styles versus more elicitive models, and sometimes it may not be appropriate at all (Rigby, 1995). In conflicts such as that between Israelis and Palestinians, no real equality exists between parties, yet successful mediation requires a core relationship of equal negotiating power with which to operate.

Finally, we reiterate the importance of space for social expression in peacemaking and how critical both public and private perceptions of the other are. Recently this topic has received some attention, as Palestinian and Israeli pairs of social scientists jointly completed a sophisticated survey of Palestinian and Israeli expectations about the peace agreements made at Camp David. They specifically looked at how participants' psychosocial processes fostered or detracted from a willingness to have real reconciliation with the other (Shamir and Shikaki, 2002). Again, this returns us to the concept that honor and dignity restoration through ritual process is a key factor in the social construct of conflict and conflict resolution. Until we understand the minutiae of genuine reconciliation processes such as *sulha*, which already exist within conflicting cultures, the prescriptions of international negotiators will not adequately address needs on all sides and the cycle of floundering peace agreements may continue. Re-embedding community into international relations is one avenue to peace. *Sulha* has the potential to take us there.

References

- Abdalla, A. "Principles of Islamic Interpersonal Conflict Intervention: A Search with Islam and Western Literature." *Journal of Law and Religion*, 2000–01, 15(1/2), 151–184.
- Abu-Nimer, M. "Conflict Resolution Approaches: Western and Middle Eastern Lessons and Possibilities." *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 1996a, 55(1), 35–53.
- Abu-Nimer, M. "Conflict Resolution in an Islamic Context: Some Contextual Questions." *Peace and Change*, 1996b, 21(1), 22–40.
- Abu-Nimer, M. "Conflict Resolution, Culture and Religion: Toward a Training Model of Interreligious Peacebuilding." *Journal of Peace Research*, 2001, 38(6), 685–704.
- Abu-Nimer, M. *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003.
- Avruch, K., and Black, P. "The Culture Question and Conflict." *Peace and Change*, 1991, 16(1), 22–45.

- Brown, N. *The Rule of Law in the Arab World*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Burton, J. W. "The History of International Conflict Resolution." In E. E. Azer and J. W. Burton (eds.), *International Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*. Brighton, Sussex, U.K.: Wheatsheaf Books, 1986.
- Drieskens, B. "A Cairene Way of Reconciling." *Islamic Law and Society*, 2006, 13(1), 99–121.
- Galtung, J. *Nonviolence and Israel/Palestine*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989.
- Irani, G. "Islamic Mediation Techniques for Middle Eastern Conflicts." *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 1999, 3(2), 1–14.
- Irani, G. E., and Funk, N. "Rituals of Reconciliations: Arab-Islamic Perspectives." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 1998, 20(4), 53–69.
- Irani, G. E., and Funk, N. C. "Rituals of Reconciliation: Arab-Islamic Perspectives." In A. A. Said, N. Funk, and A. S. Kadayifci (eds.), *Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2001.
- Jabbour, E. J. *Sulha: Palestinian Traditional Peacemaking Process*. Montreat, N.C.: House of Hope, 1996.
- Lang, S. "Sulha Peacemaking Process and the Politics of Persuasion." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 2002, 31(3), 52–66.
- Lederach, J. P. *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997.
- Liebler, C., and Sampson, C. "Appreciative Inquiry in Peacebuilding: Imagining the Possible." In C. Sampson, M. Abu-Nimer, C. Liebler, and D. Whitney (eds.), *Positive Approaches to Peacebuilding: A Resource for Innovators*. Washington, D.C.: Pact, 2003.
- Moussalli, A. "An Islamic Model for Political Conflict Resolution: Tahkin (Arbitration)." In P. Salem (ed.), *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World: Selected Essays*. Beirut, Lebanon: American University of Beirut, 1997.
- Ramsbotham, O., Woodhouse, T., and Miall, H. *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005.
- Rigby, A. "Unofficial Nonviolent Intervention: Examples from the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict." *Journal of Peace Research*, 1995, 32(4), 453–467.
- Salem, P. *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World: Selected Essays*. Beirut, Lebanon: American University Press, 1997.
- Salla, M. *Islamic Radicalism: Muslim Nations and the West*. Nedlands, Western Australia: Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies—University of Western Australia, 1993.
- Schellenberg, J. A. "Mediation: Agreement at Camp David with Material from 'Keeping Faith: Memories of a President' by Jimmy Carter." In J. A. Schellenberg (Ed.), *Conflict Resolution: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Shabi, R. "Dance, Sing, and Eat for Peace." *New Statesman*, 2003, 16(757), 14–16.

- Shamir, J., and Shikaki, K. "Determinants of Reconciliation and Compromise Among Israelis and Palestinians." *Journal of Peace Research*, 2002, 39(2), 185–202.
- Shihade, M. "Internal Violence: State's Role and Societies Responses." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 2005, 27(4), 31–44.
- Sills, D. L. (ed.). *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, Vols. 3 & 4*. New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1968.
- Smith, D. L. "The Reward of Allah." *Journal of Peace Research*, 1989, 26(4), 385–398.
- Swisher, C. E. *The Truth About Camp David: The Untold Story About the Collapse of the Middle East Peace Process*. New York: Nation Books, 2004.
- Tsafrii, N. "Arab Customary Law in Israel: Sulha Agreements and Israeli Courts." *Islamic Law and Society*, 2006, 13(1), 76–98.
- United Nations. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." United Nations, 1948. Accessed Apr. 10, 2006. Available at <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>.
- Whitney, D., Liebler, C., and Cooperrider, D. "Appreciative Inquiry in Organizations and International Development: An Invitation to Share and Learn Across Fields." In C. Sampson, M. Abu-Nimer, C. Liebler, and D. Whitney (eds.), *Positive Approaches to Peacebuilding: A Resource for Innovators*. Washington D.C.: Pact, 2003.
- Witty, C. "Disputing Issues in Shehaam: A Multireligious Village in Lebanon." In L. Nader (ed.), *Law and Culture*. Chicago: Aldine, 1978.
- Wolf, A. "Indigenous Approaches to Water Conflict Negotiations and Implications for International Waters." *International Negotiations*, 2000, 5, 357–373.

Mneesha Gellman is a Ph.D. student at Northwestern University.

Mandi Vuinovich is currently employed with the International Rescue Committee in Tucson, Arizona.