

# **Bounding societal(es): Belonging and categories of identification in Israel/Palestine**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often portrayed in essentialist terms using identity markers based on religion, language or ethnicity, most Israelis and Palestinians have murkier boundaries when pushed to define who is included in their community of belonging. This article explores the negotiation of identity categories among Palestinians and Israelis who engage in cross-border work, despite the dominant discourse of separation and difference, as a means of exploring how more inclusive boundaries of belonging might be encouraged in areas of ethno-national conflict and social exclusion. Because those Israeli citizens with Palestinian heritage (often called Arab Israelis) defy easy naming regimes, the article focuses primarily on activists in Ta'ayush, the Arab-Jewish Partnership, as a means of exploring how categories of identity emerge out of the process of creating and maintaining such a partnership. Using a boundary-focused approach, the article traces ways in which activists define categories of "self" and "other" through action, engagement and shared ideals.*

## **Introduction**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often seen as one of two peoples competing for self-determination within the same land. Identity markers such as religion, language and ethnicity are all used by the media, scholars and conflict resolution practitioners to try to make sense of and address the conflict. For most Palestinians and Israelis, the lines dividing "Palestinians" from "Israelis" are intuitively quite clear; within Israel, Arab (Palestinian Israeli) and Jewish citizens attend different schools, live (for the most part) in different communities and have different traditions (Beinin and Stein, 2006; Gerner, 1991; Golan-Agnon, 2005). The Israeli system of identity cards, bypass

roads, checkpoints, laws restricting travel for both Israelis and Palestinians<sup>1</sup> and the separation barrier further reinforce sociocultural conceptions of identity within a legal and geopolitical framework (Hallward, 2006; Halper, 2004; Tilley, 2005). Recent political events—such as the election of Hamas in the January 2006 Palestinian Parliamentary elections<sup>2</sup> and the inclusion of Avigdor Lieberman, who openly encourages the transfer of Arab citizens to areas under the rule of the Palestinian Authority, in the cabinet of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert—are further indicators of the strong basis of support within both societies for separation and even opposition between Israeli and Palestinian societies.

Despite the essentialism that is found in media portrayals of the conflict and some scholarly analysis, when Israelis and Palestinians are pushed as to who is included in their self-defined boundaries of identity, the borders become murkier and areas of overlap emerge. This is most clear when discussing the Palestinian citizens of Israel—the Arab Israelis—who comprise 20% of the Israeli population, as both Jewish and Palestinian citizens of the state find themselves in a negotiation over the boundaries of belonging when asked about their status (Al-Haj, 2005; Kanaaneh, 2003; Rouhana, 1997). Most who visit or study the region note the problematic nature of treating Israeli and Palestinian societies as unified ethnic, religious or cultural groupings. Not only is Israeli society comprised of many different nationalities, ethnicities and cultural heritages, it is also comprised of a number of different religions. Not only does Israel include a sizeable Muslim minority, but its citizenry includes Druze, Christian, non-religious and a number of *different* Jewish traditions, several of which do not recognize the validity of the others. Palestinian society includes Christian and Muslim communities, as well as rural/urban, Gaza/West Bank, and other divides. Both societies include a large number of “foreign-born” residents and view their large Diaspora communities as part of their present and potential future societies. Given the dominant discourse of separation and difference prevalent in the official narratives of both societies, and the sizeable challenges for dialogue, interaction and joint projects in the current geopolitical environment, it is instructive to explore those Palestinians and Israelis who, despite these obstacles, engage in cross-boundary work. Not only does such a study raise up voices and actions that are usually silenced or “unseen” in

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- 1 Palestinians, for example, need to undergo an extensive process to get permits to travel to Israel, as well as between different areas of the West Bank (travel between the West Bank and Gaza is currently almost impossible). Israelis are forbidden by Israeli law to enter “A” areas, defined by the Oslo process as areas under Palestinian civil and security control, such as the cities of Ramallah, Nablus and Bethlehem.
  - 2 Hamas ran largely on a domestic platform of “Reform and Change,” calling for a shift in the policies of the Palestinian Authority under the control of the secular-nationalist Fatah party. As a conservative religiously based group, some Hamas officials (and the Hamas charter) are anti-Israel.

mainstream scholarly and media outlets, and thereby portray a different picture of the conflict, but it also provides fodder for exploring how the boundaries of belonging are created, challenged and maintained, and thereby suggests ways in which journalists, scholars, practitioners and policy makers might be able to intervene in the interests of reducing ethno-national conflict and promoting coexistence.

One major factor underlying the persistence of essential nationalist categories of identity is “the conflict” itself and the desire for a united front against the “other.” The role of the conflict in solidifying particular sites of identity is most evident in the problematic naming of identity categories that do not neatly fit within either of the main conflict parties. Those Palestinians who remained in what became the State of Israel after 1948 defy easy labeling regimes. Either/or naming categories often do not work well when studying the entirety of Israel/Palestine (Mandate Palestine), and efforts to create official categories of belonging can create more anger and hostility, especially when those who do not fit neatly may be excluded altogether.<sup>3</sup> Much research has been conducted on the “split personality” of Arab Israelis and scholars have traced the ways in which this separate identity has been created, sustained, challenged and adapted since the creation of the State of Israel (e.g., Rouhana, 1997; Yiftachel, 1997). The maintenance of and change in this particular category—from “present absentee” to “Arab Israeli” to “Palestinian citizen of Israel”—as well as evolving structures and forces of social, political and cultural power, demonstrate that identity categories (and the labels adhered to them) are embedded in sociopolitical practices and procedures, but are not immune to change or adaptation. The challenge of categorization can also be seen within Israeli society as it negotiates the tension between continuity and change, and seeks to create a shared Jewish identity while also honoring calls for greater representation on the part of Mizrahi, women and other minority or immigrant communities (Jones and Murphy, 2002; Meir-Glitzenstein, 2002; Zerubavel, 2002).

In daily interaction, boundaries of differentiation other than “Israeli” and “Palestinian” are more frequently used to describe both “self” and “other.” This is particularly the case among individuals involved in the Israeli and Palestinian peace and justice movements, as they are engaged in a process moving toward mutual recognition and establishing boundaries of coexistence. Although activists often use “Israeli” and “Palestinian” identity labels, they also deploy “Jew” and “Arab,” “extremist” and “moderate,” “religious” and “secular.” Furthermore, for

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3 Many Palestinians with foreign (often U.S.) citizenship who lack Palestinian IDs, but are married to Palestinian citizens, have been increasingly denied access to Palestinian territories and have had requests for family unification denied. The recent rise in such cases has precipitated a U.S. State Department investigation into the matter. See, e.g., Benn (2006). Other such populations include the Palestinian refugees, many of whom lack any meaningful citizenship, and non-Orthodox converts to Judaism.

many activists, the “other” is not necessarily defined always as the “Israeli” or the “Palestinian,” but is often “the right,” “the religious fundamentalists” or “the government.” The current article lays out a boundary-focused approach to thinking about identity formation, which identifies the role that identity, culture and collective memory play in differentiating between “Israelis” and “Palestinians.” It then examines how members of the groups I have studied, particularly *Ta’ayush*, negotiate and craft identities in the course of their activism as a means of gaining insight into how alternative, often overlapping boundaries (i.e., non-zero sum) separating “self” from “other” might be encouraged in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## Methodology

Data for this article comes from nine months of Jerusalem-based field work conducted between September 2004 and June 2005 and a follow-up visit in July 2006. During this time, I held over 90 in-depth interviews with Israelis and Palestinians involved in peace and justice activities; engaged in participant observation of seven Israeli and/or Palestinian groups; and conducted document analysis of group publications and electronic communication.<sup>4</sup> The fact that I was both Christian and an outsider gave me the opportunity to be included in both Israeli and Palestinian groups (which I might not have had were I one or the other national groups, or either Muslim or Jewish) and the length of time I spent engaging with the groups allowed me the opportunity to build relationships, which, in turn, helped group members open up to me more than they might have otherwise. While my perspective was limited by being an “outsider,” it also provided the opportunity for me to see how group members wished to portray themselves to the outside world, a good indication of their salient identity markers. Groups were selected to fill the category space delimited by the categories of binational (Israeli and Palestinian membership) or uninational (Israeli or Palestinian membership only); base of operation in Israel or the Palestinian Territories; and whether the group was an NGO or a grassroots/activist movement. The discussion draws on the mechanisms through which groups and individual members bounded

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4 The bulk of the interviews were conducted in English, tape recorded and transcribed. A few interviews were conducted in Arabic. Electronic communication was largely circulated in both Hebrew and English, both Arabic and English, or all three languages. Participant observation focused on interaction, group dynamics and events and was largely independent of language, although conversations and explanations that accompanied the actions were often in English, sometimes in a mixture of Hebrew and/or Arabic. Some group activities or meetings that were observed took place in Arabic or Hebrew. My knowledge of each language was sufficient in most cases for comprehending the main points of the proceedings, and translation assistance was used where necessary.

their identities as a way of gaining insight into the process of identity construction, deployment and maintenance. Furthermore, it explores the contexts in which certain markers of identity come to be seen as more salient than others and how those boundaries are then deployed with particular impacts on the daily and political choices made by those individuals (and groups).

### **A boundary-focused approach to identity**

A number of different theories purport to explain the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some point to strategic military and/or political interests, control over resources or financial gain. Others, however, argue that people go to war in order to defend their *identity* and not to defend their interests (Ringmar, 1996). Such explanations of social conflict are not based in irrationality, nor are they the mere result of manipulation by conflict entrepreneurs or others with something to gain from conflict. However, identity-based conflict is not the result of primordial hatreds either. Instead, conflict emerges out of social relationships and patterns of interaction in which (at a minimum) one party fails to recognize (and/or respect) the identity of the other party. Identities need to be *recognized* to come fully into being, which is why inclusion in international bodies like the United Nations is so coveted and why the withdrawal of ambassadors is such a punishment.

Boundary drawing is intimately connected with issues of power and control and therefore can be seen in rules and regulations governing the crossing of borders, as well as in narratives defining who deserves inclusion “inside” the collective boundary (Yuval-Davis, Anthias and Kofman, 2005:517). At the same time, identity has to do with myths and memories about who a people is, based in part on a shared history. I wish to highlight the multiple contests over identity issues (and identity definitions) and note that there are generally two major ideal typical accounts of history: one is “those events which once upon a time actually happened” and the second is “*our accounts* of these actual, once-upon-a-time-happening, events” (Ringmar, 1996:24, emphasis in original). In the following, I focus on the latter account of history, holding that “it is through our accounts that the actual events of the past are *brought back* into the present and into existence; the past does not exist unless we *make it exist*” (Ringmar, 1996:24, emphasis in original; see also Heidegger, 1996; Tilly, 2002). In addition, these accounts have several dimensions: not only are they reflective of what people remember and what they choose to talk about, but they are also what they choose to talk about to a particular audience. Each time the story is re-told, it changes; thus, memory is affected by the future as well as by past experience and present circumstances (Meir-Glitzenstein, 2002; Roy, 1994:24).

Identities come into focus through “constitutive stories” that are bounded by time and place and bring to life—in narrative form—a sense of self. Conflict can emerge

when such identities are not recognized, or such stories rejected, if the narrator (a) rejects the description created by others and/or (b) fails to create a new story and instead stands by the original story and tries (through action) to convince others that the story does indeed apply (Ringmar, 1996:82). Such stories, of course, are limited by the context in which they emerge; they are grounded in relations among social sites and a tradition of interacting among those sites. The ability to change stories and the struggle to narrate stories of identity and boundaries are also affected by relationships of power as well as subjective and situational processes (Yuval-Davis et al., 2005: 521). The identities that emerge from such transactions are “always assertions, always contingent, always negotiable, but also always consequential. Identities are social arrangements reinforced by socially constructed and continuously renegotiated stories” (Tilly, 2002:xiii; see also Roy, 1994).

Furthermore, individuals and collectives have multiple identities—as many as they have social relations. These identities cross national borders; they are not necessarily congruent with national identities or with officially sanctioned collective boundaries. Identity rests not on essential attributes, but rather on “its particular combination of social relations” (Tilly, 2002:11; see also Yuval-Davis et al., 2005). Consequently, I focus here on “dynamic, contingent, negotiated relations among human beings” (Tilly, 2002:19) and particularly the ways in which boundaries separating such identities are challenged, altered and enforced in the course of political struggle (Tilly, 2002:68). Such boundary challenges to identity are grounded in and take the form of “individual and collective narratives of self and other, presentation and labeling, myths of origin and myths of destiny” (Yuval-Davis et al., 2005:526). While myths of origin and collective memory shape and impose limits on the extent to which boundaries can be altered, they also offer a repertoire of shared images and concepts that can be used to craft slightly different interpretations of “self.” Narratives of self and other are necessarily narratives about the distinguishing boundary; the boundary then defines who are “we” and who are “they” rather than any pre-existing essences (Abbott, 1995). A boundary-focused approach to identity analysis assumes that, because boundaries are embedded in patterns of social and political relations, it is theoretically possible to alter identity boundaries by changing patterns of relationships. Examining the relations among groups of Israelis and Palestinians who work together in pursuit of common goals and objectives provides an avenue for examining what works in terms of organizational/relational dynamics, as well as what sociopolitical and geographic barriers face such interactions and should be targeted. The use of narrative and collective memory in a boundary-focused approach aims to identify the tropes used to legitimate identity discourses; the main focus is to analyze the mechanisms through which such tropes are yoked together in the creation of individual and group identities through the constitution of a boundary separating “us” from “them.”

While there are infinite sites of difference between any two people or collectives, only a certain limited range of difference markers are deployed in the context of social

relationships. What is interesting is how certain markers of difference (which together form boundaries) come to be seen as more salient than others. Identities do not emerge in a vacuum, but rather are yoked together in particular ways based on constitutive stories, cultural resources and historical memory. Shared traumas, like the Holocaust or the Nakba, are one element that gets intertwined in constructions of identity, as are nationalist or cultural concepts with great sociopolitical resonance. Official categories of identity (imposed through identity cards and birth certificates, for example) and memory (as seen in museums, commemorations and the like) affect the way in which identity narratives can be constructed (Meir-Glitzenstein, 2002; Sa'di, 1997; Zerubavel, 2002). These are reinforced through legal mechanisms—such as the fact that Israeli Jewish settlers living in the West Bank fall under Israeli civil law and have full Israeli citizenship, whereas their Palestinian neighbors fall under military law and lack citizenship—as well as geopolitical realities, such as roads that connect Israeli settlements to major cities like Tel Aviv and Jerusalem while bypassing Palestinian villages. Such mechanisms create and reinforce sociopolitical and ethnic boundaries by creating communities of affection and affiliation. At the same time, however, other mechanisms seek to bound people together according to other criteria of difference. Sociopolitical differentiation is often fluid, and individuals often identify with multiple, overlapping groups (Young, 2005:140).

Despite differences in “official” national identities among various groups of Jews and Palestinians in the Diaspora, and even between groups of Jews living within Israel and Palestinians on either side of the Green Line (1949 Armistice Line), collective memory and national myths often create boundaries of belonging. The Nakba, for example, has been identified as a site of collective memory that is “firmly anchored in the concrete lives of ordinary people” through stories that have been passed down in the family, the house key still treasured by a member of the older generation, or pictures from an earlier era (Sa'di, 1997:194). The Holocaust and a longing for the land of Zion are two aspects of Israeli collective memory that are deployed even by Jewish groups who did not directly experience the Holocaust, such as Iraqi Jews (Feige, 2002; Meir-Glitzenstein, 2002). At the same time, however, there is a tension for Israelis between the Zionist narrative of creating the “New Jew” and the narrative of the trauma of the exile; processes of secularization and nationalization within the State of Israel counteract at times the collective narrative of the Jewish past and its tradition and have led to some revisionist narratives (Zerubavel, 2002). Many of the groups I studied were engaged in an effort to challenge official identities that emphasize differences between Palestinians and Israelis and sought to create space for joint action around common values, goals and interests. Because of the many official obstacles cementing opposing national identities, such groups often faced considerable challenges in carrying out their activities.

The next section examines some of the ways in which alternative boundings of identity have occurred in Israeli and Palestinian civil society groups. The analysis

that follows considers how such actions challenge official Israeli and Palestinian boundaries and collective memories.

### **Challenging and re-bounding categories of belonging**

The challenge, and also the possibility, of viewing identity as dynamic and context-specific can be seen in my experience traveling to Hebron with a group of Israeli Jews, most of whom were members of Machsom Watch (Checkpoint Watch). During the trip, we had to shift our identities depending on who we were engaging in conversation with and in order to travel throughout the various quarters of the city. Because we had Israeli license plates on the private cars we were driving, we could only enter through the Kiryat Arba settlement, as several of the other entrances to the city of Hebron were blocked to all traffic, and another required driving through the Palestinian city of Halhoul and the possibility of flying checkpoints, at which point the Israelis would likely be arrested. When we left our cars and proceeded to cross the gate separating Kiryat Arba from the city of Hebron, a private security van came to inquire as to who we were. When he learned we were all Jewish (I was suddenly converted by my compatriots) and that we had no Arab drivers, the gate was opened and we were permitted to drive all the way to the Cave of Machpelah/Ibrahimi Mosque. There we met our guides, and as we went to enter the Old City of Hebron, we were cautioned to avoid speaking Hebrew and to state, if we were asked, that we were Christian, as Israelis are not allowed in some parts of Hebron (now it was my compatriots turn to be converted). While religious identity markers were key in the first stages of our journey, later on relational ties established identities based on joint quests for a just and lasting peace in Israel/Palestine and for ending the presence of the radical Jewish settlers living in the middle of downtown Hebron. As we walked throughout the city and spoke with local Palestinians as well as amongst the group of Israelis, different identities were deployed in the course of conversation. When one of my Jewish Israeli friends returned to Hebron in a subsequent week and attempted to gain access into Kiryat Arba, she was denied because she was the “wrong kind” of Jew: an activist and a leftist (Mayorek, 2005).

Stories such as these demonstrate the ability of activists to recognize the diversity and heterogeneity of their own society, as well as of the “other” society. While maintaining their “Israeli” or “Jewish” identity, Machsom Watch women were also able to belong to other identity groupings based on non-national criteria, such as those involved in the struggle for justice and equality. To explore further the labels of “self” and “other,” and particularly the boundaries of “Israeli” and “Palestinian,” I turn to the case of the Israeli group *Ta'ayush*.

### ***Ta'ayush*: Partnership in life**

*Ta'ayush* was formed after the events of October 2000 in part to bridge the gap between Jewish and Arab activists within Israel. Through a variety of its practices, such as meeting alternately in Jewish and Arab communities, and through choosing a name that in Arabic means “partnership in life” and not just “coexistence,” the organization sought to transcend the racism, segregation and hierarchical power relations often found in Israeli society and frequently replicated in joint activities. Such distinctions, however, are not easily overcome, and the members of *Ta'ayush* whom I interviewed expressed their identity—as well as their understanding of the group’s identity—differently depending on their own “national” origin (*Ta'ayush* is an Israeli organization, but there is no Israeli nationality).<sup>5</sup> While almost everyone I interviewed noted the difficulty the organization faces in attracting and maintaining sufficient numbers of Arab members, they “related” to and explained this concern in different ways, with implications for bounding *Ta'ayush* identity.

Palestinians involved in *Ta'ayush* expressed their identity in conflictual terms. As one said,

The [West Bank] Palestinians said to us, you have Israeli passports, you have Israeli identity cards, you are Israelis. Okay, I am an Israeli citizen, but in my feelings, in my roots, my family, my relatives are Palestinian. I have relatives in Jordan, there, here, and okay, I have an Israeli passport, by my roots are Palestinian. They are deep roots (Palestinian Israeli activist with *Ta'ayush*-Center, Kfar Qasem, December 12, 2004).

After the outbreak of the Al Aqsa Intifada and the demonstrations by Arab Israelis (in which 11 nonviolent demonstrators were killed), Jewish citizens stopped going to Arab villages to buy goods or fix electrical outages or replenish depleted pharmacies. Those I interviewed shared feelings of abandonment, saying “the left, Meretz, Yossi Sarid, Hizb al Amal [the Labor Party], and the right were all against us. We were citizens of Israel, we have the passport and the identity card, but they were ignoring us, and were against us, laying siege on us” (Palestinian Israeli activist with *Ta'ayush*-Center, Kfar Qasem, December 12, 2004).

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5 Although there is no Israeli nationality, Israeli citizens are classified according to three national groupings: Jew, Arab or Druze. The Jewish grouping includes all Jews, religious and non-practicing from all ethnic backgrounds (Russian, Ethiopian, Mizrahi, Ashkenazi), while the Arab grouping includes Christians and Muslims.

*Ta'ayush* formed in part to ease this sense of isolation—from both the Palestinian and the Israeli societies—and in the process formed a mixed identity that made it difficult for the Israeli military to know how to respond. Since there were Jewish Israelis intermingled with Arab Israelis, it was more difficult for the soldiers to shoot at unarmed protestors. While many Jewish Israeli groups are now building on this practice and going into the West Bank to protest alongside Palestinian villages, this practice was initiated on a broad scale by *Ta'ayush* in the early months of the Intifada. As several of my informants said, if the soldiers know there are Jews in the crowd of protestors, they do not shoot. Such mixing “makes the soldiers confused. [When] there are Arabs, there are Palestinians, it is easy to shoot. But if it is mixed with Jews, it is not easy to shoot (Kfar Qasem, December 12, 2004).”<sup>6</sup> One of the big differences that distinguishes *Ta'ayush* from previous joint peace movements is that the original focus was not between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, but between Jews and Palestinians within Israel. Many were dramatically affected by the deaths of Israeli citizens at the hands of Israeli police in 2000, and the blow was especially severe given that the Labor Party, traditionally associated with the Israeli left, was in power at the time.

The founding principles of *Ta'ayush* emphasize the importance of relationships. As one activist stated, “*Ta'ayush* is living between the people ... we should live together you and me together, and we should have a language in common ... the language *together* ... if there is not this kind of language between us, we cannot live together” (Palestinian Israeli activist with *Ta'ayush*-Center, Kfar Qasem, December 12, 2004). In saying “language,” the activist did not mean “Hebrew” or “Arabic,” but rather a shared orientation toward the rules for interaction, a framework for joint action. *Ta'ayush* is distinct from previous leftist groups which attested to leftist principles and were willing to partner with Palestinians, but it was always “you over there and we over there, you alone and we alone. *Ta'ayush* said the end with this. Yes, there are two people, etc., but at the same time we know each other. We know the ‘other’” (Palestinian Israeli activist with *Ta'ayush*-Center, Kfar Qasem, December 12, 2004). The Arab Israelis noted their peculiar piece in the puzzle, especially given the widespread preference for a two-state solution. They are the “other” in both societies, and do not really fit in either “Israel” or “Palestine.” In Palestine, they are seen as “Israelis” and in Israel they are seen as “Palestinians.” They are more likely to be arrested or beaten or to lose their jobs as a result of their activism than are their Jewish partners. Furthermore, they are seen as “with the Jews” by their relatives because of their joint protests, even when those protests occur in Palestinian communities like Biddu.

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6 From an interview of Palestinian Israeli activists with *Ta'ayush*-Center. I repeatedly heard this same statement from Arabs and Jews in *Ta'ayush*, as well as other activist groups.

Isadora,<sup>7</sup> a Jewish member of *Ta'ayush*, stated that she joined the organization because it strove for “real coexistence” as opposed to a number of other initiatives that merely brought people together to talk:

It's not just about neighbors not getting along. That's not it. That's not the issue. It's about this country being for Jews, if not actually trying to get rid of the Arabs who are here, trying to somehow, how shall I put it, fence them in, give them minimum resources, have maximum Arabs on minimum land, have everything else go to Jews, give Jews the right to immigrate to this country, even though they've never been here and they are citizens of other countries. There are all these Americans that have essentially the same rights here as I do, and I don't have another country, you know, which is very weird, and lopsided to me, but it's very natural to many Israelis. On the other hand, there are all these people who are from here who don't get their basic rights. There are very basic things they cannot do, like they cannot buy land in this country, there's a lot of things they cannot do. So it's not just about neighbors not getting along. There's that, but there's a lot beyond that. It's about power and political agendas (Tel Aviv, November 24, 2004).

Palestinian members of *Ta'ayush* affirmed this view in their descriptions of their own experiences as Palestinians and as Israelis. Butheyna<sup>8</sup> explained that government discrimination takes many forms in daily life, and that it is more than just discrimination:

You can feel the difference between the two communities if you just cross the road [between Jewish and Arab areas]. There is no mixed city in reality; there are Arab neighborhoods in these cities, but they look like small villages inside the city and [they are] not part of the community (Jerusalem, January 18, 2005).

Continuing, she explained that the spirit of the occupation lives on inside Israel as well, and that although they are not under physical occupation,

we have through law the same feeling that we are not welcome, that we are not part. We are citizens, but when I work in Ramleh, no one sees us really, how we are living. And this is how we are feeling, our identity ... like you feel that you are not part. We are not welcome, not accepted (Jerusalem, January 18, 2005).

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7 Isadora is a Jewish activist with Ta'ayush-Center.

8 Butheyna is a Palestinian Israeli activist with Ta'ayush-Center (Ramleh).

Several of the *Ta'ayush* activists I interviewed spoke of Israeli identity in both instrumental and essential terms. As Isadora expressed,

I think there's more content to my being Israeli than to people who live in this country who have this citizenship who are Palestinian. To them, the citizenship is only instrumental. It's only a formality. It doesn't have much content. And that's their definition, not mine. To me, being Israeli has more of a content to it, maybe it's because I don't identify myself as a Jew anymore. I am, because I am defined as such by others, but I think there is a huge difference between Jewish Israelis and Jews elsewhere (November 24, 2004).

She went on to explain that this difference had to do with the fact that she grew up in the majority and not as a minority, and that her experience as an Israeli did much more to shape her identity than did her Jewishness. Nevertheless, she noted, were she a Jew during the time of the Holocaust, she would have been in the camps. Yet again, the metaphor of the Holocaust emerged as a defining aspect of identity, even for those who did not consider themselves actively Jewish. A Palestinian Israeli from Ramleh also spoke of how her Palestinian identity was dominant, describing herself as part of the indigenous community, expressing a sense of connectedness with her cultural tradition, but also affirming her identity as a woman and a professional and as an Israeli citizen.

Language is an oft-cited marker of identity, and it is particularly relevant in Israel/Palestine where Hebrew and Arabic are intimately connected to constructions of national identity. Although all Israelis must eventually learn Hebrew, Palestinian citizens of Israel do not begin Hebrew in school immediately, but proceed through the first several years entirely in Arabic. Jewish schools do not teach in Arabic except for mandatory Arabic language classes for a few years in which only classical Arabic is taught, a practice viewed as a colossal waste of time by many of the activists I studied, who yearned for the colloquial, spoken language so that they would be able to interact with Palestinians on the street and in joint organizations. While most of *Ta'ayush* business was conducted in Hebrew, some of the plenary meetings and activities, when they occurred in the West Bank or one of the Arab villages, were primarily in Arabic. *Ta'ayush* activists saw such diversity and bilingual practice a sign of strength rather than weakness, and affirmed that it meant they could protest successfully and engage with local crowds and/or local authorities regardless of whether that demonstration occurred in the Occupied Territories or within Israel.

Furthermore, *Ta'ayush* partnership was a partnership of *action* and not just one of talking. As Butheyna said,

this is the main thing, which is to have not just talking and politics, not just to have these discussions and talk about human rights, [but] they were doing things

in the field. And this is big, because ... you have a big activity and you come back home and you feel satisfied. Like you *did* something ... so this is the power, I think, of *Ta'ayush* (Jerusalem, January 18, 2005).

The importance of action was that it was *joint* and that planning and implementation

start from a place not like I am the majority and you are the minority. It is equal. There are different people there and there is not one ideology, but there is a common purpose. All of us are coming from different places and all of us have different hats. But all of us want to do things (Butheyna, Jerusalem, January 18, 2005).

Indeed, one of the main reasons for starting *Ta'ayush* was to create social ties to overcome the gulf separating Israeli Jews and Arabs from each other and separating both communities from Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. *Ta'ayush* planned actions together as

both a means and a kind of symbolic goal ... [for the purpose of] creating ties. A lot of the activity is planning together. We go to Budrus, or to South Hebron, or wherever. We sit with the people and we get to know them and we try to plan and work together. And this whole thing of *Ta'ayush* came from a type of action, again, for better or for worse, that was formative for the people, that we do things *together*. And that's the meaning of the word *Ta'ayush*, you know, living together (Yigal, Jerusalem, November 1, 2004).<sup>9</sup>

As a consequence of its actions, *Ta'ayush* has created networks with Palestinian communities throughout the West Bank and Israel. It has also drawn a number of Israelis looking for an organization that meets a need other activist groups have failed to provide. *Ta'ayush* is often lauded by its activists for allowing space for difference, for valuing pluralism and demanding conformity. Ezra, one of the Israeli members of *Ta'ayush*, stated that he did not consider himself an Israeli. Although he speaks Hebrew and carries an Israeli ID, he considers himself part of the Middle East and has lived among Arabs most of his life, speaking Arabic as his native tongue. Ezra noted that people used to speak regularly about "Arab Jews" just as they spoke about "Arab Christians" and "Arab Muslims" (Jerusalem, December 27, 2004).<sup>10</sup> Another participant in *Ta'ayush* activities, however, suggested that her experience growing up in a German-speaking family was very different, and her Jewish identity, especially as

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9 Yigal is a Jewish activist with *Ta'ayush*-Jerusalem.

10 From an interview of Jewish activists with *Ta'ayush*-Jerusalem, South Hebron committee.

it relates to the history of the Holocaust, is a very strong part of her identity. She noted that in Germany you are not supposed to document anywhere what religion you have; they have learned from the past. "Here you have your "J" [for Jew] in your passport, so to speak, because you have to say what religion you have, and in that sense you are branding" (Jerusalem, December 27, 2004).<sup>11</sup> Others expressed that they wanted a third way that was not just Arab or Jew, but wanted to live in a community where the social and cultural life was mixed and was seen as an asset rather than as a problem (Butheyna, Jerusalem, January 18, 2005).

While both Jewish and Palestinian members of *Ta'ayush* pointed to weaknesses and flaws within the organization, they all affirmed the group's success at making large strides toward bridging the gaps between exclusive "Jewish" and "Arab" communities within Israel through the creation of social ties. Although they noted there was much more the group could do to model an effective and equal joint partnership,<sup>12</sup> those I interviewed shared that they felt free to speak out from a minority perspective for the first time in their experience in joint work. While some majority culture elements continued (and affected membership), such as the time and place of plenary meetings and the language of discussion, efforts were made (albeit on a sometimes uneven basis) to have Arabic-Hebrew translation as needed and to move around some of the meeting days and times to better accommodate the Palestinian membership. Identity as a member of *Ta'ayush* was predicated on participating in activities, on taking ownership of planning and coordinating events, and of attending the plenary meetings. Diversity was welcomed and encouraged, although members recognized this also made decision-making at meetings a more difficult and lengthy process. For better or worse, *Ta'ayush* sought to create an identity that was neither "Jew" nor "Arab," but was defined by a way of relating to one another that was based in justice, equality and mutual humanity.

## **Boundaries and belonging**

The narratives provided by *Ta'ayush* members suggest that, while particular identity remains important (i.e., being a Jew or a Palestinian), members also identify with members of the "other" national community and seek partnership through action. At the same time, they also note the differential power relations between Jews and Arabs in broader Israeli society and the challenges of creating an alternative pattern of equality within the group. As noted by numerous scholars, boundaries

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11 From an interview of Jewish activists with Ta'ayush-Jerusalem, South Hebron committee.

12 Throughout the time of my research, a committee was working to provide suggestions for ways the organization could reorganize in an effort to attract and sustain more Palestinian members.

are differentially permeable to different groups of people. The ability to cross sociopolitical borders varies with class, nationality, religion, gender and race. The selective opening of borders is a reflection of power and status, and the rules and regulations governing border crossings reflect the self/other boundaries of those in control (Sack, 1986; Yuval-Davis et al., 2005). *Ta'ayush* members challenge official boundaries imposed by the state and seek to reconstruct boundaries of belonging, ones that allow for membership in multiple categories of identity and recognize the legitimacy of such affiliations. Palestinian members of *Ta'ayush*, for example, are free to share the tension between their Israeli citizenship (one category of membership) with their family roots in Palestine (another category of membership). The open recognition by *Ta'ayush* members of such tensions reflects an attitude different from many approaches to multiculturalism, which tend to reify and differentiate "minorities" from the hegemonic "majority" culture and ignore power relations between the groups (Yuval-Davis et al., 2005:523). Rather than differentiate into reified cultural groups, *Ta'ayush* members sought to create a common platform for identification through action. The mixture and integration of *Ta'ayush* activists in their activities confounded the Israeli forces, who were "confused" when faced with groups comprised of both Jews and Arabs, resulting in a change of behavior (not shooting live ammunition) by the soldiers.

The locus of *Ta'ayush* within Israel raises another issue related to power, multiculturalism and belonging. From the beginning, *Ta'ayush* intentionally sought to address the relationship between Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel rather than the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians across the Green Line. This orientation challenges other assumptions of boundaries and power evident in many approaches to identity because it openly acknowledges the power differential between groups within Israeli society while also acknowledging that geopolitical boundaries do not correspond with the boundaries of ethnic and national communities (Young, 2005; Yuval-Davis et al., 2005:522). *Ta'ayush* members recognized the divisions within the category of being "Israeli" and targeted those boundaries as part of their political practice. In seeking a society based on justice, equality and coexistence, in seeking to address the trauma created by the violence in 2000, *Ta'ayush* focused its political efforts on challenging the invisible walls within society, and thereby named the problem of domination of Palestinian citizens by the Israeli state (Young, 2005:146).

Because of their concern for the ramifications of the power imbalance in Israeli society (not to mention between Israeli citizens and residents of the Palestinian Territories), the organization and functioning of *Ta'ayush* reflects in many ways Iris Young's (2005) conception of self-determination as non-domination. Young suggests that self-determination is better conceptualized in terms of a local, plural and horizontal federalism in which units do not seek to dominate others and in which units may have differential treatment within the state system as a way of balancing out power differentials. For Young, self-determination should be "together-in-difference"; this

concept closely parallels *Ta'ayush's* goal of “partnership for life” in which Arabs and Jews work together for a common purpose, lifting up and celebrating their differences (such as language and culture) while identifying with each other as colleagues and co-organizers of activities (Young, 2005:140). Because, as a group, *Ta'ayush* explicitly seeks Arab-Jewish partnership, group decision-making practices and organizational process are designed to promote mutual respect and avoidance of domination. Identity is based not on inherent characteristics, but rather on one's willingness to participate in the group decision-making process and to abide by regulations for co-authoring policies, activities and group identity with members of both national communities. However, the *Ta'ayush* model is different from the “self-rule plus shared-rule” federalism outlined by Young (2005:147), in that *Ta'ayush* members are not seeking separation into self-determining units. Rather, they are seeking to break the model of differentiation based on national classifications (i.e., “Jew” or “Arab” as per Israeli identity cards) and instead create a model of coexistence that deals constructively with differences in culture and nationality in the pursuit of common political and/or moral objectives.

In addition to recognizing power differentials and embracing multiple identity affiliations, *Ta'ayush* members note the difference between “belonging” and “citizenship.” As noted by Yuval-Davis and colleagues, “[b]elonging ... is a ‘thicker’ concept than that of citizenship. It is not just about membership, rights and duties, but also about the emotions that such memberships evoke” (2005:526). Several of my informants stressed the importance of “belonging” to *Ta'ayush*, such as identifying the need to create a “language in common” that was more of a felt orientation to the rules of interaction than a spoken tongue. Palestinian (Israeli Arab) members emphasized the importance of finding a community in which they truly belonged, as they were the “other” in both Israeli and Palestinian societies. Within *Ta'ayush*, they were seen as equal partners, as valued contributors, but this status changed when they left group activities and went to their jobs within Israeli society or tried to explain their partnership with Jews in the context of their extended family (Gerardo<sup>13</sup>, Tel Aviv, November 23, 2004; Palestinian Israeli activists, Kfar Qasem, December 12, 2004). Jewish members also stressed the importance of belonging, and the need to go beyond simply getting together and talking, and instead addressing the power differentials, rules and regulations (as well as collective narratives) that keep Jewish and Palestinian citizens from belonging equally within Israeli society (Isadora, Tel Aviv, November 24, 2004). *Ta'ayush* seeks to bound its identity not on parameters of identity or identification (as many *Ta'ayush* activists told me, there is

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13 Gerardo is a Jewish activist with Ta'ayush-Center and a founding member.

no “membership” and there is no list of who belongs), but rather on belonging through action and partnership. Membership involves in part an emotional sense of attachment to the group, but more specifically the boundary constitutes a form of political practice based on the principle of “partnership in life.”

Finally, this belonging was not predicated on having a shared history, the same language or collective memory. Both Jewish and Palestinian members of *Ta'ayush* I interviewed spoke about the Holocaust and the Nakba as elements of their identity; yet instead of using these collective traumas to differentiate themselves from the “other” or to adhere to a solidaristic sense of “Israeli/Jewish” or “Palestinian” identity based on this shared suffering, they yoked these events to their activism. Consequently, such collective identifiers were dis-connected and re-connected in a way that created space for all those working to remove the causes of such traumas in the future. While the still-lived “memory” of the Holocaust and the Nakba were important aspects of identity for several of my informants, this did not preclude partnership with others who did not share this same aspect of historical memory and instead spurred action in the hopes that, by combating injustice, they were honoring the memory of those who suffered and died. While wanting to acknowledge and recognize the past, the orientation of *Ta'ayush* members was to the present and future and toward creating social bonds to overcome the separation, ignorance and dehumanization that can lead to widespread violence.

## Conclusion

*Ta'ayush* is not alone in its effort of challenging boundaries constructed on purely national grounds and seeking to create space for difference and a re-bounding of identity based on shared values, ideologies and political aims of equality, justice and a lasting peace with security for both peoples. One unique characteristic of *Ta'ayush* and some of the other groups that are relatively successful in creating such spaces for action (in contrast to some other “joint” projects that failed with the collapse of the Oslo process) is that they have no political agenda in terms of a final status peace agreement, but rather have a clear political agenda in terms of a process for interaction between Israelis and Palestinians based on equality, trust and mutual respect. As several informants repeated, the joint planning of actions is “both a means and a kind of symbolic goal” (Yigal, Jerusalem, November 1, 2004) because it serves as a mechanism for creating a shared identity and for creating the social ties that will help maintain that boundary of affiliation. Many of the Palestinian and Israeli activists involved in another group, one comprised of representatives from the pragmatic peace movements, spoke of how they were closer to their partners in the “other” community than they were with the extremists within their own communities. For these individuals, their political and associational ties, their affiliations and social networks

defined who they were more than political-national labels. As Izhak Schnell,<sup>14</sup> an Israeli activist, explained,

From far away you can see categories of Israeli and Palestinian, but, you see, both societies are divided and that is the main issue. I have a better understanding with people like Walid and Samaan than with the political religious Orthodox in Israel. So it's not a monolithic Palestinian society or an Israeli monolith (Jerusalem, January 26, 2005).

Similarly, Riad Malki,<sup>15</sup> a Palestinian activist stated,

If you ask me what is the Israeli definition [of peace] of Ron Pundak of the Peres Center, I think his definition is completely different than that of Itam or of Uzi or of Moshe, etc, or of [Arik] Sharon himself. If you ask me what is the definition [of peace] ... that Riad holds, compared to Sheikh Zahar, it is also different. That doesn't mean there is one commonly agreed upon definition of the Palestinians or shared by all the Israelis together ... you could find there could be Israelis and Palestinians agreeing with each other on the same definition, but they disagree with their own people on such a definition (Ramallah, March 21, 2005).

Groups like *Ta'ayush* are small and on the margins of Israeli society. However, the example of *Ta'ayush*, Machsom Watch and similar groups shows that exclusive boundaries separating and homogenizing Israeli and Palestinian societies into monolithic categories of "self" and "other" *are* being resisted by members of both societies. While the geopolitical, economic, social and psychological obstacles to cooperation and partnership are considerable, especially as the separation barrier nears completion (Halper, 2004; Tilley, 2005), it has not stopped efforts to create alternative boundaries of identity, those predicated on common goals, objectives and human (as opposed to ethno-national) characteristics. The case outlined here demonstrates that boundaries of identification are context-specific; the boundaries of *Ta'ayush* emerge out of shared planning of activities and collective participation in the decision-making process. This lends support to theories of functional self-determination and cooperation that suggest mutual identification might come over time as neighboring units interact about common problems (e.g., the environment, the economy) (Young, 2005). Furthermore, the ability of *Ta'ayush* activists to lift up and

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14 Izhak Schnell is the Israeli co-coordinator of the "Bringing Peace Together" project of the Panorama Center for the Dissemination of Democracy and Community Development.

15 Riad Malki is Director of the Panorama Center for the Dissemination of Democracy and Community Development.

value different aspects of their particular (i.e., national) identity while also affirming their collective identity with other *Ta'ayush* activists affirms that identity is rooted in social relationships and can be constituted differently depending on the particular set of relationships one is enmeshed in at the present time (Meir-Glitzenstein, 2002:182; Tilly, 2002).

The case of *Ta'ayush* suggests that interventions into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should seek to create spaces for interaction based on common concerns and not dialogue for the sake of dialogue. Furthermore, those seeking to create such spaces should be aware of the dynamics of power and privilege that necessarily accompany Israelis, Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza into any space they occupy in common. The power and privilege of being in a majority group or the dominant group in society provides an ease of access for traversing boundaries that others do not have because of their racial, social, economic or gender position. While it is clearly evident that Palestinians do not have the same ability to cross geopolitical boundaries, as evidenced in the difficulty of getting permits to travel to Jerusalem for meetings, the challenge of crossing other "invisible" social or political boundaries may be less evident and may result in a more stringent holding on to collective identity labels or publicly professed loyalty to their national group regardless of their private personal beliefs. The importance of creating space for joint action and for identifying meaningful tropes and boundary markers that have appeal to all parties can be seen in the example of the ongoing struggle in the Palestinian village of Bil'in, where for over two and a half years (since February 2005) Palestinians, Israelis and internationals engaged in weekly protests against the separation barrier. The demonstrations in Bil'in have been marked by a creative muse in which visual props, such as hangman's nooses with corpses representing values such as human rights, democracy and the like, are presented front and foremost (Blecher, 2006). Linking political activity and the boundaries of belonging to the protest movement with broader values to which both Israelis and Palestinians can relate creates space for Israelis and Palestinians to participate in joint struggles without getting tied to the particularities of a final status settlement. In the process, Israelis and Palestinians build relationships and trust, creating a system of connections that generates a different, overlapping identity boundary beyond narrow conceptions of "Israeli" or "Palestinian." The obstacles facing such reconceptualized boundaries are obvious: despite the protests, the separation barrier has been built through Bil'in. At the same time, however, Israelis and Palestinians together have managed to bring a case to the Israeli Supreme Court that has resulted in the temporary freeze of construction in the Mattityahu West neighborhood of the Modi'in Illit settlement block. As one of my informants from *Ta'ayush* stated, their power comes from the joint nature of action; by working together and getting beyond talking, such groups have the ability to create their own "facts on the ground."

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