

The System Dynamics of Identity-Based Conflict

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Introduction

Identity-based conflicts are at the centre of conflict transformation theory and practice. It is membership in these groups – defined by religious, ethnic, racial, cultural and/or other criteria – which constitutes a key unit of analysis for the understanding of violent conflict (Azar 1990). When there is an uneasy balance of power between such groups that has existed over a long period of time, and when both sides in a bilateral relationship feel threatened by each other, the story people tell themselves may actually hinder rather than contribute to the core validation and security they seek.¹ Moreover, third-parties who seek to resolve these conflicts risk being drawn into accepting the same beliefs. Despite their best efforts to remain neutral and assist both sides, the obvious power imbalances, violence and moral outrage can lead third-parties to take sides. In addition, third-parties are rarely perceived as neutral even if they see themselves in this way.

People embedded in such conflicts where their very identity is threatened tend to tell themselves and others a particular story. This story characterizes a set of beliefs that people hold about themselves, their adversaries, their situation and their alternatives:

We are innocent victims of someone else's aggression. Our actions are justified because our enemy is dangerous and unreasonable. The solutions to our problems are obvious and require our adversary to change. If we persist in our current efforts to defend and affirm ourselves, we will eventually succeed.

The purpose of this chapter is to support third-parties – peacebuilders, policy makers and donors – to apply systems thinking to help transform identity-based conflicts. The approach to systems thinking that is used in this chapter emphasizes thinking in dynamic frames and in terms of relationships (cf. Senge, 1990; Senge et al, 1994; Meadows, 2008). It also concentrates on how institutions and individuals learn and acknowledges perspective dependency. Systems thinking

1. illuminates the dynamic and often non-obvious interdependencies among multiple elements that create such problems,

¹ By contrast, in the case of people who are victims of unilateral genocide, many of these beliefs need to be taken at face value and acted upon decisively to contain one side and protect the other.

2. increases awareness of how people unwittingly undermine their own efforts to achieve their stated aims and
3. points to high leverage solutions which benefit the system as a whole.

Systems thinking is based on important core principles about how systems function:

- **Feedback:** system performance is largely determined by a web of interconnected circular (not linear) relationships among its elements. Actions taken by one group affect both its own performance and the behaviour of others – often in non-obvious ways.
- **Delay:** actions people take have both immediate and delayed consequences that they do not always anticipate.
- **Unintended Consequences:** immediate and intended consequences of people's actions are often neutralized or reversed by the long-term unintended consequences of these same actions. People often contribute unwittingly to the very problems they are trying to solve.
- **Power of Awareness:** when people see and understand the system as it really operates, they are no longer controlled by it and can make different choices.
- **Leverage:** systems improve as the result of a few key coordinated changes sustained over time.

Thinking systemically is potentially valuable in resolving identity-based conflicts for at least three reasons. First, it enables third-parties to develop a view of the conflict that honours the different perspectives of all conflict parties while integrating these perspectives into a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of why the conflict persists. Second, it explains why the conflict parties are unable to achieve the respect, security and peace they seek despite their own best efforts. Third, it helps third-parties identify sustainable, high leverage interventions while supporting adversaries to transform how they think and speak about their world.

Peacebuilders who have experimented with the approach believe that systems thinking can help them meet the challenges of analysis and strategy development. This chapter examines this potential more thoroughly. It:

1. summarizes the challenges of analysis and explains how systems thinking can help third-parties address them
2. provides a generalized systems analysis of identity-based conflicts with specific reference to how it manifests in the Israeli-Palestinian context
3. identifies a range of strategies available to third-parties for transforming these conflicts

1. A Systemic Approach to Conflict Analysis

Peacebuilders describe several challenges in developing an effective analysis of complex, chronic conflicts (Richmond 2007, Mac Ginty 2008). The first is that the adversaries tend to readily blame others for the causes of their problems and conversely fail to see how they themselves are contributing to these problems. Second, descriptions of stakeholders and factors shaping the conflict tend to be analysed and treated separately.

Third, while some peacebuilders have been successful in describing relational problems as vicious cycles – itself a form of systems analysis – more powerful yet still readily transferable approaches to systems analysis are typically not applied.² Fourth, the compelling and frequently incompatible stories told by the main protagonists tend to lead third-parties to either take sides or be perceived as doing so despite their best efforts to be multi-partial.

The approach to systems thinking taken in this chapter is derived from System Dynamics, a computer-based approach developed by Jay Forrester at MIT in the 1950s, which has been applied to understanding systems at multiple levels from the interpersonal and organizational to urban, national and global spheres (cf. Fisher 2005). Drawing on System Dynamics Peter Senge, one of Forrester's students, and his colleagues went on to popularize a more user-friendly approach to systems thinking. This approach enables people to deepen their understanding of the root causes of a chronic, complex problem while also increasing their abilities to create what is most important to them (Senge 1990). The additional learning disciplines cultivated by Senge's approach are:

- personal mastery – the ability to approach life from a creative instead of a reactive orientation
- shared visioning – the capacity to align diverse stakeholders around shared aspirations
- mental models – the ability to reflect on and shift one's own thinking in order to design more effective actions
- team learning – the capacity to learn and work more effectively in groups

Developing a systems analysis within the context of furthering individual and collaborative learning dramatically increases its effectiveness. People are encouraged to look beyond the crises and negative trends that usually capture their attention to the underlying structural causes of the conflict. The learning disciplines help people reflect on how they contribute, often unintentionally, to the very problems they are trying to solve. The purpose of cultivating personal responsibility for the conflict is not to render others blameless but to increase one's own power to change the things one can change.

Systems thinking enables third-parties to integrate the analyses of stakeholders and conflict drivers by showing the interdependencies among a range of drivers valued by different stakeholders. Systems maps evoke a more complete picture of a very complex problem. We are reminded of the Sufi story of the blind men and the elephant, where each blind man touches part of the elephant and swears that the part he touches is the whole reality. Systems analyses acknowledge the partial truths held by each party while expanding the views of all sides to encompass a more comprehensive picture of the dynamic reality that affects them all.

Systems thinkers have also identified a set of approximately a dozen systems archetypes – common dynamics appearing in a broad variety of systems. These archetypes or classic stories enable third-parties to extend their analysis beyond simple vicious cycles by showing how the main protagonists' destructive actions interact with

² The author especially wishes to thank Peter Woodrow for his experiments in applying systems thinking in a variety of international conflict settings.

their efforts to achieve specific goals. The archetypes also generate easily understood explanations of the core of many of the complex problems parties face (cf. Kim, 2000). In addition, they serve as the seed crystals for developing richer and more refined understandings of the characteristic uniqueness of any conflict. Archetypes such as Shifting the Burden, Conflicting Goals and Escalation offer insights into the unintended and delayed consequences of people's actions and specify well-understood leverage points or interventions for shifting these dynamics.

Finally, the richer, more comprehensive and dynamic view developed through systems thinking enables third-parties to honour the partial perspective of each conflict party as well as create a more complete picture that encompasses everyone's views. Because the systems view also shows how each side tends to contribute to the very problem it is trying to solve, the approach helps peacebuilders develop not only compassion but also a firmer resolve to support adversaries to take more responsibility for their current actions and to adopt more effective strategies.

2. Understanding Identity-Based Conflicts from a Systems Viewpoint

System dynamics are often pictured as maps of dynamic interdependencies. Multiple maps are often used to illuminate different aspects of the problem. The maps have certain features. They:

1. Help people answer a critical 'Why?' question that concerns them. For example, "Why have we not been able to achieve the respect, security, sovereignty and prosperity we desire despite our best efforts?" The maps are intended to answer the question rather than to model the 'whole system', thus establishing boundaries for the analysis.
2. Incorporate and illuminate interdependencies across a range of explanatory factors over time. For example, factors that influence identity-based conflicts include external drivers such as geopolitics and donor policies, internal drivers such as national resource allocation policies and treatment of minorities, informal factors such as people's perceptions and emotions and the goals of different stakeholders.
3. Surface distinctions about which drivers are most significant. For example, in an analysis of the dynamics that led to the ten-year civil war in Burundi, local NGOs identified the key variable as the relative power of the elite in relation to the majority *instead of* ethnic tension between Hutus and Tutsis. This enabled them to address ethnic manipulation as a *strategy* used by the elite of both groups to maintain control of the country's resources rather than as the root cause of the war.
4. Show people the differences between the intended and unintended consequences of their actions and the ways in which people unwittingly undermine their own ability to achieve their goals.
5. Are most useful when presented as working hypotheses to be modified by the stakeholders themselves and acknowledged by these stakeholders as helping them answer their 'Why?' question in a more complete and effective way.

6. Are designed to catalyse new thinking and conversations among stakeholders about the nature of the problem and more cost-effective strategies for resolving it.

Identity-based conflicts appear to be created and sustained by three archetypal dynamics: *Shifting the Burden*, *Conflicting Goals* and *Escalation*. I will first describe each in turn. Then I will map how they come together generically and in the specific case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.³

The story of *Shifting the Burden* is one where people are aware of a long-term, fundamental solution to a problem symptom. However, it is easier for them to implement a quick fix because it achieves short-term results and does not require a fundamental shift in their orientation towards the other side. Over time, their dependence on the quick fix makes it increasingly difficult to implement the long-term solution, and the problem symptom gradually gets worse. For example, some people who are unable to process the trauma of childhood abuse turn to drugs and alcohol as quick fixes to manage their pain; however substance abuse also undermines their capacity to heal the core trauma that led to it. This is the basic archetype of addiction (see for example, Senge, 1990, 109-111).

The story of *Conflicting Goals* is one where an action taken by group A to achieve A's goal directly undermines the ability of group B to achieve B's goal. Given the impossibility of achieving both goals at once, people usually end up achieving neither goal to their satisfaction. For example, if group A and group B both want to live on the same land without sharing this land, their goals are fundamentally conflicting.

The story of *Escalation* is one where sides A and B compete unsuccessfully for permanent advantage. Each time one side gets ahead; the other side redoubles its efforts to win and temporarily regains the lead. Over time both sides expend tremendous resources but neither gains the permanent victory it seeks. An arms race is an example of an escalating dynamic where each side unsuccessfully seeks to gain permanent advantage through continuously adding to its arsenal.

The problem symptom that drives identity-based conflicts is the threat each side perceives to its basic right to exist. For example, both Israelis and Palestinians experience threats to their essential rights to land and sovereignty. Although peaceful co-existence is accepted by many as the long-term fundamental solution – a two-state solution in the case of Israelis and Palestinians has been discussed for many years, – both sides resort instead to quick fixes to gain legitimacy. The more powerful side (Israel in this case) seeks to control the other economically and militarily, while the weaker side (here the Palestinians) works to undermine the stronger one through enlisting sympathy for its cause and engaging in guerrilla tactics. The primary long-term consequences of efforts to control or undermine the other are losses of life, resources, respect and/or security on both sides that increase fear and anger, which in turn reduce the ability of advocates for peaceful co-existence to implement the more fundamental solution. Similar dynamics have been seen in Northern Ireland and Cyprus.

Moreover, the origins of the perceived threat lie in a history of oppression experienced by each side, which leads both sides to perceive themselves as victims. For example, Jews were forced by the Romans to leave the land they now occupy nearly

³ The author wishes to thank Diana Chigas, Hugh O'Doherty and members of the Alliance for International Conflict Prevention and Resolution for their inputs to this model. See also, Stroh (2002).

2,000 years ago, were persecuted in many of the countries they subsequently inhabited and lost one third of their global population in the Holocaust. Palestinians have never been in control of their sovereignty – being subjects of the Ottomans, British, Jordanians and Israelis over the past 400 years. The perception of victimhood on both sides is compounded by new experiences of humiliation and injustice stimulated by current losses and by a structure of nested oppression where even the powerful side in the current conflict is threatened by more dominant external players. For example, Palestinians suffer as an occupied people while Israelis feel attacked by their neighbours and threatened by the larger Arab world, Iran, and international anti-Semitism.

What has been described in the previous two paragraphs is essentially the systems archetype of Shifting the Burden. In other words, the adversaries feel compelled to control or undermine the other as a way to validate their own existence. The tragic impact is that both sides feel even more endangered over time. The general dynamic is shown in Figure 1.

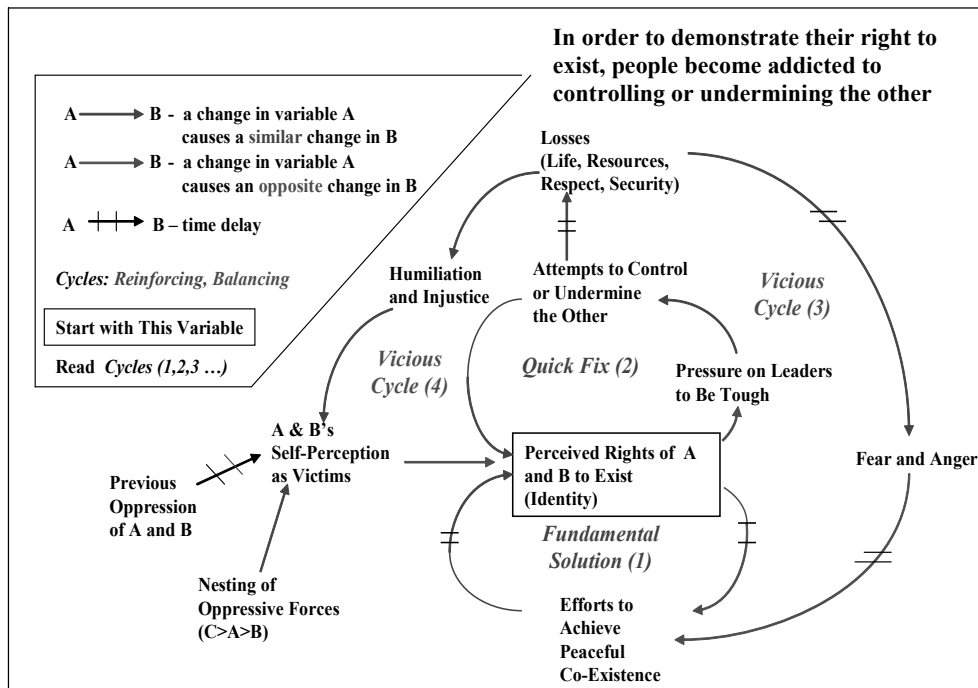


Figure 1: Shifting the Burden

A second dynamic that intensifies the conflict is that of Conflicting Goals. Neither side is monolithic in desiring to control or undermine the other. Both sides have moderate camps (e.g. peace groups in Israel and the Palestinians' Abbas government) which want or at least are willing to accept peaceful co-existence as the end result. However, each side also has extremists whose goal is to expel if not eliminate the other (Israeli settlers and Hamas are respective examples). The problem is that losses incurred by both sides increase fear and anger, which in turn strengthen the cause of each side's

extremists and weaken the cause of those calling for peaceful co-existence. These dynamics are shown in Figure 2.

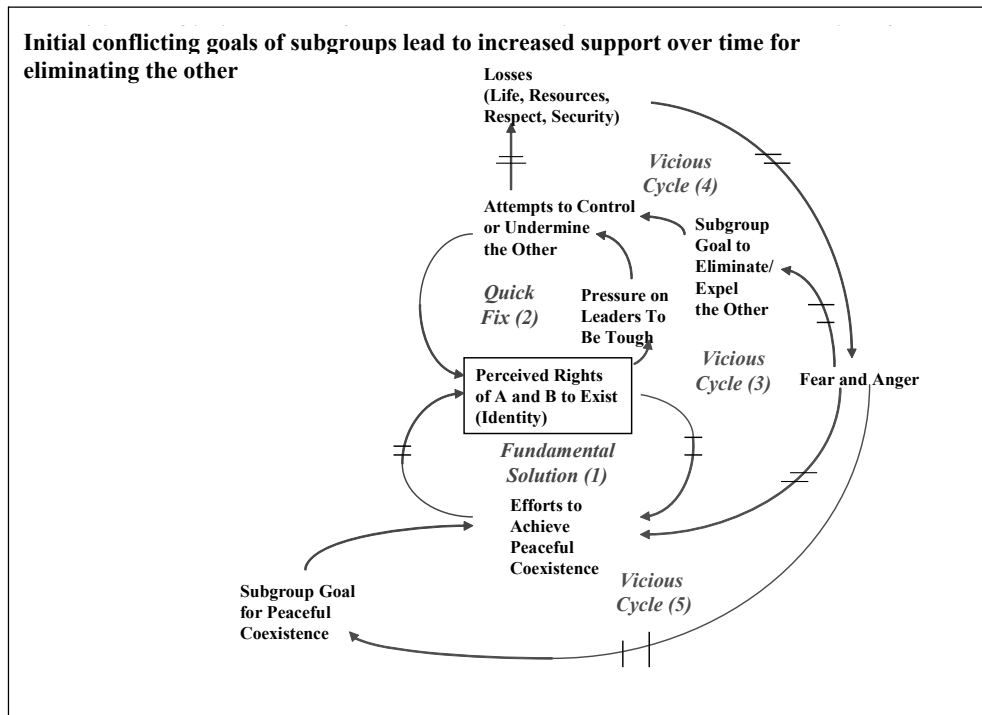


Figure 2: Conflicting Goals

A final dynamic that compounds the aforementioned problems is escalation. In the effort to justify their respective rights to exist, both sides become entangled in an endless race for both domination and victimization. They do so by denying or justifying their aggression towards each other as the legitimate response of victims. For example, many non-religious Israelis justify their occupation of the West Bank as a requirement for their security even if they do not abide by the more religious belief that this land constitutes a historical right. Similarly, many Palestinians regard bombings both within the West Bank and the Green Line as the justifiable acts of an occupied people. Ironically, the history of persecution is not only repeated but also defended by both sides – decreasing even further the likelihood that either will gain the sovereignty and security they work so hard to achieve. These dynamics are summarized in Figure 3.

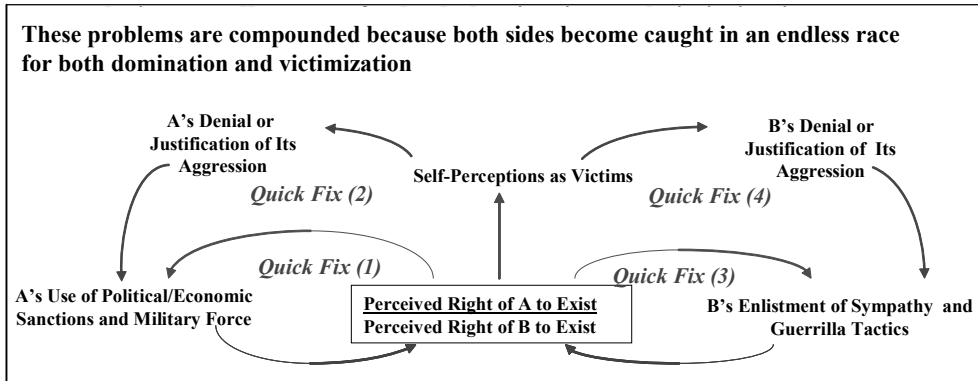


Figure 3: Escalation

Many of the cause-effect relationships that produce system dynamics are shaped by people's mental models. Indeed, one of my colleagues, Michael Goodman, has observed in conversation that "systems thinking is mental models made visible". Making critical mental models visible on a map both brings the dynamics to life and provides insights into the thinking that has to transform for the dynamic to shift. For example, the belief that 'force leads to respect' is what increases the pressure on leaders to be tough when people feel their identity threatened. An example is shown in Figure 4.

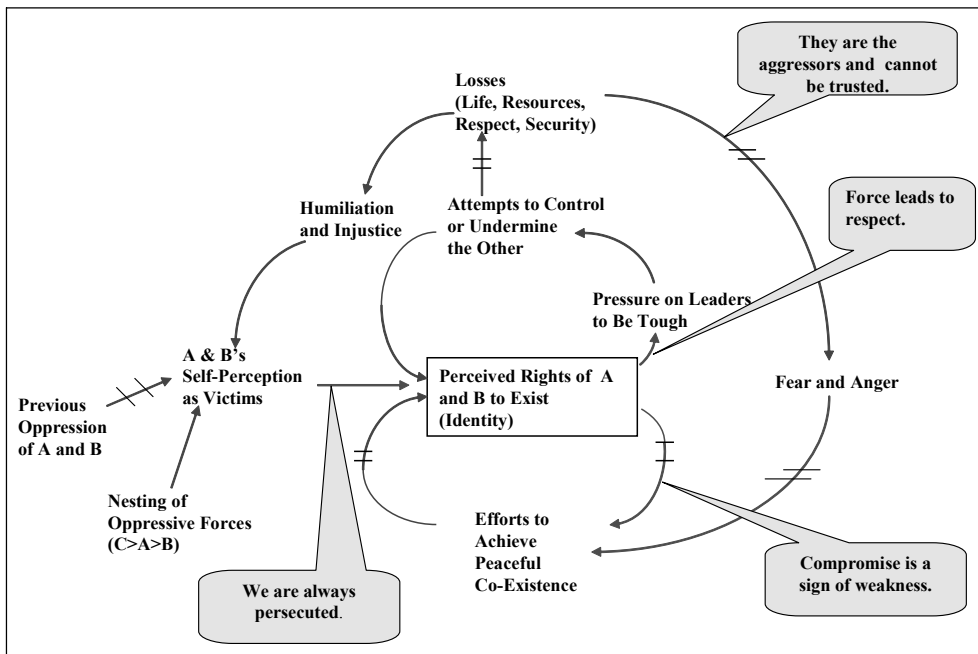


Figure 4: Adding Mental Models

3. Strategies for Resolving Identity-Based Conflicts

Systems thinking enables third-parties to create a different story. In essence, the story related by the above analysis is one where every group fails to achieve what it really wants – despite its best efforts. Certainly, Israelis and Palestinians who want peaceful co-existence are not successful. Even the extremists on both sides have failed to eliminate, though they may have partially expelled, their enemies. Systems thinking is unlikely to change the goals held by extreme sub-groups. However, it can help third-parties and the proponents of peace and moderation on both sides to build a stronger case and strategy for sustainable co-existence.

The question of who to involve in the problem-solving process, and how, is especially important in conflict transformation work. One principle is to incorporate as diverse a set of viewpoints as possible in developing the analysis of the problem. The viewpoints of leaders and extremists should be explicitly included. Representatives of diverse stakeholders who are directly involved in developing or modifying the maps should then be encouraged to share the maps with their constituents and test for clarity and completeness of the dynamics described. Finally, it is important to ensure that leaders capable of making tradeoffs between the short and long-term consequences of decisions are included in strategy development.

Systems thinking can assist

- peacebuilders to work more effectively with peace supporters and moderates on both sides,
- policy makers to identify and press for high leverage policies that support peace,
- donors to identify, create and sustain funding for high leverage initiatives and
- peace proponents and moderates on both sides to engage further support among their own populations.

The strategy has five steps:

1. Ask a different set of questions.
2. Reflect system dynamics back to those who favour peaceful co-existence.
3. Reassess goals and beliefs.
4. Target leverage points based on an understanding of the specific dynamics.
5. Expand, especially in the case of identity-based conflicts, the range of interventions to encompass spiritual, emotional and physical as well as cognitive factors.

3.1 Ask a Different Set of Questions

Systems thinking enables third-parties and moderates to ask a powerful set of questions that challenge conflict parties to transform the story they tell themselves. The purpose of the systemic questions is to build a story where each side is doing the best it can to achieve what it wants but fails to realize that the long-term consequences of its actions undermines not only its adversaries but also its own cause. Systemic questions include:

- Why has this conflict continued over time, often despite people's best efforts to solve it?

- How do people contribute, albeit unintentionally, to their own problems?
- What do people lose by ignoring the views of others?
- If the answers are so obvious, why don't they work?
- What can people do differently to achieve what they want?

3.2 Reflect System Dynamics Back to Those Who Favour Peaceful Co-existence

Social systems transform in part when people see more of the system in which they are embedded. As a result of this awareness, they are no longer controlled by the system and can make different choices. Third-parties can help peace proponents and moderates unfreeze stuck mindsets and recognize that:

- Each side contributes, however unwittingly, to the very problems it is trying to solve.
- Although conflict parties' actions usually produce short-term benefits, the same behaviour often creates unintended delayed consequences that make it more difficult for the majority of people to achieve the security, respect, sovereignty and prosperity they want in the long run.
- People's beliefs are key obstacles to their success.

For example, a group of Israeli peace activists who saw the systems analysis discovered that siding with Palestinian moderates and denouncing other Israelis for their oppressive tactics over-emphasized Israeli aggression and downplayed the Palestinian actions that hurt peace prospects. Moderate Palestinians hurt their cause when they portray themselves as victims and condone violence. It is also true that even moderate Israelis contribute to the country's lack of security and global respect by voting for leaders who pursue economic and military strategies that stifle the ability of Palestinians to create a viable state. Israeli efforts to support settlements and control Palestinian movements in the West Bank provide a security buffer in the short run but risk creating an even more desperate neighbour in the long run. By the same token Palestinian strategies to either draw attention to their helplessness or attack Israelis enhance temporary feelings of legitimacy but undermine their ability to achieve sovereignty.

Enabling each side to accept the realization that it can be its own worst enemy is a delicate matter. For example, a group of moderate Palestinians who saw an early version of the systems maps together with moderate Israelis felt that the apparent symmetry of the conflict belied their weaker economic and military position. People are victims in truth when their family and friends are killed, when they lose their homes and livelihood and when they are not free to live or even travel where they want. However, victims often become perpetrators, for example when they justify violence as a legitimate response to the losses they have experienced. As Terrence Real points out:

“Far and away, the most prevalent underlying dynamic of retaliation is *offending from the victim position* (italics his). Adopting this stance, one thinks: ‘If you hit me, I get to hit you back twice as hard, with no shame or compunction, because, after all, I’m your victim.’ Whenever you offend from the victim position, you wind up being in the absurd position of being a perpetrator who feels like he’s being victimized even as he attacks” (Real, 2007, 52).

Moreover, even if someone was once a victim, violence is not an effective response since it begets more violence. As Jesse Jackson told his African-American brethren

“You may not be responsible for being down, but you are responsible for getting up.”

Systems analysis points to a painful truth – that people often hurt themselves as much if not more than their adversaries. Many third-parties are aware of this fact but understandably find it difficult to raise it with the conflict parties. However, the benefit of raising this truth is that it can empower people to stop the cycle of violence at the point of greatest control – within every individual in each moment.

Third-parties who want to help the respective actors become more aware of the self-destructive nature of their own actions might find the following guidelines helpful:

- Support people through an integrated stance of caring and firmness. The Buddhist precept of practicing ‘ruthless compassion’ points to the need to be both sensitive to people’s inevitable pain and fierce in challenging their self-inflicted suffering. Compassion comes through recognizing that everyone has been doing the best they can given what they understand to be true – and that most people fail to see how the same actions they take to help themselves in the short run often hurt them over time. Fierceness comes in by gently but firmly calling people’s attention to their self-sabotage.
- Develop your own systems map first – through historical reading and interviews with all sides – to orient you to the systemic nature of the conflict. The systems maps provided in Figures 1-3 are starting places for you to establish this orientation.
- Work with each side separately to raise its awareness of how it is hurting itself. This may involve some combination of sharing your own map as a starting point for people’s input and developing a similar map with them.
- Share systemic insights with representatives of multiple sides when you feel they are ready to speak with and listen to each other about the bigger picture.

3.3 Reassess Goals and Beliefs

Seeing a more complete story of counter-productive actions, negative long-term consequences and limiting beliefs can lead people initially to despair. They recognize that the thinking and behaviour they have relied on so far will not help them achieve the goals they espouse no matter how hard they try. They realize that, even though their strategies temporarily move them in the direction they want to go, eventually these lines of attack return them full circle (literally and figuratively) to where they are now. They confront the fact that they must first change themselves instead of others if they want to achieve a different result.

Once the despair fully registers, another feeling often begins to emerge. This is one of true hope, founded on the sense that if we think and correspondingly act differently, perhaps we can finally achieve the results that have eluded us until now. Because goals and beliefs are critical elements of all social systems, third-parties can reinforce people’s cautious optimism by helping adversaries reflect more closely on their goals and beliefs.

First, third-parties can remind people of their espoused goals, e.g. greater respect, security, sovereignty and prosperity. They can then distinguish these goals from the short-term benefits people achieve through their current actions, e.g. temporary security or dominance, a feeling of superiority, revenge or justifiable passivity.

Next, third-parties can point out that the actions producing these short-term benefits actually limit people's ability to achieve their espoused goals. Even when both parties resort less to physical violence, they can still undermine the long-term goals many protagonists desire. For example, continued efforts by Israel to expand settlements provide only temporary security, while Palestinian incitement of their youth to get revenge on their oppressors does not create lasting respect. The failure to confront these more subtle forms of disrespect and threat, and to challenge the addictive tendencies of both parties, has left both Israelis and Palestinians continuing to justify their destructive – and self-destructive – behaviours. By contrast, when third-parties help protagonists clarify these dynamics, they can support them to make a more informed choice about which payoffs to pursue – those that serve them in the long run or ones that provide only temporary relief.

Third-parties can also help adversaries set aside old beliefs and adopt new ones in several ways. First, ask people to test their beliefs in terms of whether or not the beliefs help them achieve their goals. For example, ask “Does the belief that people will only listen to you if you use violence help you achieve the peace and respect you want?” instead of “Has the other side taken you seriously when you attacked them?” The answer to the latter question will usually be “Yes” since it is based on people's past experience, but it does not help them achieve what they really want. Second, ask people to provide data that disconfirms their existing beliefs. For example, many Israelis and Palestinians can vouch for the essential goodness of individual members of the ‘enemy’ even though they feel the need to malign the other side as a whole.

Third, ask people to take responsibility for the unintended consequences of their own actions – since their intentions, beliefs and actions are the ultimate source of their power. For example, Israeli members of Peace Now could acknowledge that unequivocally supporting all Palestinian efforts ‘to end occupation of the West Bank’ would not ultimately serve their desire for fairness and peace since doing so condoned acts of violence against its own people. Fourth, encourage people to see the world as their enemy does – since it affirms the other's humanity (without necessarily accepting their behaviour).

Fifth, ask people to reconsider their ‘obvious’ solutions – since these solutions have often led to the very outcomes people say they do not want. For example, even several prominent Palestinians have argued against insisting on the full right of return since they recognize that Israelis can never accept this and because such insistence leads Israelis to refuse to be flexible on other negotiating points (cf. Nusseibeh, 2007).

Sixth, encourage people to create experiments where old beliefs can be set aside and new beliefs safely tested. For example, there are numerous joint Israeli-Palestinian collaborations around water management, the arts, violence prevention and childhood education that demonstrate the two sides have common interests and can work towards them together. The Parents Circle – Families Forum, a group of Israeli and Palestinian parents whose children had lost their lives in the conflict learned to set aside their negative beliefs of each other in light of a shared grief and common goal to stop further bloodshed.⁴

4 Please see: www.theparentscircle.com

3.4 Target Leverage Points

In addition to focusing on reaffirming espoused goals and reframing deeply held beliefs, third-parties can identify, fund and press for implementation of high leverage solutions. Leverage points are those few places in an existing system where sustained effort over time can produce sustainable, system-wide improvement. Systems thinkers have identified leverage points for each of the archetypal dynamics described earlier (cf. Kim, 2000).

Three changes are understood to permanently transform a Shifting the Burden story in favour of the fundamental solution:

1. Decrease dependence on the quick fix, i.e. the tendencies in identity-based conflicts to try to control or undermine the other side. Shifting mental models, e.g. from “Force will lead to respect” or “Seeking sympathy for our helplessness will create support for our cause” to “Respect creates respect” or “Non-violent resistance is self-affirming and effective”, assists in reducing this dependence. For example, both Gandhi and Martin Luther King were able to generate freedom for their people through encouraging non-violent resistance.
2. Extend people’s time horizon so that they will persist in implementing the fundamental solution. This can be done by aligning adversaries around a vision of an ideal future or helping them develop strategies that enable both sides to identify and prepare for a range of possible future scenarios.⁵ For example, scenario planning prepared both whites and blacks in South Africa to make a peaceful shift to a post-apartheid government (cf. Kahane 1994).
3. Apply the quick fix where necessary in a way that supports rather than undermines people’s ability to implement the fundamental solution. For example, Machsom Watch is a group of Israeli women who regularly monitor Palestinian checkpoints to help Israeli soldiers treat the Palestinians with dignity, thereby fostering in the moment the respect that both sides seek and deserve.⁶

Leverage points ‘rewire’ key cause-effect relationships. Rewiring can occur in several ways: cutting or mitigating the impact of one variable on another, introducing new factors and cause-effect relationships, shifting mental models that govern critical cause-effect relationships and reducing time delays that undermine the ability of the system to implement fundamental solutions. Figure 5 shows how the leverage points described above rewire the Shifting the Burden dynamic.

The leverage in changing a Conflicting Goals story is to either find a solution that satisfies both goals or choose and align resources around one of the goals. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the goals of peaceful co-existence and eliminating or expelling the other side appear mutually exclusive. If the majority of people want peace, leverage lies in unambiguously aligning resources around the goal of peaceful co-existence. However, this requires both sides to effectively contain their own extremist populations. While Israeli and Palestinian moderates have made efforts to do this, both have a tendency to blame the other side for failing to containing *its* extrem-

⁵ See, for example, the approaches to shared visioning and scenario planning in Senge et al. (1994).

⁶ For further information please check: www.machsomwatch.org/en.

ists rather than make the hard choice to confront its *own*. For example, Israeli governments condone expansion of settlements in the West Bank and tighten economic restrictions on Palestinians to such an extent that Palestinian moderates have little to show their own people for their moderation. Israel can point to its willingness to leave Gaza – and the continued attacks by Hamas on neighbouring Israeli land – as justification for its reluctance to compel settlers to leave the West Bank. However, without an unambiguous political commitment to peaceful co-existence, neither moderates nor extremists will achieve what they want.

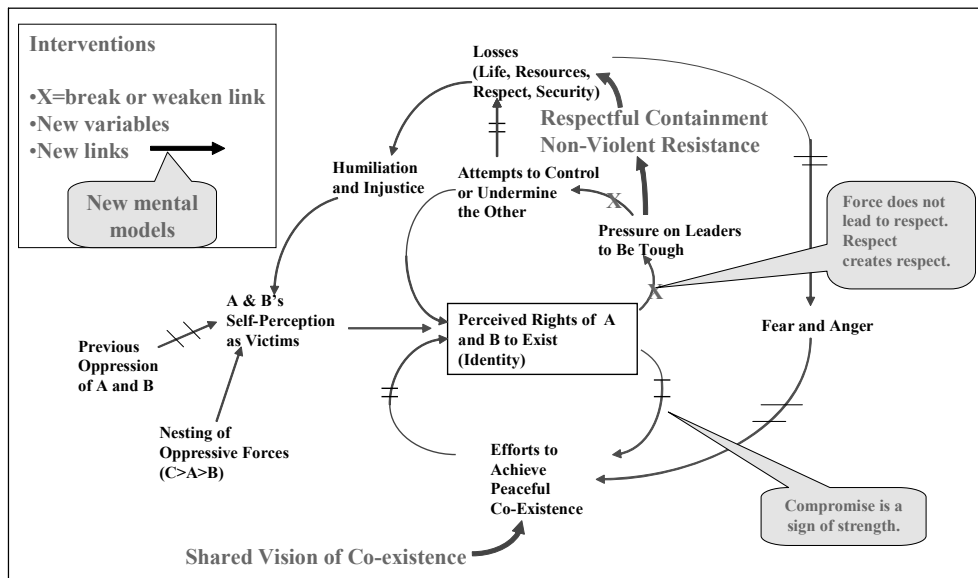


Figure 5: Rewiring the Shifting the Burden Dynamic

Broadly speaking several interventions are available to shift the Escalation story. The first, as in the example of Parents Circle – Families Forum, is to increase people's awareness of the dynamic and the costs to both sides of maintaining it. The second is to create ways in which both sides feel safe and respected, as Machsom Watch seeks to accomplish at the checkpoints. The third – which both Israelis and Palestinians have experimented with through various joint initiatives in policing, health care, economic development, and water resource management – is to slow the rate of escalation.⁷

Leverage points are sometimes neither obvious nor popular. More politically acceptable solutions, such as dialogue and capacity building, might be favoured by both donors and their recipients because of the short-term results they provide, but this does not necessarily mean they have high leverage. As Woodrow/Chigas have observed, making NGOs and particularly donors aware of this discrepancy is not easy. At the same time, foundations can learn to apply systems thinking to leverage their grant-making (cf. Stroh, 2009/Stroh & Zurcher, 2010).

⁷ For example, see the environmental work of The Israeli-Palestinian Centre for Research and Information at www.ipcri.org.

3.5 Expand the Range of Interventions

All of these interventions support people to transform how they *think* about ending the conflict. In the case of identity-based conflicts, where people whose very existence is threatened find it difficult to think clearly, it is important to develop complementary approaches that meet their spiritual, emotional and physical needs as well. Spiritually based approaches help people to identify and affirm their common values and aspirations, as well as to interpret the realization of these values in new and potentially more constructive ways. Emotionally centred approaches include honouring grief, developing shared empathy, truth and reconciliation and storytelling. As we have seen, systems mapping is a way to develop stories of basically well-intentioned people doing the best they can in a complex interdependent world, creating unintended consequences that hurt themselves as well as others and finding better ways to achieve their goals through responsible behaviour and partnership. Other stories may also be appropriate given the cultures and needs of the conflict parties. Finally, resolving conflict on the physical level includes helping people to, in Gandhi's words, "be the change they want to see in the world"; establish clear boundaries; do new things together; negotiate and fulfil agreements.

Conclusion

Systems thinking can be a powerful way to help third-parties transform chronic, complex problems because it helps them:

1. step back from the compelling stories told by all sides about the righteousness of their actions
2. integrate adversaries' partial stories into a more objective and comprehensive explanation of why the conflict persists
3. understand people's resistance to change (i.e. all adversaries are usually able to realize short run payoffs from their behaviour and blame others for long-term stalemates or setbacks)
4. explain to each side why changing its behaviour might be in its own best interest (since each side's current strategies ultimately undermine its own cause)
5. describe what each side must do differently to sustainably achieve the results it wants
6. target the cited leverage points that promise the highest and most sustainable return on investment of collective peacebuilding resources

Systems thinking is best applied within a context of individual and collaborative learning. It offers a powerful way to stimulate the cognitive restructuring that people need to promote their own rights to exist in a healthy and sustainable way. It is likely to be most effective when integrated into a comprehensive approach that meets spiritual, emotional and physical as well as mental needs for affirmation.

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