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The role of individual agents in promoting peace processes: business people and policy entrepreneurship in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict

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ABSTRACT

Are individual businesspeople who operate as policy entrepreneurs willing and able to influence peace processes in conflict areas? The literature on businesspeople as policy agents shifts when talking about peace processes, focusing on group level activities and ignoring the effect of individual agents. We argue that rather than regarding businesspeople as a traditional interest group, we should consider the approaches to promoting change that strongly motivated individuals adopt as policy entrepreneurs. Based on interviews with senior Israeli businesspeople and decision-makers, we demonstrate how strongly motivated Israeli businesspeople promote peace as policy entrepreneurs. We identify their motivations, goals, challenges, and the strategies they use. The findings indicate that although motivated by economic profits, businesspeople undertake activities that may prove very beneficial to both themselves and society as a whole.

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Introduction

This study addresses a two-part question about the role of businesspeople in promoting peace in areas of conflict. First, how do businesspeople who are driven primarily by the desire for profits advance the prospects for peace? Second, how do they accomplish this goal by utilizing methods unavailable to other actors? Are businesspeople who operate as policy entrepreneurs willing and able to influence peace processes in conflict areas? What are the motivations, strategies, goals and barriers that they face while functioning as policy entrepreneurs in peace processes?

Businesspeople have long been identified as important actors who can have a significant influence on policy outcomes (Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Berry 1977; Dahl and Lindblom 1976). Traditionally, businesspeople are referred to in the literature as a type of interest group. Usually they are well funded and therefore have a strong influence on public policy issues such as preferential regulations, tax cuts and other pro-business benefits. The literature has emphasized their power as pressure ‘communities’, focusing on liberal democracies where business operates as an interest group.

In the context of peace research, some regard conflict areas as good for business, promoting the manufacture and export of arms as well as the exploitation of and trade in lucrative natural resources in war torn areas (Berdal and Malone 2000). In contrast, others maintain the opposite, arguing that globalization links peace with economic growth. Thus, businesses not only have a stake in the resolution of violent conflicts, but also the ability to create the 'peace dividends' that could change priorities and lead to the reconciliation of protracted conflicts (Wegner and Mockli 2003). This approach relates to the 'liberal peace-building' paradigm, which argues that liberal societies tend to be more peaceful, both in their domestic affairs and in their international relations, than illiberal states. According to this theory, democracies do not go to war with each other because their leaders have institutional constraints that make initiating conflict with other countries more difficult. In addition, since such countries are interdependent economically, going to war may disrupt economic and trade relations (Newman, Paris, and Richmond 2009). While weapons dealers naturally benefit from conflict, other forms of commerce enjoy the open markets created in times of peace. Therefore, businesspeople may promote peace in local, sometimes marginal, but important conflicts with varying degrees of success (O'Hearn 2000). Their ability to work as policy entrepreneurs depends on their ability to influence policy and policy-makers, which they do mainly through the threat of withholding taxes.

The literature recognizes two main approaches to studying the business community's influence on public policy (Mitchell and Munger 1991). Both assume reciprocal relations between the business community and politicians. Businesspeople supply financial or electoral support to politicians, while in return the latter promote preferential policies favoring the business community. The first approach, an indirect one, maintains that under certain conditions competition between business communities maximizes financial efficacy. Businesspeople pay taxes, open factories, create jobs and thus, promote the social welfare. The second approach, a direct one, assumes that politicians are interested in maximizing their chances of election, and businesspeople want to influence government regulations in a way that benefits them. Accordingly, politicians promote the interests of businesspeople who contribute significantly to their election campaigns (Ben Porat 2006; Vogel 1996). This is based on the assumption that rulers maximize revenues by promoting joint ventures with taxpayers. In particular, they grant voting rights to citizens as a way to commit to this joint venture, and citizens use these rights to protect their investments. In other words, citizens give up a share of wealth to the ruler in exchange for political rights that enable them to protect their property rights. As Wantchekon (2004, 30) argues, 'The bargaining power of taxpayers is even stronger when their assets are mobile.'

Nevertheless, interest groups are not the only way to influence public policy (Moe 1980). We maintain that businesspeople as individual actors can promote peace processes by means of entrepreneurship. A small number of ambitious individuals can adopt innovative, unconventional methods for achieving their goals. In this article we offer some theoretical insights into their activity.

Policy entrepreneurs are individuals who exploit an opportunity to influence public policy results for their own benefit, in the absence of the resources required for accomplishing this goal alone (Cohen 2012). They are not satisfied with merely increasing their self-interest within given institutions, nor do they accept the constraints that others have established. Rather, they try to influence public policy to open up new

opportunities. They are well-versed in the socio-political context in which they operate and demonstrate high levels of social acuity in understanding others and engaging in policy conversations (Mintrom and Norman 2009, 652–654). Thus, they identify windows of opportunity (Kingdon 1995) for introducing innovative policies within the existing social order and using unconventional strategies to influence policy outcomes (Navot and Cohen 2015). Indeed, as Wilson (1985) suggested, in situations in which costs are centralized but benefits are decentralized, the politics of entrepreneurship is needed.

As the literature has already revealed, businesspeople may act as policy entrepreneurs in promoting desirable public policy on various issues (Arieli and Cohen 2013; Cohen and Naor 2013). Peace initiatives are one of those policy areas. This observation accords with Kingdon's (1995, 122) and Mintrom and Vergari's (1996, 422) suggestion that like their business counterparts, policy entrepreneurs are identifiable primarily by the *actions* they take, rather than by the positions they hold.

The theoretical link we posit between the involvement of individual businesspeople in the peace process and policy entrepreneurship may serve the research on both peace and public policy. Many peace processes rely on economic development as a tool for peace making. Hence, analyzing the involvement of businesspeople in the peace process as policy entrepreneurs may enrich the literature about policy entrepreneurs and improve our understanding of the role they play in peace processes.

The involvement of Israeli businesspeople in the Israeli–Arab conflict is an interesting laboratory in which to examine our claim. The involvement and support of the Israeli business community in the various peace processes of the past two decades is clearly evident (Ben Porat 2006). However, focusing on business people's involvement in peace processes only on the group level may prevent us from understanding the motivations, goals and strategies they use as individuals and the challenges they face in this new role.

Our field research is based on 20 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with senior Israeli businesspeople and decision-makers active in the peace process conducted during 2014–2015, along with a textual analysis of primary and secondary sources and non-participant observations. The businesspeople interviewed are among the most successful owners of large companies both in retail, commodities and high-tech, some of which are traded on the Israeli blue chip Tel Aviv 25 Index, which has posted an annual yield of 10.4% since its launch in 1992.

Given the fact that businesspeople are a closed, powerful and isolated group, the interviewees were sampled on the basis of convenience sampling using the snowball sampling method. This elite is a closed, inter-related social group that is accessible only through personal networking (Cohen and Arieli 2011).

The involvement of businesspeople in the peace process

The ability of businesspeople to influence the political elite is one of the basic questions in many studies in political science and an important variable in designing public policy (Vogel 1996; Wilson 1985). Indeed, political participation is often defined as the attempt of businesspeople to lobby for public policies that benefit their economic and social interests (Verba and Nie 1972, 2). Many concepts of political influence predict

that producer groups such as firms and their representatives have power that exceeds that of citizen groups.

Many scholars argue that, due to their special ties to the political elite, businesspeople or communities are not an ordinary interest group and may actually be better positioned than other interest groups (Dahl and Lindblom 1976). Furthermore, in democracies the social and conceptual connections between the political and economic elites, the ability of the latter to shape public opinion by donating to the former's campaigns and lobbying them, and the dependence of the state on economic security and stability explain the special status of businesspeople as an interest group (Vogel 1996; Wilson 1985).

The link between peace and economic growth and prosperity increases the involvement and influence of business in peace processes. Businesspeople can build bridges between different communities, engage directly in talks with belligerents, provide information, act as pro-peace constituencies, pay for peace processes, strengthen entrepreneurship, build trust, foster accountability and limit access to funds for continuing the conflict (Berdal and Wennmann 2013). Furthermore, to create a brighter future, mediators should call upon the expertise of development agencies and local or international business. While the exact role of these actors has to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, they are key in promoting the idea that a better future is really possible (Wennmann 2010).

Finally, the resulting political power of business puts it in an influential position vis-à-vis policy-making processes (Cohen and Ben Porat 2008). A better understanding of the economic aspects of armed conflict provides a platform from which to assess the planning and management of a peace process and tailor mediation strategies to the specific characteristics of the struggle (Wennmann 2009, 1134). Other scholars have argued that business is uniquely positioned to encourage rival factions to work together on a common project, even if that project is simply making money. Companies in Northern Ireland, for instance, intentionally hired equal numbers of Catholics and Protestants to give them the experience of working together (Oetzel et al. 2010).

Businesspeople also play a catalytic role in promoting peacemaking activities. Their expertise in dealing with complicated problems can succeed where less flexible institutional approaches fail (Gerson 2001). Firms that are regarded as credible brokers can be official actors with the political space and flexibility necessary to help resolve conflicts (Fort 2007). The two-track diplomatic effort to resolve the conflict between the ruling National Party and the African National Congress in South Africa, for example, illustrates the valuable role that non-state actors can play in resolving conflicts (Oetzel et al. 2010). Moreover, in a comparative study of Israel and South Africa, Shafir (1998) noted that business communities emerged as major players in resolving these conflicts.

Nevertheless, businesspeople do not always succeed in promoting peace processes. Normatively, some would argue that their lack of success is good, as this is not their inherent role to play – but rather the politicians' role. While they do have tools and methods available to them that other actors lack, their success is not guaranteed. For example, Ben Porat (2006) examined the motivations of the business communities in Israel and Northern Ireland in becoming involved in peace processes. His study shows that their empowerment allowed them to exert political influence but fell short of the hegemony that would enable them to set the broader political agenda, and was therefore limited in its success. Nevertheless, the literature has yet to connect businesspeople with the concept of policy entrepreneurship.

Moreover, when it comes to questions such as peace, the interaction between business and politics is wider, involving not only political elites but also the public at large. In such cases, it is not just the resources of businesspeople to influence the government, but also their ability to lead society in a desirable direction. Where the risks of involvement are high and the benefits are uncertain, as our case demonstrates, businesspeople will avoid taking the lead and disappoint those who count on the pragmatic power of business to change political outcomes. Therefore, a practical contribution of this analysis is the identification of the needs of policy entrepreneurs and the obstacles they face in changing the realities, in terms of both policy and practice, in an environment of conflict.

The involvement of businesspeople in the peace process and policy entrepreneurship

Businesspeople and policy entrepreneurship in conflict zones

The focus on policy entrepreneurs is a recent phenomenon (Mintrom 2013, 443). Nevertheless, in a relatively short period, scholars studying policy entrepreneurs have made real progress in identifying their actions (Mintrom and Vergari 1996), revealing how contextual factors support or inhibit their activities (Mintrom 1997, 2000), analyzing the compatibility between this more detailed understanding of their work and broader theories of policy-making (Mintrom and Norman 2009), and describing the various strategies they use to meet challenges and overcome obstacles (Cohen 2012).

The concept of entrepreneurship has been applied to various players at different levels who engage in different activities and perform various functions in the political system. Although no single person receives full credit for policy design, most scholars view entrepreneurs as key players with the motivation to formulate policy and the willingness to use various strategies to overcome their opposition and achieve their goals (Mintrom and Norman 2009). Kingdon (1995, 122) explained that policy entrepreneurs may be in or out of government, in elected or appointed positions, in interest groups or research organizations. However, like business entrepreneurs, their defining characteristic is their willingness to invest their resources, time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money in the hope of a future return.

Policy entrepreneurs in conflict areas are those few individuals who see opportunities in peace initiatives despite the prevailing conditions of suspicion and uncertainty and *act* to promote it. As Arieli and Cohen (2013) suggested, policy entrepreneurs in the private sector are not merely business entrepreneurs. They are businesspeople, usually affiliated with large and medium size businesses, who try to influence or change policy outcomes to serve their interests. Their motivations are rooted in the opportunities they see to maximize their personal economic benefits through expanding markets and reduced transaction costs.

Like other policy entrepreneurs, businesspeople who are active as policy entrepreneurs exhibit four behaviors that Mintrom and Norman (2009) described as central to policy entrepreneurship: (1) defining and framing problems, (2) building powerful teams that tap relevant knowledge networks, (3) amassing evidence to show the workability of their proposals and (4) creating strong coalitions of diverse supporters. Thus, like other policy entrepreneurs, they are knowledgeable about their socio-political context and can identify windows of opportunity in the existing social order. As experienced individuals

who know the world of business and politics, they are uniquely positioned to have a comparative view of the socio-political zeitgeist (McKenna, Rooney, and Liesch 2006). Nevertheless, not all businesspeople are equally well positioned to understand all aspects of political conflicts, because unlike the political elites, they have specific areas of expertise.

Like other policy entrepreneurs, businesspeople relate specific problems to their own interests. Defining problems involves presenting evidence in ways suggesting a crisis is at hand and finding ways to highlight the failures of the current policy (Wysocki 2011). Businesspeople are masters at defining problems, usually problems that require an immediate solution but are oriented to a strategic logic. They are team players whose strength comes from their ability to work effectively with others in the policy arena. They use their personal and professional social networks to create coalitions for policy change (Kerzner 2013). Finally, they take actions intended to reduce the perception of risk among decision-makers. When policy entrepreneurs lead by example, legislators often switch from a focus on the consequences of action to a focus on the potential of action and the consequences of inaction. In this manner when policy entrepreneurs engage in business transactions, form business relations, and invest in building infrastructure in new trading zones with unnatural partners in areas considered unstable, decision-makers will at least consider following such steps taken by a very powerful elite.

Motivations, goals, challenges and strategies

Given that most businesses seek to maximize their profits, when it comes to peace between neighboring countries, their motivations are varied and difficult to identify, especially because they may have multiple motivations. The goal of a private firm is to increase its profits. The relationship between businesspeople's commitment to peace and the desire to increase profits is a complex one. Indeed, these two factors are often at odds with each other. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to adopt a cynical attitude about all businesspeople when it comes to promoting peace in violent conflicts. Hence, one should not completely ignore their commitment to peace. Despite their personal interests, businesspeople in conflict zones often want to contribute to their community and society, along with making profits (Cohen and Ben Porat 2008).

Businesspeople's belief in their self-efficiency and their confidence that they have the ability to accomplish their goals play a role in the balance they try to strike between social, environmental and economic goals (Bandura 1997). As rational and experienced actors in cost-benefit calculations (Karat 1994), businesspeople aim to establish an effective policy in which the benefits exceed the costs. The term 'rational' refers only to their means, not to their ends (Downs 1957, 4-5). In other words, we should not try to test whether their goals are rational or not. Rather, given our assumption that businesspeople's goal is to increase their profits, we should analyze their means and strategies for achieving their goals as rational. Hence, regardless of whether they are motivated by a commitment to peace or private interests, in cases in which the political costs of action are greater than the benefits, they will be less likely to promote peace initiatives and vice versa.

A conflict environment is one in which individuals or groups perceive their needs, goals or interests to be contradicted by the goals or interests of the other side (Kriesberg 1998). These interests usually involve territory, resources, trade, self-determination, religious rights or cultural values (Bar Tal 2000). Significant levels of misunderstanding, considerably exaggerating the perceived disagreement and creating a general atmosphere of

distrust and suspicion, often accompany such conflicts. Thus, the degree of conflict is a significant challenge, even to the most determined and enthusiastic entrepreneur.

Businesspeople acting as policy entrepreneurs in promoting peace face various challenges. Foreign policy is an arena involving international, national, regional and local decision-makers, interest groups and the general public who often have contradictory perceptions and goals. These multiple players shape the perceptions and strategies of the policy entrepreneurs, presenting them with unique challenges. In the case of Israel, security is a primary concern (Arian 1999; Heller 2000; Hermann et al. 2013). Hence, with the exception of the summer of 2011, when nationwide public protests demanding the right to live in dignity erupted, the Israeli public has been relatively indifferent to other issues.

As for social legitimacy, both the public and the political elite often doubt the motivations of policy entrepreneurs, regarding them as motivated by their own interests. Furthermore, they are not publically elected representatives and cannot claim to represent the will of the public. Indeed, Mintrom (2000) noted that entrepreneurs often face an environment of lack of trust in them. Furthermore, their efforts to introduce new combinations of activities inevitably raise the possibility of changing the status of other players.

The term 'peace dividends' was initially used to describe the effects of redirecting 'unproductive' defense spending at the end of the Cold War and the attempts of regional and core powers to devise solutions to local, sometimes marginal, but important conflicts (Chan 1995). After the Cold War, the potential role of business in peace processes was regarded as positive, because the benefits of peace included global integration and economic growth (Schwartzman and Taylor 1999). Thus, the potential of real peace dividends in the form of global integration motivated the business community and its allies to actively support peace (O'Hearn 2000). However, peace dividends are also considered the direct and indirect benefits to people as a result of a peace agreement. The restoration of basic infrastructures and social capital, public services, and community-based services should be a priority of post-conflict development interventions. Employment and income generation through rural roads, community water supply and sanitation, community development, institutional capacity building, and the empowerment of socially excluded and marginalized sections of society are some of the important activities that can contribute to peace building and stability (Upreti 2012).

Furthermore, there are considerable risks involved in promoting change. The cost of entrepreneurship during periods of conflict can be particularly high in terms of the time and money needed to devise new solutions and build networks of support for these innovative solutions. Politicians who oppose such efforts may regard these policy entrepreneurs as helping their political opponents. Social groups that oppose such efforts may regard these policy entrepreneurs as a threat to their agenda and protest against them or even boycott their businesses.

Business entrepreneurs seem willing to live with the potentially negative aspects of social contracting for the opportunity to create new business opportunities. As policy entrepreneurs, they build friendships based on liking, trust, gratitude or obligation to form coalitions. When businesspeople initiate policy entrepreneurship actions, they try to lead a coalition of entrepreneurs supporting them (Starr and MacMillan 1990).

Their strategies emphasize the importance of creating a change in public policy by defining existing problems, presenting suitable solutions and trying to implement these solutions. This approach to leading by example establishes *de facto* connections, both

business and personal, with those on the other side of the conflict. Leading by example occurs on the micro-level when individual businesspeople engage in their own private undertakings and on the macro-level via the coalition.

Most of these strategies involve practical actions such as engaging in consistent persuasion, influencing the political elite through personal meetings, offering support to public gatherings, presenting knowledgeable alternatives modeled on business methods and even using pressure tactics rather than softer measures. Furthermore, developing trust among leaders and the public is important for promoting peace initiatives and realizing the policy entrepreneurs' goals. Relationships of trust can be built by linking the actions taken through online social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, and through the repeated interactions arising from reciprocal, preferential and mutually supportive actions (Arieli and Cohen 2013). Let us consider these ideas in the context of the peace efforts involved in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The Israeli–Palestinian peace efforts from 1993 to 2010

Despite the efforts over the last two decades to negotiate peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, no lasting agreement has been concluded. The Oslo Agreements, the first agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, was signed in Washington, DC, on 13 September 1993 (Peled and Shafir 1996). The ultimate outcomes of the agreements were to establish a framework for a permanent settlement and devise the parameters of the final peace agreement. Within the framework of the Oslo accords, a Palestinian Authority and a Legislative Council chosen by election were created; the two sides committed to final status negotiations over the next five years based on UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338; Israel agreed to withdraw in stages from the occupied territories that were determined by the Oslo II accords signed in 1995. However, in 1996–1999, following the many suicide attacks by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad since 1993, the newly elected Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared a new policy. Israel would not engage in the peace process if Arafat continued with what Netanyahu described as the Palestinian 'revolving door policy', meaning the incitement and direct or indirect support of terrorism. After Israel determined that its conditions were partially met, the Hebron and Wye Agreements were signed.

In 2000, the then US President Bill Clinton convened the Camp David Summit between Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Neither Arafat nor Barak accepted Clinton's proposals. At the Taba summit in January 2001 talks continued based on the Clinton parameters. The talks ended without an agreement (Swisher 2004).

A new initiative called the Beirut summit of Arab government leaders took place in March 2002 under the aegis of the Arab League. It was followed in July 2002 by the 'road map' proposal from the quartet of the USA, the European Union, the United Nations, and Russia that outlined the principles of a road map for peace, including an independent Palestinian state. The road map was released in April 2003 after the appointment of Mahmoud Abbas as the first Palestinian Authority Prime Minister. Both the USA and Israel had called for the creation of the new Prime Minister position, as both refused to work with Arafat anymore (Golan 2004).

The plan called for independent actions by Israel and the Palestinian Authority, with disputed issues put off until a rapport could be established. From December 2006 to mid-September 2008, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority met 36 times; there were also lower-level talks. In 2007 Olmert welcomed the Arab League's re-endorsement of the Arab Peace Initiative. In his bid to negotiate a peace accord and establish a Palestinian state, Olmert proposed a plan to the Palestinians. In the end the Palestinians rejected Olmert's plan, saying that the state envisioned in it would have lacked both territorial continuity and Jerusalem as its capital (Podeh 2014).

Egypt brokered the 2008 Israel– Hamas ceasefire, which lasted half a year from 19 June 2008 until 19 December 2008. The collapse of the ceasefire led to the Gaza War on 27 December 2008 (Sharp 2011). In September 2010, the Obama administration pushed to revive the stalled peace process by getting the parties involved to agree to direct talks for the first time in about two years. During the 2010 talks, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said that the Palestinians and Israel had agreed on the principle of a land swap, but Israel had yet to confirm that statement.

Israeli businesspeople as policy entrepreneurs in promoting the Israeli–Palestinian peace process

Most Israeli businesspeople acknowledge that the Israeli–Palestinian peace process is an ongoing one that has yielded very few results, leaving them with a limited regional market (Interview: Anonymous 3; Anonymous 4; Anonymous 6; Anonymous 9; Anonymous 10; Anonymous 11; Anonymous 15; Anonymous 17). Given this deadlock, several Israeli businesspeople began to engage in more and more activities as individuals. As we suggest, analyzing the involvement of Israeli businesspeople in the peace process as policy entrepreneurs may enrich the literature about policy entrepreneurs and improve our understanding of the role they play in peace processes.

Motivations and goals

Although some may argue that the Israeli–Palestinian peace process has already had positive consequences such as the removal of parts of the Arab embargo, and despite the fact that high-tech businesspeople are less influenced by its costs, there is still an understanding among most Israeli businesspeople of the importance of the peace process to their business. In interviews with them, these businesspeople noted that the lack of progress when they acted as an interest group prompted them to change their thinking and undertake individual actions.

The rise of high-tech businesses during the second decade of the new millennium offered these businesspeople a tool with which they could promote the peace process (Interview: Anonymous 2). The high cost of public action, putting their reputations on the line, and even risking their connections with the political elite were a price that not all members of the coalition were willing to pay (Interview: Anonymous 7; Anonymous 8; Anonymous 11; Anonymous 13; Anonymous 15).

During the last decade, Israeli businesspeople have been very frustrated when poorly conceived public policy has wasted opportunities for a peace agreement. As several of them noted, such calculations may erode the trust of Israeli society in the peace process

and its benefits, which are not only in terms of security but also of economic prosperity (Interview: Anonymous 4; Anonymous 6; Anonymous 17). Businesspeople recognize the lack of public agreement about a permanent solution and are aware of being perceived as an isolated elite, disconnected from the public zeitgeist and motivated solely by their personal interests. However, in their interviews they mention the ongoing opposition from decision-makers, politicians and bureaucrats as the most wearying part of their battle. As businesspeople see it, the activity of businesspeople in this situation should be to support the political elite and seize the opportunities that result from their connections worldwide, but it is a hard task to accomplish because the political elite has its own cost–benefit calculations (Interview: Anonymous 7; Anonymous 11; Anonymous 18). Thus, as policy entrepreneurs in the Israeli–Palestinian peace process, businesspeople are in a very difficult position, criticized as an exploitive elite from below and as an intrusive counter elite from above.

Nevertheless, these Israeli businesspeople believe that peace would benefit their businesses and society as a whole. Hence, their goals derive from the desire for an effective social, environmental and economic policy. As one interviewee noted, ‘Today we see a large scale identity of interests in many aspects in the Middle East, as Saudi Arabia, The Gulf States, Egypt, Jordan and the non-extreme Palestinians say – let’s sit and talk ...’ (Interview: Anonymous 12). The interviewees claimed repeatedly that,

Peace will lead Israel to prosperity ... After the regional peace agreement, by the year 2025, the living standard of Israeli citizens will rise by an average of 45%. There will be far-reaching implications for the Israeli economy in general, and individual households will also feel the economic improvement ... (Interview: Anonymous 18)

They also believe that the lack of action on the political front leaves a vacuum that can be filled by a strong elite, because ‘certainty leads to growth ...’ (Interview: Anonymous 16; Avisar 2014).

Although businesspeople regard the absence of peace as having a negative impact on their businesses, they emphasize that the commitment to peace is a major factor in their actions. Indeed, they argue that while personal financial losses may seem to be the motivation that encourages businesspeople to act as policy entrepreneurs in the peace process, they are also committed to peace because they believe it will make the country more prosperous (Interview: Anonymous 11). Moreover, they believe that the financial losses to Israel’s economy are particularly disappointing because, ‘Israel can become the Hong Kong of the Middle East, thanks to its financial, technological and scientific strength, on condition that the rhetoric of war is replaced by the rhetoric of peace’ (Interview: Anonymous 4).

Given the seeming stalemate of the Israeli–Palestinian peace process, the goal of businesspeople as policy entrepreneurs is to create a ‘two-state solution; two states for two peoples’. This goal embodies the hope of changing the political and social conceptions about peace with the Palestinians while emphasizing that peace will be followed by economic and social prosperity. Thus, as rational and experienced actors in cost–benefit calculations, businesspeople seek to establish peace as an effective policy whose economic, social, and environmental benefits exceed its costs.

Challenges and strategies

Everyone seems to agree that the Israeli–Palestinian peace process exposes everyone involved in it to constant criticism, making it very difficult for anyone, businesspeople

included, to promote it. However, businesspeople acting as policy entrepreneurs face unique challenges and political obstacles in achieving their goals. First, as a wealthy elite in an economically challenged era they must deal with a public that is skeptical about their motivations. They are constantly criticized as being prompted not by a commitment to peace but only by narrow self-interests (Interview: Anonymous 4; Anonymous 15). As most of them see it, there is a collective distrust expressed in the lack of recognition within Israeli society about the link between peace and economic prosperity (Interview: Anonymous 1; Anonymous 2; Anonymous 4; Anonymous 5; Anonymous 11; Anonymous 12; Anonymous 13). Although this misconception leads businesspeople to focus on politicians as the target of their entrepreneurship, they face an entrenched elite that thwarts their efforts. In fact, when asked what conditions would promote their entrepreneurship, they said: 'Letting businesspeople to do what they do best – entrepreneurship ...' (Interview: Anonymous 11), removing political challenges or even forming a businesspeople's party ... (Interview: Anonymous 4; Anonymous 12), and promoting the recognition that peace and prosperity are intertwined ... (Interviews: Anonymous 7; Anonymous 12; Anonymous 18). Thus, businesspeople see themselves as playing a large part, some would say too large, as they are not political representatives, in the peace process.

Given that political affiliation is a sensitive issue, businesspeople tend to work away from the public eye in private meetings (Interview: Anonymous 13), fearing that their promotion of peace will harm their relations with the political elite and that their businesses will be the target of public protest. Despite their efforts to influence the political establishment by defining the problems and presenting their solutions, 'it did not affect public atmosphere or the prime minister himself. The consequence is that if the leader is a barrier – no Breaking the Impasse [Author's note: See the description of this group below] will help us make peace ...' (Interview: Anonymous 3).

While in the past businesspeople operated mainly through traditional platforms under the auspices of all-embracing organizations such as the Manufacturers Association of Israel, today many have adopted individual initiatives as their main course of action. On the micro level, these entrepreneurs use their abilities as networkers to create 'business-to-business' and 'people-to-people' connections with the Palestinian side. Such private initiatives have led to the establishment of two institutions that promote peace through business alliances. One such endeavor is the Peres Center for Peace (2014), whose representative noted: 'In such business to business encounters we bring business parties from both the Israeli side and the Palestinian side and, just as in a 'speed date' format, we join them into a concrete business partnership' (Interview: Anonymous 14). The second agency is The Israeli–Palestinian Chamber of Commerce, which was established in 2008 by leading Israeli businesspeople and economic organizations seeking to enhance bilateral trade and investments between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (Israeli-Palestinian Chamber of Commerce 2014). As one of our interviewees argued: 'The more leaders understand that the Israeli economy depends on future peace agreements – the more motivated they will be to achieve peace ...' (Interview: Anonymous 17).

High-ranking businesspeople also undertake individual initiatives within the boundaries of their businesses. A high ranked representative of the Israeli Bank HaPoalim is an excellent example of such individual policy entrepreneurship. Well aware of the political challenges in influencing the peace process, he noted:

Bank HaPoalim works individually as the only bank that cooperates with Palestinian banks, and this is my contribution to the peace effort. It is very complicated because the state will not insure the process – and if the bank loses money, it will receive no compensation from the Israeli regulator, a fact that drove away all the other banks in Israel. Realistically speaking, if the bank severs its connections with the Palestinian side, no transactions will be made between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. (Interview: Anonymous 16)

A second policy entrepreneur established a business that aims to help create successful Palestinian start-up businesses. According to him, his firm is the first venture capital firm targeting the Palestinian IT sector. He elaborates:

We are joining forces with exceptional entrepreneurs to power innovation and help build the first wave of world-class technology and service companies in Palestine. If we succeed in that, I believe that it will also have a positive impact on the region in many ways, including helping to create the conditions that will make peace more likely. (Interview: Anonymous 8)

Another major enterprise is the Jordan Gateway Industrial Park and Private Free Zone (JGIP). As one of its founders explains:

With the belief that economics will lead to peace as a bottom-up process, we formed an industrial park that makes economic connections with the Arab world. This park was established in 2002 and is located in Jordan. The park extends over 1,200 thousand square meters and enjoys superb strategic location and special economic status. The park operates as an industrial, commerce and logistic center facilitating easy and swift transportation of products and commodities from and to America, Europe, Middle East and the rest of Asia. This combination of outstanding location and designation as a free zone area makes the JGIP one of the most attractive investment destinations in Jordan, as tenants' enterprises also enjoy exemption from taxes, duties and VAT, zero corporate taxes on export, and the ability to operate as offshore entities.

He concludes, 'Business is business, Moses is Moses.' In the absence of a clear 'made-in-Israel' peace vision, the phrase he stresses is 'economic grass-roots peace' (Interview: Anonymous 5).

Examples of Israeli policy entrepreneurs' initiatives

On the macro level, businesspeople form coalitions by building teams of entrepreneurs to influence national leaders. These coalitions invest time, social connections, and money to lead by example and show the political elite that peace can be achieved. There are two coalitions of businesspeople that are practicing entrepreneurship on the macro level and tying the concept of peace to economic prosperity at the national level – Breaking the Impasse (BTI) initiated by Israeli businessman Yossi Vardi and Palestinian entrepreneur Munib Masri, and the Israel Peace Initiative (IPI) set-up by businesspeople Kobi Hoberman and Yuval Rabin. These two coalitions are community interest companies created for this purpose alone. Nevertheless, the two teams differ in the degree to which they criticize political leaders as well as in the lengths they go to implement their political solutions to the conflict. BTI takes a softer approach, seeking to develop trust, and focuses its persuasion efforts mainly on the leadership, whereas the IPI is more critical of political leaders, aiming its strategies mainly at the public.

Created in July 2012, BTI is a coalition of prominent Palestinian and Israeli businesspeople who believe in the urgency of reaching a peaceful resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict through the 'two states for two peoples' approach. Its members explained

during interviews with them that this coalition joins together the highest profiled business-people in Israel, from the far right to the far left of the political arena. Since that there are acute differences in political orientations between its members, they have agreed not to discuss the details of the peace agreement but to hold to the two state solution (Interview: Anonymous 8; Anonymous 11; Anonymous 13; Anonymous 15; Lan 2013; Breaking the Impasse 2014).

The coalition has held several meetings with leaders within and outside the region that support the initiative. Most of BTI's meetings, activities and consulting are confidential and take place in the entrepreneurs' private homes away from the public eye. As one member said: 'High profile public activity is not our aim – we aim – to influence political leaders' (Interview: Anonymous 13). Still, among its efforts are public gatherings aimed at creating trust and persuading others about the value of their goals. In May 2013, newspapers reported that 300 Israeli and Palestinian businesspeople traveled to Jordan to present their vision of a co-operative future once peace was achieved. Yossi Vardi was quoted saying said, 'We are the silent majority who are no longer silent' (Boosting the West Bank's Economy 2013).

In January 2014, 100 Israeli businesspeople signed a manifesto calling on the Israeli government to 'reach a peace agreement urgently'. These same signers participated in a special day of discussions with the Palestinians in Davos, Switzerland, at the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum. The manifesto contrasts sharply with statements by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has always claimed that 'Israel will prosper and grow even without a settlement with the Palestinians, and that our political situation has nothing to do with our economic situation' (about-BTI website).

Before leaving for Davos, BTI members met privately with Netanyahu to warn him about the looming threat posed by boycotts (Coren 2014). At the meeting, the businesspeople told Netanyahu they were worried about the signals they were receiving from the international business community. They also noted that if Israel did not make progress toward a two-state solution, there would be negative consequences for the Israeli economy (Ravid 2013; Interviews: Anonymous 11; Anonymous 13; Anonymous 15).

In summarizing BTI's activity, one interviewee notes:

We want to act as a tailwind, letting the political elite know that we right there behind them in the peace efforts. All participants of the BTI act voluntarily. They are constantly on call in case of meetings, because those private meetings are the motivator to promote the activity – we are not a large army, but we are willing and able. (Interview: Anonymous 15)

The second core alliance is called the IPI, launched in April 2011 by businesspeople Kobi Hoberman and Yuval Rabin. The IPI takes a stronger, more public position, criticizing political leaders while offering a concrete solution to the conflict. The IPI has called on the government of Israel to make a courageous decision and take the initiative, the purpose of which would be to advance a regional peace agreement in the Middle East, strengthen the security of Israel in the tumultuous region and enhance its problematic international standing. Specifically, the IPI favors the framework of the 2002 Arab peace initiative as the solution to the conflict and presents its complete initiative on its website and Facebook page. It also organizes large public conferences for networking and presenting its proposals (Israel Peace Initiative 2014).

The IPI underscores its ability as a coalition of businesspeople offering knowledgeable alternatives borrowed from the business world, while investing resources in defining the problems, devising solutions and conducting backchannel talks with Palestinian elites to lead by example. As one of its members said: 'We are not just asking the state to do things out of the air; we supply a full plan of how a regional peace agreement will make Israel prosper' (Interview: Anonymous 7). With a more societal perspective than BTI, the IPI claims to have a proposal for an IPI developed with the aid of Israeli experts and based on known solutions to all of the basic problems such as the Clinton parameters, the proposals put forth by Barak at Camp David, and the Olmert and Livni understandings in the Annapolis process. As one member noted:

We do not see our job as being cheerleaders asking the state for an agreement, but we bring our own plan and ask the state to refer to it. Although when the IPI began, we discussed only political agreements, a year ago we began arguing that a peace agreement is crucial for the economy. (Interview: Anonymous 18)

Finally, when possible the IPI believes that businesspeople should use pressure rather than softer measures to achieve their goals. However, such opportunities are rare, and most businesspeople refuse to jeopardize their status and connections with the political arena.

Conclusions and discussion

This article focuses on the theoretical insight that strongly motivated individuals adopt innovative approaches to promote change as policy entrepreneurs. We argue that the traditional interest group approach to viewing the role of businesspeople in the peace process is not the only way to understand their actions in changing policy. Analyzing the involvement of businesspeople in the peace process as individual policy entrepreneurs may enrich the literature about policy entrepreneurs and improve our understanding of the role they play in promoting peace. In addition, we investigate the characteristics of their entrepreneurship strategies in promoting the peace process. We maintain that strongly motivated individuals may take personal, innovative steps to approach the problem differently and function as policy entrepreneurs.

Focusing on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, we demonstrate how several determined Israeli businesspeople began functioning as policy entrepreneurs in initiating peace efforts. We then identify their motivations, strategies, goals and challenges, and describe the strategies they use in promoting peace.

Our analysis reveals that one of the main characteristics of private sector policy entrepreneurs is that although their primary goal is to increase their personal profits within existing institutions, they try to influence public policy to open up new opportunities for society as a whole. Therefore, even if they are motivated mainly by self-interests, policy entrepreneurs can create positive externalities for society, because the benefits of their actions are shared collectively. However, our findings also indicate that although economic profits are crucial to their cost–benefit calculations, they are often motivated by a commitment to peace as well. Nevertheless, that commitment does not outweigh the goal of increasing profits.

Finally, while the literature often tars the involvement of businesspeople and business communities in politics and policy as being motivated by purely selfish interests, such is

not the case in complex and violent conflicts. Hence, despite the extensive research that has emphasized the power that businesspeople wield, it is clear that in certain areas such as complicated conflicts, they have failed to have a significant impact. Thus, the power of business as measured by its ability to influence political outcomes is not a given. Future research should try to determine the policy domains or structural conditions in which their power seems to be so dramatically muted.

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