REFRAMING PALESTINE:
MISCONCEPTIONS AND AMERICAN JEWISH-MUSLIM SOLIDARITY

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ABSTRACT

This project studies the impact of discourse surrounding the Israeli occupation of Palestine on American Jewish-Muslim solidarity efforts. The author uses a Muslim-Jewish dialogue that took place between 2001 and 2014, the Muslim-Jewish Bridge Building Group (MJBBG), as a case study, conducting interviews with former participants and facilitators. The data demonstrates that the entanglement of Jewish and Muslim religious identities with the political Palestinian is an impediment to addressing the root cause of Jewish-Muslim tension in the United States. The author suggests that this problematic reframing be addressed at the beginning of American Muslim-Jewish solidarity efforts in order to dispel misplaced tension and dismantle the xenophobic project of equating Islam and Palestinians, Jews and Zionists.

HONOR PLEDGE

On my honor, I have neither given, nor received, any unauthorized aid on this senior capstone. Honor Code Upheld.

Rachel Mintz

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INTRODUCTION

Donald Trump's rise to power coincided with a rise in xenophobia, which in turn created a reactionary rise in American[1] Muslim–Jewish solidarity efforts (Berman 2017). These efforts call upon the histories of marginalization and oppression that Jews and Muslims have historically faced both in the United States and abroad. At the same time, common discourse suggests tension between Muslims and Jews due to the Israeli occupation (see Appendix 1). However, Israel is not a primary concern for all Jews nor all Muslims. Rather, it is an issue for Zionists,[2] Palestinians, and for those engaged in solidarity work with Palestinians. So, why does popular discourse suggest that it *is* an issue for Muslims and Jews? And in what ways and under what conditions does the question of Palestine affect American Jewish-Muslim solidarity efforts?

In my Capstone project, I analyze one specific Muslim-Jewish solidarity effort as a case study. This program, the Muslim-Jewish Bridge Building Group (MJBBG), was created by the Jewish Committee for Social Change (JCSC) in 2001 in response to the increasing Islamophobia following the September 11 attacks. Many Jewish individuals and organizations including the JCSC saw the perceived Islamophobia as analogous to anti-Semitism and felt a need to build community between local Muslims and Jews in order to fight against xenophobia.

According to those who work at the JCSC, they "do not take a position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," which is unique amongst Jewish organizations, as the majority publicize their Zionist or anti-Zionist stance. They assert taking a stand would inhibit their ability to address social justice issues locally and that what is happening abroad is not the focus of their

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[1] I use "America" and "American" because in English there is no word for United States-ian. It is important to note, however, that all people of South and North America are encompassed in these words, and their identities should not be overshadowed by the United States.

[2] "Zionism aims at establishing for the Jewish people a legally assured home in *Eretz Yisrael*" (World Zionist Organization).

work. For many Jews, this may be a breath of fresh air because the Israeli state and its policies are often uncritically embraced in Jewish settings. Despite efforts to avoid it, the Israeli occupation *did* become an issue for the MJBBG and the tensions this produced contributed to the group's fracturing, ultimately disbanding in 2014. Through analyzing the MJBBG, I argue that framing the political problem of Israel as one of religious difference complicates efforts at building American Jewish-Muslim solidarity because it occludes the question of Palestinian political rights and Palestinian dispossession. This must be addressed in Muslim-Jewish spaces in order to establish a foundation upon which equitable relationships can be achieved. The MJBBG is a good example of trying to address this issue.

I approach this issue from an anthropological perspective because anthropology has a particular interest in religion and politics. Anthropology has, from the beginning, grappled with the relationship between religion and politics and the problems that arise from this relationship. In the case of Palestine, the two have become entangled, and it is my role as an anthropologist to tease them apart.

As an American Jew who is feminist and anti-Zionist, my own position is enmeshed with the central questions of research. As a feminist, I believe that all people should be treated equitably and understand that no one is free while someone else is oppressed. Personally, being a feminist is inextricably linked with being anti-Zionist, but it is important to understand that there are people who consider themselves both feminist and Zionist. As an anti-Zionist I am critical of the policies of the state of Israel and its continuing occupation and the dispossession of Palestinians. Therefore, I approach this research with a particular sensibility and stake in the project at hand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

I review some of the scholarly literature on discourse surrounding Israel/Palestine, as well as interreligious dialogue frameworks. Specifically, I demonstrate how the entanglement of political, specifically Zionist and non-Zionist stances, with religious identities grew from anti-Semitic sentiments in Europe throughout the twentieth century. I also cover basic critiques of "Contact Theory", which ties together the way in which this entanglement of religious and political identities impacts dialogue between Jews and Muslims in the United States.

My work is situated in the study of religion and politics in anthropology. Scholars such as Judith Butler (2012), Mahmood Mamdani (2002), Rashid Khalidi (2006), Edward Said (1979), and Benedict Anderson (2006), have already looked at the ways in which religious identities have been politicized and debated. My work adds to the conversation by looking at the way in which Jewish and Muslim religious identities have become politicized and the way in which this impacts Jewish-Muslim solidarity work in the United States.

Reframing Palestine

Since its inception, people acknowledged Israel is a political problem, not a religious one. We can see this from both critics of Zionism and Zionists, including: Finkelstein 2005; Abu-Nimer 2004; Said 1979; Khalidi 2006. Yet there still exists a hegemonic discourse of Israel as a religious issue (see Appendix 1). Why? How did that come to be? First, we must understand how nation and religion are different. Anderson (2006) suggests that "the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation" (46). Thus, the idea of a national consciousness only started to emerge in the 1500s, reaching full

bloom in the nineteenth century (Van der Veer 1999). So, could one argue for the secularization thesis, that the nation is now the new, secular religion of the nation? Van der Veer (1999) argues one cannot: “this is a much too simple idea of one thing replacing another” (19). In this way, we see religion and nation are two separate entities. Put in another way, we know nation and religion are different because nations require land and for people to have a relationship to that land, whereas religion can exist apart from land in diaspora. Thus, Judaism and Israel (and the project that supports the existence of Israel, Zionism) are not the same thing, rather, the former is a religion, and the latter is a national, political project.

So, how did Zionism and Judaism become entangled? In early twentieth century Europe, anti-Semitism was ubiquitous. Part of this anti-Semitism purported that the Jewish identity was insurmountable, preventing Jews from holding both Jewish and national identities, whether British, French, German, or Italian. Christian Europeans had somehow emancipated themselves from their religion, but the Jewish people were apparently unable to do the same (Anderson 2006). Thus, Jews could not possibly be members of the nation, because their Jewish identity hindered their ability to participate in the life of the nation. Anderson (2006) exemplifies this when he writes: “forever Jews, no matter what passports they carry of what languages they speak and read. (Thus, for the Nazi, the *Jewish* German is always an impostor)” (149). While Britain was not exceptional amongst European nations in this regard, they were the primary European power become invested in creating a separate Jewish state to deal with this “Jewish problem.” It did not matter that Palestinians already lived there, because Palestinians were “pre-modern savages” that had no idea of nationalism; therefore, they were worse than Jews (Khalidi 2006, 50). All that mattered was that Jews could be moved elsewhere.

We can thus see how, from the beginning, the Jewish religious identity became politicized and entangled with Zionism. The actions of the British government in colonizing Palestine furthered this entanglement. One example is the use of a tactic the British government used in other societies over which it had ruled, which "frequently involved the development and refinement of… differences, and sometimes the production of new ones" (Khalidi 2006, 50) in order to weaken resistance to colonialism. The differences drawn out in Palestine were those of religion. As in India, the British government utilized indirect rule to maintain control over Palestine. Essentially, this involved elevating the status of local elites in exchange for obedience to British orders. Piecing together remnants of the Ottoman Empire's religio-political system, the British government sought out corrupt, Muslim-Palestinian aristocrats who acted in favor of the Zionist project. The Supreme Muslim Council (SMC) is an excellent example. This new branch of Palestinian government was given full control of Palestine's *awqaf* (Islamic charitable contributions), previously controlled by the Ottoman religious bureaucracy (Khalidi 2006), as well as control of appointing members of the court of appeal, *muftis* (Muslim legal experts), schools, and other institutions. This is just one example of the way in which the British government furthered the politicization of the Jewish and Muslim religious identities.

Even though the time and historical context are different, there is continuity between the British and American entanglement of religious and political identities. Part and parcel with this is the collapsing of Muslim and Arab into the same category. Another piece is the misconception that Islamic fundamentalists are representative of all Muslims. When one combines the former with the latter, all Arabs become Islamic fundamentalists or terrorists. In order to see the way in which Islamophobia has developed and changed in the United States, I review some pre- and post-September 11 instances below.

Prior to September 11, the U.S. government was already participating in and furthering Islamophobia. During the Nixon presidency, “Operation Boulder” had the “specific purpose to target Arabs in the U.S. for special investigation with the specific purpose of intimidation, harassment, and to discourage their activism on issues relating to the Middle East” (Akram 2002, 68). This led the FBI to “investigate individuals of ‘Arabic-speaking origin,’ supposedly to determine their relationship with ‘terrorist’ activities related to the Arab-Israeli conflict” (Akram 2002, 68). President George H. W. Bush furthered profiling to include surveillance of Arab-Americans, including interrogations of community leaders, finger-printing, and airline profiling (Akram 2002, 69).

Simultaneously, American Jewish organizations including the Jewish Defense League (JDL), the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) targeted Arab-Americans and critics of Israel. The JDL “committed… about one quarter of the total terrorist acts in the United States in the 1980’s” (Akram 2002, 63), targeting Arab-Americans and dissenters of Israel. The ADL, as previously mentioned, produced a list targeting Arab-Americans who spoke out against Israel, and AIPAC also produced similar lists (Akram 2002, 63).

After September 11, Zionist organizations continued to advance Islamophobia. As noted by Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP), the Jewish United Fund (JUF) donated money to prominent Islamophobic hate groups and received millions from the Donors Capital Fund, “one of the leading funders of Islamophobia in the United States” (Jewish Voices for Peace–Chicago 2017, 5). AIPAC also has ties to Islamophobic organizations, including the Investigative Project on Terrorism, inviting its founder, Steven Emerson, to various conferences (Jewish Voices for Peace 2017–Chicago, 7). It behooves Zionist organizations to support Islamophobia because the

collapsed identities of Muslim and Arab create fear of Arabs, creating more support for Israel, a country that experiences assaults from Arab Palsetinians.

It is also critical to understand in what ways the entanglement of the political Zionist identity and the religious Jewish identity manifests in the United States. One of the most important tools that contributes to this entanglement is the misuse of anti-Semitism. Presently, popular American discourse considers critiques of Israel to be anti-Semitic. According to Brownfeld (1987), “anti-Semitism has been redefined as anything that opposes the policies and interests of the state of Israel” (53). This is furthered nearly two decades later by Finkelstein (2005). He suggests that the criteria for “anti-Semitism” as used by the Israeli lobby in the United States consists of the following: “exaggeration and fabrication; mislabeling legitimate criticism of Israeli policy; and the unjustified yet predictable ‘spillover’ from criticism of Israel to Jews generally” (2005, 16). Take, for example, the ADL claim that Minnesota Democratic Representative Keith Ellison is anti-Semitic. In 2016, a video clip of Keith Ellison was shared, in which he criticized the U.S. for its emphasis on supporting Israel in its Middle East foreign policy. The ADL responded with the following:

> Rep. Ellison’s remarks are both deeply disturbing and disqualifying. His words imply that U.S. foreign policy is based on religiously or national origin-based special interests rather than simply on America’s best interests. Additionally… his words raise the specter of age-old stereotypes about Jewish control of our government, a poisonous myth that may persist in parts of the world where intolerance thrives, but that has no place in open societies like the U.S. (2016)

Here, we see how the ADL suggests that critiques of the U.S.-Israel relationship are anti-Semitic. Since Ellison is suggesting that the U.S. focus less on its relationship with Israel, the ADL is pulling out the anti-Semitism card to distract from and delegitimize Ellison’s legitimate critique of the U.S. relationship with Israel.

Zionist organizations also have a long history of actively trying to silence critiques of Israel and Zionism. Akram (2002) exposes the silencing project of the ADL handbook: *Pro-Arab Propaganda in America: Vehicles and Voices.* She writes:

> Groups or individuals who criticized Israel of Zionism were listed in the handbook, along with quotes and descriptions of their activities. All were characterized as 'extremists' intent on eradicating Israel or inciting prejudice against Jews in America. Included in the handbook are some of the most prominent academics, thinkers, and writers… from Colombia University's Edward Said to Harvard University's Walid Khalidi… The handbook was widely distributed through the ADL's 31 U.S. regional offices and Canada, in an effort… by Zionist activists to challenge, harass and silence groups and individuals on the list. (63)

This handbook has a dual effect, both utilizing the conflation of legitimate critiques of Israel and anti-Semitism to further the un-touchability of Israel, and to increase anti-Arab and anti-Muslim hatred. I will expand upon the latter in the following section.

At this point, I feel it is important to include a disclaimer. Anti-Semitism undeniably does still exist, which is apparent just from the 99 Neo-Nazi groups recorded across the United States (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017). What I am suggesting, rather, is that people are charged with anti-Semitism in situations where it is not merited, which is inappropriate and also weakens accusations of actual instances of anti-Semitism. If we are truly dedicated to ending anti-Semitism, we cannot call every critique of Israel anti-Semitic, because then we are not fighting against actual acts of violence against Jews. Furthermore, criticism of a state and its policies are not anti-Semitic because it is not a critique of a group or people, rather the way in which a state obtains and uses its power. We must stop treating Israel as if it is immune from critique. Israel must be held accountable for its actions.

Contact Theory

While there has been active furthering of Islamophobia by Zionist organizations, it must be made clear that this does not reflect the values of all Zionists. A Zionist can hold the door open for a non-Zionist, and there need not be discussion of their political views, allowing people with differing opinions to coexist in peace. These everyday interactions, also called “contact”, are foundational to “contact theory.” Contact Theory posits that interaction between conflicting groups reduces prejudice (Dixon et al. 2005). That is, the more interactions people have with “Others,” the less likely they are to be prejudiced. However, research has increasingly led to skepticism of this assumption. I will demonstrate that it is not necessarily a lack of exposure to difference that causes prejudice, but the inability to turn that exposure and knowledge into practice in a way that accounts for inequality between groups.

One critique of Contact Theory is that mere contact can reinforce the negative stereotypes and power structures that led to conflict in the first place. There is the tendency to approach dialogue spaces as if in a vacuum, ignoring more organic spaces of contact and institutionalized oppression. Psychologists Dixon et al. (2005) argue that “there is a gulf between the idealized forms of contact… and the mundane interactions that characterize most ordinary encounters between groups” (700). That is to say, these dialogues are distinct from everyday life (e.g. encounters at the supermarket, the workplace, on the street), where conflict most often manifests. This is obviously problematic because it diminishes the transfer ability to real life scenarios, but it is also problematic in that it does not address the banal manifestations of hegemonic power. These “idealized forms of contact” require nearly impossible conditions, including that participants “are of equal status, stereotypes are likely to be disconfirmed… [and] broader social

norms support intergroup contact and group equality" (Gawerc 2006, 447). When these requirements cannot be met, it is possible to reinscribe power structures.

Another problematic aspect of Contact Theory is the tendency to emphasize similarities. Abu-Nimer calls this "minimization," in which differences and confrontational models are minimized (2004, 500). While acknowledging similarities can "increase the participants' knowledge of the other" (Gawerc 2006, 447), it ignores the assumptions and problems that led to conflict in the first place and does not provide the space for the difficult, constructive conversations that are necessary for change.

One illustration of this concept comes from popular culture. In a 2016 Saturday Night Live skit titled, "Black Jeopardy with Tom Hanks" (Saturday Night Live, 2017). Tom Hanks plays Doug, a poor, white, Trump-supporting contestant on Black Jeopardy, and succeeds (up until the end) despite his whiteness. The idea of this skit is to demonstrate the way in which the impoverished American white community may share a similar experience to the American Black community, which experiences the highest levels of poverty in the United States due to systemic racism (Semega et al., 2017). However, the solidarity that builds between Doug and his Black co-contestants shatters at the end, when Doug is given the final category, "Lives that Matter", to which he responds, "I've got a lot to say about this". Here, we can see how, while there may be many similarities between the Black contestants and Doug, he is still a racist. Therefore, none of the similarities really matter, because Doug's racism is contributing to the institutionalized oppression that causes Black poverty. This exemplifies that focusing on similarities between conflicting groups of people does not address issues of tension nor causes of conflict, which is necessary for lasting change.

METHODOLOGY

I elected to conduct interviews rather than ethnographic observations for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, I was specifically interested in the MJBBG because the JCSC does not take a position on Israel. As opposed to many other Jewish organizations, the JCSC provides a Jewish space in which people do not, and in fact are encouraged not to, talk about Israel. This enables more people to work together on local social issues they care about without furthering the entanglement of the political Zionist identity and the religious Jewish identity. While it would have offered a different perspective to observe the MJBBG in action, the fact that there were roughly three years between the ending of the program and my interviews has given respondents time to reflect upon their experience.

I also chose to interview people individually, rather than in dyads or groups, in order to allow informants to speak their minds without fear of backlash from other informants. All of the interviews took place in person, in coffee shops or informants' offices, or over the phone, lasting from fifteen minutes to over an hour, depending on how connected informants were to the MJBBG and how much information they wanted to share (for a list of basic interview questions, see Appendix 2). The interviews were collected between August and October 2017. I audio-recorded all of my interviews on either the voice recording app on my Samsung Galaxy S6 or using QuickTime on my Mac, and transcribed them afterwards to ensure that informants are represented in their own words. During the interviews, I also took notes to remind myself to go back to any pertinent points or questions. Due to my connection with the Jewish community, I was more fruitful in getting Jewish individuals to respond positively to my interview requests. Thus, out of my twelve interviews, ten were with members of the Jewish community and two with members of the Muslim community. While I did not ask informants' ages, they appeared to

range between approximately 28 to 80 years old. I was not concerned that any informants were under the age of 18 because they were either rabbis (meaning they had to have completed both college and rabbinical school), I had met them in person and seen that they were over the age of 18, or they had mentioned going to and completing college. Only three out of twelve were women (my assumption based on use of she/her/hers pronouns).

Because Israel is such a contentious issue, I was cognizant of the potential for critics of Israel to feel silenced by Zionist Jews. Since I was introduced (either by myself or informants connecting me to other informants) as connected to Jewish organizations, which as we know have become entangled with the Zionist political identity, and because "Rachel" is a common Jewish name and "Mintz" a popular Israeli-Jewish name, it was apparent to all informants that I am indeed Jewish. This likely impacted the opinons shared by some informants. However, during interviews, I nodded along with my informants' descriptions, as to create the space for them to share their personal perspectives, Zionist or not, without fear of criticism.

The interviews were gathered in a snowball fashion, beginning with leaders of the JCSC, to leaders of partnering Muslim organizations, to eventually participants of the program. I chose this method because it allowed me to demonstrate that this project was sanctioned by those who had led the initiative to promote Jewish-Muslim dialogue, making respondents more likely to accept my request for an interview. This also allowed me to connect with those who were most involved in the program rather than those who only occasionally participated or played more peripheral roles.

The Colorado College Institutional Review Board (IRB) marked me exempt from undergoing the review process prior to research because I elected to keep informants anonymous and was working with adults over the age of 18. I chose to do this in order to avoid any

defamation of informants' reputations, prevent further marginalization of these already marginalized communities, and to try to ensure that informants could share their true opinions and observations. Because the Jewish community is so small, I also have to keep the location and organizations anonymous in order to prevent them from being found on, say, a Google search. Thus, the names of individuals and organizations are also pseudonyms.

CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Viewing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in religious terms limits the possibility of interfaith dialogue between American Jews and Muslims. After interviewing former participants of the MJBBG, I came to the conclusion that the inaccurate discourse of Israel as being a Jewish or Muslim primary concern, rather than a Zionist and Palestinian primary concern, should be addressed in Jewish-Muslim spaces in order to prevent tension from arising and to dismantle this problematic assumption. If national discourse can be changed to understand Jewish and Zionist, Muslim and Palestinian, as separate identities, a variety of positive results will ensue: Israel will lose its ability to deflect criticism based on "anti-Semitism", we will begin to dismantle the Islamophobic conflation of Muslims and terrorists, and there will be less tension between American Jews and Muslims.

As I observed in the MJBBG, the entanglement of political and religious identities is a barrier for Muslim-Jewish solidarity groups. Even though the JCSC is moving in the right direction by not taking a position on Israel, I believe the difference between Judaism and Zionism, Muslims and Palestinians, should have been explained at the very beginning of the MJBBG in order to prevent the tension that arose, and ultimately fractured, the program.

The Entanglement of Politics and Religion in the MJBBG

There were a number of instances in which the conflation of politics and religion led to tension in the MJBBG. Part of the issue for the MJBBG was that larger, Jewish and Zionist organizations, particularly the Jewish Federation, conflated their two distinct identities, as well as those of Muslims and Palestinians. The JCSC received a lot of pushback from the Federation for working closely with Muslim organizations, which created a headache for the JCSC because some of their Jewish members also belonged to and/or respected the Federation. Anat, a middle-age Jewish participant, explains the general claim against one of the JCSC's Muslim partners, the Muslim Community Council (MCC):

> Well, [the Jewish] Federation hates MCC, because they've made all these charges against them over the years that… they're founded originally by the Muslim Brotherhood, which is... anti-Israel, and because they had been unindicted co-conspirators on a trial about monies… sent to Hamas. (2017)

The JCSC took these claims seriously and thoroughly researched them to determine their validity. They determined that the Federation, however, was making false allegations. This is significant because it demonstrates the way in which Zionist organizations in the United States try to defame Muslims by associating them with Palestinian terrorist organizations like Hamas. In the context of the War on Terror, the word "terrorist" has become integral to the language of Islamophobia, making it an easy way to discredit anti-Zionist opponents.

Even after these claims were dismissed, larger Jewish and Zionist organizations continued to push the JCSC to cease working with the MCC. The most common tactic was to claim that critiques of Israel were expressions of anti-Semitism. With the MJBBG, we can see this best through the response to the 2008-09 assault on Gaza. People took to the streets to either show their support for or against Zionism. There was an effort made by organizations to deny entry to any Islamophobic or anti-Semitic signs, but some slipped through. The large, Jewish,

Zionist organizations of the study area immediately used this as an opportunity to question the validity of the relationship between the JCSC and the MCC, as a younger-middle age Muslim participant named Xavier, shared:

> [T]here was always a larger body of Jewish leadership… [and] whenever there were certain actions that pretty much went against Israel, in spite of any [attempt by] coordinating parties… to make sure no anti-Semitism would be present… there would always be (because we're talking about throngs of thousands of people would be present at such rallies, there would be some people that would be able to get past and actually reveal some sign that is anti-Semitic or certain slogans shouted out of that huge crowd), and this would be recorded or photographs be taken. And so, the larger, more conservative… Jewish organizations would always come back to JCSC and charge them with the question: 'why are you working with said groups?' (2017)

It is important to note that some of the signs were indeed anti-Semitic as the informant stated, and the JCSC did bring up the truly anti-Semitic signs up to the Muslim partners. However, some of the signs that the Jewish and Zionist organizations were calling anti-Semitic were merely critiquing Israel. An older Jewish informant, Elijah, also described how this tactic is used against members of the Jewish community: "[it is] dangerous [to critique Israel] in the sense that you could lose your job. I mean, I know Rabbis who, very large donors have threatened to pull out if… 'the Rabbi talks this way'" (2017). These situations are significant because they demonstrate how the colonial conflation of the political as religious infiltrates hegemonic discourse in the United States and has incredibly negative ramifications. This is an active move to incite tension and conflict within the MJBBG, in order to silence critiques of Israel.

Contact and its Flaws

From my observations, it is apparent that the MJBBG utilized ideas derivative of Contact Theory in their pursuit of fostering relationships between the Muslim and Jewish communities. We see this through the types of events that were put on by the MJBBG, which included art galleries, musical performances, holiday services, and public conversations between religious

leaders. We can see that these spaces were meant to provide opportunities for Jews and Muslims to share common experiences in an effort to build relationships. In other words, providing formal opportunities for contact between Muslims and Jews would provide the foundation upon which solidarity could be created. This falls in line with the Dixon et al. (2005) definition of Contact Theory, that interaction between conflicting groups reduces prejudice.

In this section, I will analyze the ways in which the MJBBG upheld and violated the scholarly critiques of Contact Theory that I have already outlined. I have found evidence that unequal power relationships were maintained throughout the program and that the focus on similarities allowed for the problematic, colonial conflation of politics and religion to persist. I did not, however, find that negative stereotypes were reinforced. This is significant because it suggests that the MJBBG is moving in the right direction, but would benefit from directly addressing the false equation of Zionism and Judaism, Palestinians and Muslims.

There was an unequal power relationship between the Jews and Muslims in this program, due to there being more Jewish participants present and also the leadership primarily being comprised of just the JCSC. Xavier noted that, “with MJBBG events, there were far more Jewish participants than Muslim,” (2017) and Alice, a middle-aged Jewish participant shared that there was consistent Jewish leadership, but the same could not be said for the Muslim side:

> [W]e had an advisory council that was all our people–a couple of Rabbis, a couple of JCUA leaders–it did not have Muslim leaders. And when I tried to figure out why… I was told, “oh, well the Muslim side of it is supposed to have their own leadership,” but that didn’t make any sense because we didn’t have a strong and public Muslim partner that was willing to work with us in an ongoing way. (2017)

It is important to note that, in the above quote, the observation was made after the MCC had fettered out its participation in the MJBBG, leaving no consistent Muslim partner. This power imbalance is significant because it creates the sense of a majority and minority division,

potentially inhibiting the participation of the minority. It is also significant because Jews, while still the target of anti-Semitism in America, are not associated with terrorism the way that Muslims are, which makes us less likely to be targeted and gives us more privilege, respectively.

Another applicable critique to the MJBBG is that the focus on similarities allowed for problematic assumptions and tensions to remain unaddressed. As Rebecca, a Jewish participant in her late twenties, shared:

> We talked a lot about similarities between Jewish and Muslim religious beliefs and traditions and practices. And, also, the similar state that Jews and Muslims… have in anti-discrimination work and religious freedom and civil rights work, and that kind of thing. Their focus was really on talking about the similarities and shared interests and stuff like that. (2017)

Since the events focused on similarities instead of discussing points of divide between Muslims and Jews, these pieces were swept under the rug and allowed to fester. One assumed division was that of Israel/Palestine, which festered and bubbled up occasionally, always remaining "the elephant in the room." We see this take form in a variety of ways. Below, I have divided some examples into sections, the first being general critiques of the MJBBG, and the second critiques surrounding the idea of "normalization".

General critiques of the MJBBG:

> [W]e started to really come under criticism with some of our partner Muslim organizations because it got complicated, because as things became more and more visible and public in Israel-Palestine, people were challenging. And they said, 'this is great, all this bridge-building and getting to know each other, but unless you're gonna address Israel-Palestine, the elephant in the room, you're not gonna change the world at all. This is bullshit. What are we really doing if we're not even talk[ing] about these issues?' And then there were other people who said, 'oh, this is great Jewish-Muslim stuff, but the people that come to this stuff are Turkish-Muslims and Pakistani-Muslims, where are the Arab-Muslims? Because unless you're really working directly with Arab-Muslims in an intentional way, you're not getting to the core of the issue.'(Alice 2017)

> [S]ome people have been critical of us, saying, 'wow, if you're not gonna really talk about the real issues,'–and that's actually been one of the conflicts we've had

> with the Muslim community, is some people have felt like we're skirting the issue, we don't want to address the issue–'we don't want a relationship with you unless you really wanna talk about Israel's behavior.' So there have been parts of the Muslim community that have refused to be in conversation with us because they feel like we're skirting the issue. (Anat 2017)
>
> [There were signs outside of the synagogue that said] 'we support Israel,' 'we give our support to Israel.' And so, the Muslim speaker went there and saw that, he kinda felt obligated to talk about it, right? A lot of Muslims that were attending saw that and it was somewhat uncomfortable, 'cause, well, we thought it was not political, but yet seeing these signs there. And so, he ended up making a comment... concerning the issue, and when he made a comment saying, 'well, let us talk about the issues. Let's come together. Let's do it. Let's talk about the issues,' I guess some of the Jewish members that were attending, that were participants, made an issue with the speech, and then the Pandora Box thing opened up... So it's always in the back of the mind." (Omar 2017)[3]

These general critiques surrounding the MJBBG demonstrate how the Jewish organization was being conflated as a Zionist organization. In Alice's excerpt, there is anger directed towards the JCSC for not working more closely with Arab-Muslims, assuming that the "core of the issue" is the Israeli occupation. In Anat's excerpt, we see how this metastasized into members of the Muslim community and Muslim organizations refusing to be part of the MJBBG unless Israel was discussed, which relies on the assumption that Jews are tied to Israel. These feelings came to a head in the situation that Omar described, in which an MJBBG event took place in a synagogue that had Zionist signs outside. The fact that this sign was present as participants arrived at the event suggested that the JCSC agreed with that sentiment, furthering the problematic conflation of Israel as a religious issue, rather than political. When the Muslim speaker tried to address this tension in his speech, some of the Jewish participants had a negative reaction because there was no space created for dialogue.

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[3] A Muslim informant in his late twenties.

There were also critiques made surrounding “normalization”. The very basic concept of normalization can be applied to a variety of situations, and generally means that a new, unusual, or problematic object or relationship is becoming to be the new norm. Examples of this could include expecting the president of the United States to produce inflammatory tweets at 3:00am or thinking that men are genetically aggressive and violent. We have become accustomed to thinking these things are “normal,” when in fact they are very troubling. In the context of Israel/Palestine, there is an anti-normalization movement to stop accepting the existence of Israel as permissible or normal (+972 Blog 2011). Framing Israel/Palestine as a primary concern for Jews and Muslims is being translated to the United States as an unwillingness of Muslim groups to work with Jewish groups that do not denounce Israel. We can see the way in which normalization is applied to the MJBBG and critiqued from informants’ quotes below:

> For the Palestinians, I think the biggest sort of issue was this idea of 'normalizing'. So, there's this concept of normalizing relations with the Jewish/Israeli community, in the sense that... the best analogy I can kind of give you is: imagine they wanted to do a racial event where Whites and Blacks come together... they wanna come together and build these relationships, but they don't wanna talk about the race issue... So, you kinda understand how not talking about the issue is an issue in itself. And it's kinda like that. So, when we're having these Jewish-Muslim groups and talks and programs, and we say, 'well, let's not talk about the issue. Let's just get to know each other,' this, from a Palestinian-Muslim perspective, is sort of a problem, 'cause we do wanna talk about the issue, we do wanna talk about the problem. (Omar 2017)

> I think the point of dialogue is to talk about the issues that really matter, and no matter how difficult or painful or difficult. I said difficult twice [laughter] 'cause it's difficult. Yeah. And I think this is a primary issue in interfaith dialogue. I mean Israel-Palestine is a land that is central to all three faiths and considered sacred by all three faiths. And to avoid the political reality of it simply because it's upsetting to Jewish sensibilities–which is why I think it's avoided generally–is enormously problematic and is very antithetical, I would say, to the very concept of what dialogue should be… if it's going to be organizing with the Arab-American community, then it has to come clean on this issue and be really clear about what its stance is, because I think it's disingenuous to do that kind of organizing with that constituency and not deal with that issue head on. I think that if they're going to do Muslim dialogue... if they're gonna delve into that territory,

> then they need to come clean about that as well. You just can't have it both ways. So I guess my answer is: I don't think it's problematic that it doesn't have a mission statement about Israel-Palestine–a vision statement, an organizational vision statement on Israel-Palestine–but I do think it's a problem that it's seeking allyship with Arab Americans and Muslim Americans… and are not willing to take a stand on what's going on in Israel-Palestine. (Benji 2017)[4]

In Omar's piece, we see that Jewish is being conflated with Israeli, which we can assume also means Zionist, based on popular discourse. Benji, similarly, assumes that all Jews and Muslim Americans feel an attachment to Israel/Palestine. It is important to address this, because allowing anti-normalization to continue in such a way that it divides the Jewish and Muslim communities only furthers the xenophobic reframing of Israel/Palestine as a religious, rather than political, issue. With this in mind, I agree with Omar and Benji. Israel/Palestine should indeed have been addressed in the MJBBG and should be addressed, now, in Jewish spaces, by drawing a distinction between Jews and Zionists, Muslims and Palestinians. Making this understood will allow for the conflation of politics and religion to be dismantled, disallowing Zionists and Israel to use charges of "anti-Semitism" to deflect critiques and begin to also dismantle the Islamophobia.

On a Lighter Note

I want to shine some light on the positive feedback I gathered about the MJBBG, because I would not want to give the impression that the MJBBG grossly contributed to the conflation of politics and religion or created a greater divide between local Muslims and Jews. On the contrary, all of my informants expressed positive sentiments about the program, some of which I have included below:

> We became friends, and I mean, to this day I still talk to many of those people. (Omar 2017)

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[4] A middle-aged Jewish informant.

> [I]f MJBBG was never created, I don't know exactly what the state of Muslim-Jewish relationships *would* be. And I'm not saying that lightly, or trying to exaggerate that in any way, shape, or possibility. I hope some way, somehow, you can quote that as well, because that's how significant I do see that. (Xavier 2017)

> I think there's an important connection that we made over the years that the Jewish community would just be completely absent from if not for JCSC. (Or 2017)[5]

> [T]here did seem to be strong relationships built between [representatives from the JCSC] and the representatives at [Muslim organizations] that we worked with, and the Imams that we also had been connected to... and I think those friendships were strong and I think we kinda knew that we built enough of a relationship that if we wanted to call on them to participate in some initiative we were doing, they were gonna say yes. So, I think from just a community-building perspective, that was successful. (Rebecca 2017)

One of the informants also noted that the model of the MJBBG was being adopted by other interreligious solidarity efforts across the United States, signaling that there were, indeed, a lot of positive aspects about the MJBBG. If there had been dialogue that addressed the xenophobic project of framing Israel as a religious, rather than a political, concern, I believe the program could have avoided the tension that ultimately fractured the MJBBG.

CONCLUSION

The entanglement of the Zionist and anti-Zionist political identities with Jewish and Muslim religious identities impedes the success of American Jewish-Muslim solidarity. While the MJBBG is moving in the right direction by parsing apart Judaism and Zionism, the entanglement is so overwhelming that it must be formally addressed in order to diminish its negative impact. One must also distinguish between Muslims and Palestinians in order to break down the Islamophobic collapse of Muslim and Arab identities. The findings of this research have the potential to improve American Muslim-Jewish solidarity efforts.

[5] Or, a Jewish participant in his early thirties.

It is important to note that this research is not perfect. There are a variety of issues that could be improved upon in future research in order to ensure a more holistic account of Muslim-Jewish solidarity efforts. As previously noted, I chose to focus specifically on the MJBBG because the JCSC does not take a position on Israel. However, it would be beneficial to also study solidarity efforts put on other Jewish organizations, anti-Zionist and Zionist, in order to draw conclusions on the impact of an organization's stance on Israel in relation to the success of the program. Within the scope of my own project, if I had more time, I would have liked to have equal numbers of Muslim and Jewish informants, to ensure that both perspectives are appropriately accounted for and, perhaps, analyze any differences between them. I would also conduct ethnographic observations of protests and rallies surrounding both the Israeli occupation and American Jewish and Muslim rights, to study the rhetoric in those spaces.

As I write this, there is turmoil surrounding the Trump administration's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. It is likely that this decision is creating even more tension in Jewish-Muslim spaces. While it is not within my capacity to incorporate this into this research project, it is my hope that anthropologists address this development, especially in the context of the entanglement of political and religious identities in this tense region.

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APPENDIX 1

Examples of Religious Discourse

“Since the mid-20th Century, there has been an unending struggle between Jewish Israelis and Muslim Palestinians over the rule of the geographic region. Muslims recognise Islamic-Palestine as the only legitimate country, while the majority of the Jewish people believe Israel is a legitimate state” (Tawhidi 2017).

“Celebratory images of blood-stained cleavers, popularised in Isis beheading clips, quickly flooded many Palestinian websites and Facebook pages. It did not matter that the chosen targets were elderly civilians inside Israel’s pre-1967 borders.

This is what a religious war looks like, and we should stop kidding ourselves that this is not what has been happening in the Middle East. In various degrees it’s been going on for a century” (Pfeffer 2016).

APPENDIX 2

Basic Interview Questions

1. How did you become involved with the JMCBI?
    a. What interested you about it?
2. What did you understand its purpose and goals to be?
3. What did you enjoy most about that experience?
4. What do you think could have been improved?
5. Do you think it was successful in achieving its goals?
6. Do you recall there being any challenges or tensions? If so, what were they?
7. Did the Palestinian-Israeli conflict come up at all? In what way? How were those situations handled? Do you think they were handled appropriately?