

2 Author's Perspective and Primary Research Interest

Peaces and conflicts are relational, and hence in any case need a perceiving subject to be understood and contextualized (Dietrich, 2012: 7). For the Innsbruck School of Peace Studies, which draws on very specific ontological assumptions on which I will elaborate in the chapter about the transrational model, it is key that an author is critically self-aware, not only at the beginning of a study, but also throughout the process of research. The researcher changes during the process of writing and, at least in my case, in every sense of the word, the researcher is searching. The many sounds of the Middle East Conflict certainly have and will change me and shape me as a *persona*¹. I therefore will make my personal background explicit in this chapter and throughout this book, which perhaps goes further than usual, in what I would argue are rather conservative academic conventions. This is particularly important for the empirical part of this study, in which I will directly interact, hence resonate, with people in the midst of the Middle East Conflict.

In addition to Cairo, where I wrote my introduction, Jerusalem and Innsbruck are the two other places, which are relevant for rooting and contextualizing my research about the Middle East Conflict. While the first two cities listed might seem to be logical places for such an endeavor, a small Austrian city might not seem to be too self-evident. Yet it is precisely this city that has largely influenced me in different phases of my personal becoming and in which I am partly rooted through family history. My socialization in Innsbruck has shaped my perceptions, motivations and interests in my discipline as a researcher, and hence should be taken into account with equal priority.

Innsbruck, located in the midst of the Alps, is my mother's hometown and also the place where I grew up. Here, people I encountered were often not too informed about the Middle East Conflict and if they were, the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was usually directly and almost exclusively associated with the Holocaust and a feeling of inconvenience rooted in a feeling of collective guilt mixed with a culture of constructing an image of Austria being the first 'victim' of Nazi Germany. I was

¹ I have used this terminology in reference to the Latin verb *sonare*: "to resonate with intensity" (Guzman after Lederach and Lederach 2010). I will further elaborate on this concept in the chapter 5.2, "Mapping the Middle East Conflict".

born almost exactly 40 years after the foundation of Israel and 43 years after the end of World War II. Yet, even in my generation I found little space for other narratives about the conflict. Amongst my friends there were often two common arguments: that we, as Austrians, carry a fundamental historical responsibility for the State of Israel, and that we have no responsibility for something that happened in the distant past. The former emphasized a historical responsibility to the State of Israel and the idea that we carry the heavy burden for the extermination of Jewish life in Europe. Many saw it as our obligation to protect Israel at any cost, so that Jews would never again become the victims of Anti-Semitism. Those who rejected responsibility for something that happened so many years ago argued that this is not a concern of our generation any longer and that we should live our life in the present, regardless of what has happened in the past. Finally, there were also those who relativized the Holocaust. My largely leftist, urban upbringing, however, was rather distant from such people and ideologies. In retrospect, reflecting upon myself critically, I have to assume that I possibly contributed to even more polarization in Austrian society by trying to exclude those existing realities from my life.

In my father's hometown, Cairo, I have often had heated conversations about the Middle East Conflict with friends and relatives. Referring to the same historical event, I found the narratives to be very different. The painful memory and reality related to World War II, for them, was not the Holocaust, but the establishment of the modern State of Israel, which in Arabic is commonly known as the *Nakba*, which means 'catastrophe'. Also, there are a lot of personal traumata related to four wars against Israel. The Egyptian nationalism surrounding the Fourth Arab-Israeli War of 1973, that tells the story of Egyptian victory, martyrs and success, accompanied me throughout my life, especially because one of my uncles is a veteran of that war. He continues to recount his memories of regained dignity when he was crossing the Suez Canal together with his comrades to raise the Egyptian flag on the Sinai that had been occupied by Israel while mentioning little about the wounds and losses created by the war.

There are strong links between my ancestor's lives and the Middle East Conflict. Since I was a small child, I have been told very different narratives about the conflict, and people have always urged me to 'take a stand' and to define my own 'truth'. This has led to many discussions and conflicts on a very personal level with dear friends and relatives, as well as with complete strangers in the street cafes of Cairo, with settlers in the West Bank and with colleagues in Austria. Most of all, it has caused me inner conflicts. My curiosity in the construction of, and the inter-dependency between, these seemingly fundamentally different narratives, and my wish to listen to as many of them as possible, is the reason I decided to write this book.

Because of the personal experience of regularly encountering the tension between different narratives in the Middle East Conflict, I soon realized that there are experiences that cannot be expressed with language alone. This became particularly evident to me when war broke out again in war-torn Gaza in November 2012. Having had countless impassioned discussions about these violent developments with friends and colleagues from the Middle East, most of us took strong positions about the legitimacy of what was happening, and I became aware that many of us were try-

ing to suppress feelings and emotions and be as rational as possible in our debates. A friend from Gaza was feeling shaken, fearing for the lives of his loved ones. Despite his fears, in our discussions he was trying to be as rational as possible by referring to, and framing his arguments within, international law, which he convincingly argued Israel was violating. He stressed the huge injustice that has been committed towards the Palestinians since the early days of Zionism.

A fellow student and Israeli soldier was basing his position on the argument that Palestinians created a constant security threat for the State of Israel, hence that the Israeli offensive was absolutely legitimate. He was trying to support his position with 'hard' empirical evidence by providing numbers of Palestinian missiles that have been shot into Israeli territory from Gaza, creating a threat for Israelis living in the areas that border the Gaza strip. His fears were real.

In these discussions it became clear to me that both were right in their own way. They were authentically communicating their own truths about the conflict. Their arguments were based on empirical evidence, whilst their feelings and emotions, which lay below the obvious narrative of the conflict, were hardly acknowledged. This only happened in more intimate and informal conversations. Traditional academic environments provide very little space for deeper reflections about expressed truths, which present themselves to the beholder of the episode of the Middle East Conflict. As students who had been trained to analyze conflicts rationally, we had little space to be emotional, at least when talking about international politics.

As I have lived in Cairo for nearly two years, I have experienced how the political reality that has unfolded in the context of the Middle East Conflict and the Egyptian revolution has had a very direct impact on me. The 'outer' reality of violent conflict has been corresponding to what has been happening 'within' my own social network and has sometimes also left me with inner personal struggles. I have realized how seemingly 'outside' issues have a very direct impact on how I relate to myself and to others. For example, I still vividly remember a lunchtime conversation with an international journalist friend of mine on a hot summer day in Cairo. What was meant to be a nice break from work soon escalated as my friend was complaining massively about a merchant at a grocery store who had sold her a bottle of juice above the normal price. For some reason, she did not stop complaining about that situation. On that same day, I had found out about the arrest of an activist with whom I had spent an entire evening discussing the political *status quo* in Egypt only a few days earlier. This activist's struggle, and her political passion had touched me, and I felt a burning sadness about the fact that she was behind bars like tens of thousands of other people. When my friend started complaining, I answered that it was her fault that she agreed to the bargain and that she, as a wealthy international journalist, should not be so dramatic about having paid a few pounds more than a local. Our lunch ended with her leaving the table upset, and I was left feeling even more frustrated about my personal situation in Egypt. It seemed like the conflicts around me would not stop tackling me.

Recently, this friend and I reflected on that situation together and by doing so it became clear to us that we both had felt tense about the violent political reality around us. Similar situations like the one of the exploding car, with which I have

opened this book, had been happening around us on a regular basis during this time period. Even though both of us had been self-reflective about the situation and aware of the possible implications of violent conflicts on individuals, it was as though the violent outside reality had penetrated both of us on the inside. This realization fostered a sense of resonance with one another in a way that we both perceived as extremely dissonant. The unspeakable violence that had been happening around us had, in a way, manifested on the episode of our *personae* and suddenly, the seemingly unimportant conversation about the fact that my friend had paid a few cents more was enough to become a significant disturbance in our relationship.

French economist Jacques Attali argues that, “[f]or twenty-five centuries, Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for the beholding. It is for the hearing. It is not legible, but audible” (Attali, as quoted in Lederach and Lederach, 2010: 73). Here, Attali touches on one of my central concerns in this book: approaching conflict transformation from an angle that allows going beyond the beholding of phenomena on the episode of a conflict. From experiences like the one outlined above, one can assume that there are truths about conflicts, which exist deep below the surface. These truths can be understood as rooted somewhere beyond rationality (Dietrich, 2012). The common English saying, “I have no words” is more than just an empty platitude, and suggests that the totality of reality sometimes cannot be expressed with modern, standardized, language alone. Given this consideration, these truths are not always reasonable to the rational mind nor can they be expressed with words alone, hence my reference to unspeakability. In the context of the Middle East Conflict, it often seems that rational argumentation about the conflict fails or even backfires in the sense that it evokes even stronger beliefs about one’s own position and assumptions about the conflict. Joe Keohane argues, “[i]f we believe something about the world, we are more likely to passively accept as truth any information that confirms our beliefs, and actively dismiss information that doesn’t” (Keohane, 2010: 2). I keep wondering where these beliefs that we find expressed so strongly are rooted. Is it possible that Keohane’s backfire effects are the expressions of resonance deep inside of us?

My curiosity about the realities that remain hidden below the surface led me to have long conversations about the concept of resonance with my stepfather Claudio, who is a musician. He explained that the opposite of resonance was barely thinkable: For him, in the musical sense, the definition of resonances was very clear. Sound boxes in their physical appearance make sound possible. He gave me the following example: “Just think about a violin! Without a sound box music is unthinkable. Resonance is the result of a sound depending on its environment. Every room and space has a stereophonic sound” (Büchler, personal communication, October 20, 2012). For him, harmony and dissonance together are more than just the sum of their parts. Both can only live together and together they can build something more. ‘Yes and No’ are not forming a *Jein*² but always either a ‘Yes, but’ or a ‘No, but’ (Büchler, personal communication, October 20, 2012). It is precisely this ‘but’, which is of interest here. Claudio defines harmony in the musical sense of the word

² German for ‘yes and no’ (my own translation).

as a coming together of sounds that does not require any further resolution. Resolution, however, is necessary to lead a dissonance into a harmony. A dissonance carries an inherent wish for resolution. Music, on the other hand, requires both, harmony and dissonance. For him, harmony is only possible if one finds subjective solutions to a conflict.

I also asked Claudio about his definition of sound. He said that this is something difficult to define:

The sound of an instrument changes depending on where and under which conditions it resonates. You cannot hear the same sound twice. Every ear is different. Everybody hears in a different way. Everybody understands a sound in a different way. We can never hear the same thing again as we are constantly changing. (Büchler, personal communication, October 20, 2012)

There seems to be an interesting parallel between variety of possibilities of hearing sounds, always changing people, and Wolfgang Dietrich's transrational approach to Peace Studies that suggests an understanding of the concept of peaces in the plural, rather than the singular (Dietrich, 2012). In this book, I aim to explore this parallel further, and I am therefore driven by the assumption that it might be possible to understand the Middle East as an open space full of resonating sound boxes, which stand as a metaphor for the many persons that are engaged in the conflict on a daily basis.

As I will outline below, Dietrich (2015) argues that interpersonal conflicts always find an inner correspondence, within the various actors in conflict. This suggests that a discovery of our inner qualities as resonating sound bodies might be of central interest for finding ways through and out of dysfunctional conflicts. This potentially opens the possibility for recognition of our interconnectedness in a resonating web of human relationships (Lederach 2005: 5) and hence, a unity beyond duality. A consciousness about this interconnectedness might ultimately carry the potential to recognize the possibility of looking beyond separateness and exclusiveness. They show me how we are all outwardly and inwardly connected with our fellow human beings and ultimately the entire globe, as the transrational model suggests (Dietrich 2015; UNESCO Chair for Peace Studies 2014b). This stresses the deep metaphysical question where my self starts and where it ends and what we are in essence as human beings. Where are the boundaries between my personal self and the universe?

Mark Hathaway and Leonardo Boff argue that,

[m]odern Western thought—of which mainstream psychology is a part—has generally restricted the “self” to that which lies within the bounds of our skin; all that lies beyond is the “external world.” [...] [W]e isolate ourselves more and more from the wider community of life so that we may function as “normal individuals” in the modern world. (Hathaway and Boff, 2009: 113)

I am interested in the construct of exactly those modern boundaries between the self and the external world. It seems as if they are a core reason for any kind of absolute and dualistic thinking in modern conflicts that very often leads to violence in its most destructive forms. Through the recognition of resonances on all layers of the *persona*, lays a potential to experience peaces in their deeper qualities. At times it is difficult to define and explain them with words, as they are sometimes rooted where words are no longer sufficient to explain reality, but I have experienced and embodied some of them. It seems as if there is no way not to resonate. The only

question is how open our channels of resonance are and most importantly how aware we are of these flows.

The destructive nature of the Middle East Conflict could easily bring me to the conclusion that I should stay out of that field. Why should I risk becoming an actor in such a complex conflict as I am conducting my case studies, where there seems to be nothing to win and so much to lose? Following my arguments above, the answer to that is simple: I am already an actor. I resonate with all the actors in the field. There is a two-way link between me, discussing the Middle East conflict with my colleagues in what is often called an 'ivory tower' of academia, and what is happening in the Middle East. Phrased differently: The reality of academia and the reality of armed conflicts correspond. They cannot be seen as separate entities but rather as two sides of the same coin.

I have known these resonances throughout my life as I have experienced dissonances and harmonies by listening and sometimes passionately contributing to very different narratives about the Middle East Conflict. This sometimes left me confused and time and again frustrated. At the same time, I have developed a strong compassion and love for the diversity of the cultures and people of the Middle East. I have hated it, I have loved it. I have resonated. Despite the complexity of the conflict, this is also a part of the world where I have experienced strong feelings of being at home. In the Middle East, I have been willing to open myself up for resonances, knowing that this can sometimes be very painful, as this implies looking at my own vulnerabilities.

Based on these strong personal experiences, here I embrace the idea and metaphorically use an understanding of the Middle East as an open social space full of resonating sound bodies which I assume could be individuals and groups alike. In the first part of this book, which will outline my theory and method, I inquire:

How can the metaphor of the Middle East as an open space full of resonating sound bodies be applied to peace and conflict studies theory and methodology?

How can the potential of speaking unspeakable truths be elicited in the context of the Middle East Conflict?

I will revisit these two primary research questions and outline my further research interest in chapter 8 entitled "Further Research Interest", since the elaboration on the transrational model and aspects of music theory are key to understand the basis of my further inquiry.

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Sounds of the Middle East Conflict

Hamed, A.

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