All for Peace Radio

breaking down borders in the Middle East

Mossi Raz

The prolonged Israeli-Palestinian conflict and stagnation in the peace process has generated intense intercommunal distrust and disillusionment around the prospects for peace. Domestically, optimism regarding a viable two-state solution has reached an all-time low. Regionally, an image of a ‘dehumanised other’ promotes extremism and weakens faith in negotiations. Internationally, high expectations of an externally-led return to the negotiation table further compromise local ownership and direct action. There are three major areas for action: grassroots public opinion; policy; and the media’s role in framing the public debate.

The lack of interaction between Israelis and Palestinians due to travel restrictions, roadblocks and the security barrier means that the media plays a major role in the way people view each other and the conflict. The region reports some of the highest media consumption rates in the world. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, in Israel 63 per cent of adults read at least one newspaper, 68 per cent listen to the radio, and 40 per cent visit internet news portals on a daily basis. In the Palestinian Authority (PA) 58 per cent read the newspaper, 62 per cent listen to local radio stations, and 34 per cent read internet news.

Israeli and Palestinian mainstream media organisations tend to highlight extremism and violence, relegating peace initiatives and moderate voices to the margins. On the Palestinian side, a lack of independent media outlets prevents real discussion of political, socio-cultural and economic issues from a critical perspective and excludes marginalised voices such as those of youth and women.

The All for Peace Radio station is currently the only fully independent, Israeli-Palestinian collaborative communications venture operating in the Middle East. It promotes cross-border dialogue, human rights and collaborative civil society peacebuilding initiatives in order to break down misperceptions and strengthen democracy in the region. All for Peace comprises 24 staff members and 48 volunteers. Roughly half are Israelis and half Palestinian. Volunteers dedicate time to research, develop and host diverse programmes together. Their intercommunal perspective is reflected in the station’s content, which is broadcast continually on FM airwaves and online.

The station’s content is diverse, ranging from political talk shows to cultural programmes and music to engage listeners on topical issues while also cultivating shared tastes and cultural exchanges. It supports civil society to promote understanding and reconciliation through regular coverage of their work on programmes like Civil Society Hour, interviews with peace activists from different sides, or special programmes focusing on innovative civil society initiatives, such as the only joint Palestinian-Israeli public policy think tank, the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI), the Palestinian Centre for the Dissemination of Democracy and Community Development (Panorama), or Rabbis for Human Rights.

All for Peace creates a channel that allows Israeli perceptions of Palestinians to be played back to the Palestinian community and vice versa, to reflect dominant narratives across the divide as well as helping alternative perspectives to filter through.

The station also raises issues that ‘trickle through’ to the mainstream media. For example, its popular morning show featured interviews and a discussion on the issue of illegal foreign workers’ and asylum-seekers’ children being held unsupervised in detention centres in violation of international
and Israeli law. A month later the topic received widespread coverage in Israeli and some international media.

**Tailoring the approach**

In 2009 the station decided to split its frequencies to broadcast in Hebrew and Arabic concurrently, in recognition of growing hostility and distrust within, and between both societies, as well as the steady expansion of All for Peace’s programmes and profile. The split was designed to reach the tens of thousands of Israeli and Palestinian listeners in their own languages, to more successfully bring the Palestinian message to the Israelis and the Israeli narrative to the Palestinians.

The station also runs special language programmes for certain communities. A weekly Russian and Hebrew talk show discusses current affairs and the conflict. Interviews have been held with Peter Satgni, Russian Ambassador in Israel, and Alex Tentzer, a renowned activist for the rights of the Russian-speaking population in Israel. It is one of very few media organisations engaging this predominantly conservative community from a progressive perspective.

Combining tailored intra-national programming for better accessibility and cross-border exchange has proven strategic. The station’s listener base has increased within Israel, the PA, the Middle East and internationally. Between August 2008 and March 2010 online listeners numbers grew from 9,000 to 22,000. Increasing numbers of emails, faxes and phone calls help to determine the station’s content, enabling All for Peace to interact directly with listeners.

In May 2010 Maysa Siniora, the Palestinian Co-Director of the All for Peace radio station and Mossi Raz, its Business Manager, were awarded the International Media Award for an outstanding contribution to peace. The award is presented on behalf of the International Media Council of the Next Century Foundation to individuals demonstrating courage and balance in broadcasting. All for Peace radio was recognised as strengthening mutual understanding in a polarised environment.

**Conclusions**

Borders can be psychological as well as physical. Isolation on either side of a conflict divide often has an echo chamber effect; limited interaction and information flows tend to reinforce negative perceptions of the ‘other’. But there is a clear appetite for information and exchange among the Israeli and Palestinian people. All for Peace radio has harnessed this demand to break down discursive barriers and broaden public debate.

The station creates opportunities for people-to-people contact through volunteering and collaborative programming. Its content reflects progressive Palestinian and Israeli viewpoints and showcases innovative peacebuilding initiatives. It also creates a forum for inclusive debate and opportunities for discussion between listeners.

Mossi Raz is business manager of All for Peace Radio. He is a former Israeli politician and a well-known peace activist, having served as secretary-general of the Israeli NGO Peace Now and as director of Ir Shalem.