

ARTICLE

# Identity Transcendence as a Response to Religious Conflict: Understanding Effective Student Engagement with Israel and Palestine

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## Abstract

From 2014 to 2019, more than one hundred students at the London School of Economics took part in an interfaith program designed to improve their understanding of the Israel-Palestine conflict and to meet religious and regional interfaith leaders who demonstrate how faith can be the inspiration and vehicle for peace-making. This article seeks to evaluate that program and to investigate the meaning of an effective interfaith intervention in the context of this conflict. It identifies the notion of “identity transcendence” as an increased capacity to empathize with an opposing view while retaining fidelity to one’s own convictions and community commitments. We consider its features and the conditions needed to foster it in order to learn lessons for the future of interfaith engagement in this and other religion-related conflicts.

## Keywords

interfaith, conflict, dialogue, encounter, higher education, Israel and Palestine, identity,

In the months following October 7, 2023, university campuses across the world saw angry protests that highlighted and exacerbated the religious divisions within their student bodies. Even prior to the Hamas attacks against Israel and the ensuing Israeli military response in Gaza, few issues had greater capacity to divide academic communities than the Israel-Palestine conflict. As universities seek to contain these tensions and improve their engagement with the conflict going forward, educational programs that bring interfaith groups together around this issue will need to be appraised and their lessons learned for possible future interventions. One such program was run by the Faith Centre at the London School of Economics between 2014 and 2019, taking over 100 students from diverse religious backgrounds on a week-long shared encounter in the region. Sensitive to accusations of “faithwashing” the conflict, the program pursued the dual educational aim of (1) better understanding the religious dimensions of a complex multi-dimensional conflict and (2) meeting religious and interfaith leaders in the region who demonstrate how faith can be the inspiration and vehicle for peace-making.<sup>1</sup>

This article seeks to evaluate and learn key lessons from LSE’s *Interfaith Encounter Israel and Palestine* program. The authors are the founder of the LSE Faith Centre who set up the program in 2014 and a program participant who went on to work as a program manager in the center. Here we share the research we have conducted among former participants since the conclusion of the program in 2019. We begin by setting out, in primarily descriptive terms, the aims, ethos, and shape of the program. We then move to consider its pedagogy, recognizing the limitations of many encounter-based programs and identifying our core purpose as having been to instill a posture of *identity transcendence* that equips participants with the awareness to identify a *conflict ethos*, the confidence to challenge it, and the imagination to envisage pathways to alternative realities. We then go deeper into the nature of this identity transcendence and how it is fostered through our analysis of participant surveys and interviews. We consider the ways in which participants converge and diverge as they are brought together for this intense shared journey and then return to their communities continuing to process the experience. Finally, we identify some core insights that we hope may apply across similar interfaith and peacebuilding interventions.

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1 “Faithwashing” is used to describe the appeal to interfaith dialogue and harmony as a means of deflecting from real political injustices. Accentuating the need to overcome religious differences is viewed as a distraction from the “real” political and economic causes of the conflict.

## The Aims and Ethos of the Program

*Interfaith Encounter Israel and Palestine* ran as an extracurricular program that took six cohorts of 18 students to the region for a week-long educational visit. Interfaith interventions can be made with a number of motives. Our objectives make clear that the purpose of the program was principally educational in building participants' understanding of the ambivalent role of religious narratives within the conflict. These narratives fuel the conflict with competing, perhaps irreconcilable, claims about land, divinely instituted statehood, and sacred sites. But they also resource actors on the ground with motivation and common language to build bridges across the divides. The specific context of the program we have set out points to other motivations: our desire to promote more cohesive relations on LSE campus and our belief that LSE students can use their experience of religious diversity among their peers to equip them with skills to address religious conflict after graduation.

The program was heavily oversubscribed (often five applicants to a place), owing in part to significant subsidy from a range of sources.<sup>2</sup> Four selection criteria were, therefore, adopted to help identify those most likely to benefit and maximize impact. These were: (1) a clear interest in religion and its impact on the world today; (2) active involvement in your religious (or other) community; (3) a demonstrated commitment to reconciliation and conflict resolution work; and (4) a readiness to engage in further interfaith activities. However, participants did not need to meet all four criteria. In particular, many candidates were selected due to strong evidence of one of the first two criteria, with no previously expressed interest in interfaith relations.

While these criteria helped identify appropriate participants, none of them (including the fourth) committed students to any specific further actions beyond the experience itself. This was deliberate and made the program distinctive among similar initiatives which frequently seek to demonstrate impact through mandating the delivery of a specified tangible outcome. On an issue as divisive as Israel and Palestine, we were keen to allow students to engage as much as possible on their own terms and avoid the feeling of an agenda being imposed on them. These criteria, as well as selecting

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2 These included internal university funding, government grants, a Jewish family foundation, and a Muslim philanthropist. We were transparent with students about these funding sources and, while making clear that no funder had exercised control over the content of the program, we included funding as part of the conversation with students about the practical and cultural pressures on the parameters of such a program.

from a highly international student body (LSE students are drawn from 150 countries), allowed for very diverse cohorts in almost every sense. We had a mixture of undergraduate and postgraduate, including some older students. In each cohort around half originated from outside the UK, and over the duration of the program participants were drawn from nearly every continent. The majority were adherents to one of the three Abrahamic faiths, and political opinions covered the full spectrum from Zionist students who had previously taken part in pro-Israel “Birthright” trips to active pro-Palestine campaigners.

To accommodate this diversity and allow students to engage authentically, we adopted what might be described as a “modally plural approach” that sought not to impose any set of assumptions about engagement with the program that would compromise strongly held political or religious stances.<sup>3</sup> This modally plural approach was established through a preparatory workshop encouraging students to consider different modes of leadership and engagement. To do this, the students explored four archetypes developed by Carl Jung. We suggested that students might identify their mode of participation in the program with any (or all) of the archetypes: king (monarch), friend, warrior, or wizard (sage).

*Kings* are participants who may find their personal interest or political views about the conflict are constrained by their leadership obligations and the demands of a constituency. They may be office holders in the Students’ Union or a campus faith society, and their engagement may be characterized by a pragmatic collaboration for shared interests, particularly the cohesion of the LSE community. The *friend* is the participant who seeks to build empathy before forming political views. Their focus is learning where different people are coming from in order to build understanding. Legitimizing this “open” position is important on a topic where students are often told that not taking a side is a collusion with injustice.

*Wizards* are those who reframe the problems, bringing fresh perspectives and complexity that open up new possibilities. These were often the most effective bridgebuilders since peace between opposing groups is significantly advanced by those able to break and imaginatively reframe the entrenched polarities. Nonetheless, we also welcomed the category of *warrior*. These are

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3 Sergey Melnik identifies four types of interfaith dialogue, which he labels polemical, cognitive, peacemaking, and partnership. These modes map loosely onto the four Jungian archetypes we come on to set out here of warrior, friends, wizards and kings; Sergey Melnik, “Types of Interreligious Dialogue,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 31, no. 1 (2020): 48–72.

people with strong views about the conflict and an activist orientation. It was important to legitimize this stance since we maintain that strong advocacy on either side need not preclude a genuine engagement with and respect for opponents. This marked ours out from similar programs in which activism can be viewed as necessarily creating “a battleground dynamic that impedes learning by shutting down alternative or competing perspectives essential to critical thinking.”<sup>4</sup> We do not believe this is necessarily the case and did not want to narrow our participation to more “moderate” participants by sending the message that acting on strongly held convictions is antithetical to our ethos.

Using these archetypes, we encouraged students to identify their positionality and understand the approach of other participants within the overarching framework of the program. We also sought to avoid the imposition of any single understanding of the conflict, or any one justification for the role of interreligious engagement with it. For the warrior, for example, better understanding opposing views might be a vehicle to better advocacy for your view. For the wizard, it will be the means of finding new paradigms for peacebuilding. Students were invited to reflect on the different scenarios in which they might adopt these different roles.

### **The Shape of the Program**

The time and financial constraints of an extracurricular program inevitably made this a limited engagement with a very complex situation. Over the years, the program was refined to maximize its effectiveness, curating a representative range of encounters with adequate preparation and opportunities to debrief. The preparatory workshops included the work on Jungian archetypes discussed above, teaching from LSE colleagues with a reputation for balanced scholarship on the history of the conflict, and discussion of how we might consider the religious entanglements of a geopolitical conflict.

The itinerary of trip itself was developed in partnership with the Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue who coordinated our stay in the region.<sup>5</sup> Typically, it began with two days in Jerusalem, visiting the major

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4 Daniel Brunstetter and Daniel Wehrenfennig, “Teaching about Intractable Conflicts: An Approach to Peace and Conflict Studies,” *APSA Teaching and Learning Conference Paper* (2013); Available at SSRN: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2206732>.

5 <https://rossingcenter.org/>

religious sites and learning about contested histories. We then took in the north of Israel, visiting Nazareth and the archaeological site of Sepphoris before staying in Tiberias to visit the Biblical sites around Galilee. The return south would enter the West Bank, spending a night with families in Bethlehem, visiting the Aida Refugee Camp and learning about life under the occupation. Participants would encounter each other's worship, attending a mosque in Nazareth that permits non-Muslim visitors, an Arabic-speaking Roman Catholic church, and a synagogue in West Jerusalem which arranged for our students to be hosted in the homes of its members for a Shabbat meal. Throughout the trip, the group met with individuals and organizations who are seeking to build bridges across religious divides such as the Parents Circle, which brings together bereaved families on both sides of the conflict, and Roots, an organization in the West Bank striving for coexistence.<sup>6</sup> Time was allocated each day to the sharing of reflections in diverse groups. The whole group would meet around one month after return to the UK for a facilitated debrief on their experience.

The curating of a program such as this is both an enormous responsibility and an impossible task. Accusations of imbalance or “normalization” of unjust political realities are unavoidable. The constraints are multiple, from where it is physically safe to take a group of young people, to questions about what meetings might be reputationally too risky for the university. A longer, more ambitious program would engage participants in co-creation of the itinerary. Unable to do this, we sought to engage students in an active interrogation of the program itinerary, maintaining the conversation about whose voices were not heard, what logistical or political realities might have led to that, and how we could address these absences.

### **Encountering Difference within Asymmetries of Power**

In line with most peacebuilding educational programs, our program adopted an encounter-based pedagogy. This approach expresses faith in the process of people coming together face to face, deconstructing mutual prejudices, and developing trust and empathy through affinity and shared dignity rooted in their common humanity. This is indeed what programs hope for, and sometimes it is realized; but too often this hope translates into a naïve optimism that attributes intrinsic transformational properties to interpersonal and intergroup contact.<sup>7</sup> Proponents of a more realistic contact hypothesis

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6 [www.theparentscircle.org](http://www.theparentscircle.org); [www.friendsoroots.net](http://www.friendsoroots.net)

7 This view is often characterized as the naïve lay representation of Allport's Contact

assert that for personal group-based prejudices to be deconstructed rather than reinforced, certain conditions must be met: equal status, ongoing interaction, mutual dependence, and institutional support.<sup>8</sup>

Attempts to employ contact hypothesis insights within the context of Israel-Palestine have been identified as problematic as its power asymmetries and seeming intractability violate necessary conditions for effective and ethical contact.<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that it is impossible or without merit, but greater attention should be paid to form and context. In his investigation of various contact models within the Israel-Palestine context, Maoz argues that the narrative-storytelling model, one that combines interpersonal interaction with a mutual exploration of social identities and power, is associated with increased trust, empathy, and appreciation for complexity.<sup>10</sup> A primary purpose of our program was to expose, through direct encounter, participants from a range of religious, national, and political identities to people and places that challenged their own simplified narratives of the conflict, encouraging more expanded and complex ones.

Choosing to apply this model to a student educational program from an elite global north institution is not without its complications. First, as Christine Hong cautiously notes, “designing interpersonal interreligious and intercultural experiences can be tenuous. If educators are not careful, student learning can occur on the backs of minoritized people”.<sup>11</sup> If a program like this is to be ethical and of value, at the bare minimum all participants and educators must reflect on the effect they have on those that they encounter and consider behaviors and interaction norms that mitigate harm. Ideally, they should also have a clear vision for how learning positively contributes to an ecology of peace. Second, programs that pursue *appreciating complexity* as an explicit objective can fall foul of colluding with existing

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Hypothesis; Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, Mass.:Addison-Wesley, 1954).

- 8 Thomas F. Pettigrew, “Intergroup Contact Theory,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 49, no. 1 (1998): 65–85.
- 9 John Dixon, Kevin Durrheim, and Colin Tredoux, “Beyond the Optimal Contact Strategy: A Reality Check for the Contact Hypothesis,” *The American Psychologist* 60, no.1 (2005): 697–711.
- 10 Ifat Maoz, “Does Contact Work in Protracted Asymmetrical Conflict? Appraising 20 Years of Reconciliation Aimed Encounters Between Israeli Jews and Palestinians,” *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no.1 (2011): 115–125.
- 11 Christine Hong, “Experiential Learning and Skills Transfer: An Anticolonial Response to Jones and Meyer,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 36, no. 1 (2022): 97–103.

system justifications and inertia. This is the criticism implied in accusations of “faithwashing.” Just as interpersonal exchange must incorporate “a more structural approach that challenges and unsettles normative thinking,” appreciating complexity must be complemented with tools to navigate it and reimagine action informed by expanded realities.<sup>12</sup> Third, exposure to narrative-disrupting voices must be taken seriously from a practical, pastoral, and political perspective. If students are exposed to situations in which they feel physically or psychologically unsafe, then this has been shown to entrench worldview defense and become self-defeating.<sup>13</sup> Related to this, educators retain a duty of care to participants, mitigating risks and a responsibility to respond to distress appropriately. Finally, even though encountering fringe and extreme perspectives can be instructive, legal prohibitions and power considerations place necessary limits on who can be encountered and where, as discussed in the previous section.

In light of these considerations, the program’s vision of equipping participants with the skills to lead across difference points to two important concepts: the identification of *conflict ethos* and the cultivation of *identity transcendence*. Through experiential encounter, the program hoped to equip students to identify and subvert a *conflict ethos*. Bar-Tal conceptualizes and lists the societal beliefs that shape the reality of a conflict ethos, including the goal of self-justification, the delegitimization of opponents, and an idyllic framing of peaceful resolution.<sup>14</sup> In our program, we focused on reflective practices that encouraged our participants to identify when these social scripts were being employed by themselves, their cohort, and their interlocutors. Through building deep relationships across faith and other identity intersections, the program hoped to instill a sense of *identity transcendence*. Hamack defines his concept of identity transcendence as discovering “a way to integrate both in-group and out-group<sup>15</sup> into the life story narrative in such a way

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12 Marianna Moyaert, “Towards a New Program for Interfaith Learning: Reflections from an Interreligious Educator Working in the Netherlands,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 38, no. 1 (2023): 3–15.

13 Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon, “The Causes and Consequences of a Need for Self-Esteem: a Terror Management Theory,” in *Public Self and Private Self*, ed. Roy F. Baumeister (New York: Springer, 1986), 189–212.

14 Daniel Bar-Tal, “From Intractable Conflict Through Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation: a Psychological Analysis,” *Political Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2000): 351–365.

15 We understand in-groups and out-groups here within the framework of Social Identity Theory expounded by Tajfel and Turner; Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior,” in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, eds. Stephen Worchel and William G. Austin (Chicago: Hall Publishers, 1986), 7–24.

that does not threaten the in-group and his or her identification with it.”<sup>16</sup> Our program deliberately chose to foreground the faith identities of our participants and their interlocutors to meet a recognized absence in most programming and discourses on the conflict.<sup>17</sup> Identity transcendence here does not equate to multiple religious belonging.<sup>18</sup> Participants are invited to deepen their own religious convictions through a fuller understanding of other religious beliefs and experiences, described by Awad as “acquiring an inherently critical and reforming self-examination; an in-depth fathoming of one’s own religious identity.”<sup>19</sup>

It is through the integration of these two concepts that we arrived at a more specific articulation of our program objective: *to invite and instill a posture of identity transcendence, through encounter with diverse religious and political interlocutors, that equips participants with the awareness to identify a conflict ethos, the confidence to challenge it, and the imagination to envisage pathways to alternative realities.*

### Evaluating Identity Transcendence

After each *Interfaith Encounter* program, participants were invited to follow up with an immediate evaluation. Hammack identifies three key indicators of identity transcendence: (1) cognitive ability to understand the identity needs of out-groups; (2) willingness to challenge in-group master narrative; and (3) integration of in-group and out-group narrative that does not threaten in-group membership.<sup>20</sup> In our immediate post-program evaluations, most participants exhibited these key indicators of identity transcendence through narrative reflections and follow up conversations. They would exhibit a clear understanding and recognition of out-group narratives, and they would express critical concerns of their own in-group’s position having seen for

16 Phillip Hammack, *Narrative and the Politics of Identity: the Cultural Psychology of Israeli and Palestinian Youth, Culture and Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 272.

17 Peter Dziedic, “Re-approaching Interreligious Engagement in Israel/Palestine: Moving Beyond Questions of Religious Identity and Experience,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 11, no. 1 (2013): 34–41.

18 Rachel A. Heath, “Multiple Religious Belonging and Theologies of Multiplicity: Confluences of Oneness and Porosity,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 21, no. 1 (2017): 23–36.

19 Najib G. Awad, “The ‘End of Dialogue’ and Christian-Muslim Interrelations: Dialogue as Self-Perception Venue,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 32, no. 1 (2021): 5–20.

20 Hammack, *Narrative and the Politics of Identity*, 272.

themselves inconsistencies between distant representations and the realities they experienced.

Examples of participant reflections from past contemporaneous evaluations include: (1) “The trip exposed me to many different viewpoints, realities, life experiences, and histories. There is no clear-cut, black and white way of looking at the conflict;” and (2) “Some of the opinions and assumptions that I held were confirmed and verified, while others were challenged. I was faced with facts that were incredibly difficult to accept, but I also left with a higher sense of understanding and therefore a stronger ability to make sense.” However, evidence suggests that the sustainability of such identity transformations cannot be taken for granted. In his own research, Hamack found that identity transcendence had somewhat faded for his studied program participants on return to their original contexts.<sup>21</sup> Our research set out to investigate how much our program was affected by this phenomenon and, for those who retain a sense of identity transcendence, how it manifests in their lives years afterwards.

We designed a time-intensive qualitative online survey for all 108 program alumni. They were asked to complete written narrative responses to question prompts based on the three indicators of identity transcendence. Additionally, alumni could participate in an in-depth, semi-structured interview with one of the researchers. Given the complexity of what we were measuring, we opted to gather responses exhibiting depth and nuance rather than surface level measures facilitating a larger sample size. We received twelve completed surveys (average response length 622 words) and conducted seven in-depth interviews (average length 48 minutes) with contributions from all cohorts except the 2013–14 pilot program.<sup>22</sup> There was balanced faith and gender representation amongst respondents. Our survey yielded three Jewish, four Muslim, and five Christian responses with these equally distributed amongst gender (F=6, M=6). Our interviewees were similarly distributed with two Jewish, two Muslim, and three Christian respondents (F=4, M=3). In total, eleven different national identities were represented in our samples.

Assessing impact in this way brings with it positionality and ethical considerations as well as the risk of inherent selection bias. As educators

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21 Hamack, *Narrative and the Politics of Identity*, 310–320.

22 Retaining contact information and details of this and other cohorts was significantly affected by General Data Protection Regulation legislation and reduced our pool of prospective research participants. All student participation was informed and voluntary.

with continuing relationships with alumni, residual power dynamics and politeness norms risked limiting the honesty of feedback. In our data collection we took measures to invite and encourage critical reflections and anonymous methods for doing so. In addition, the time-intensive nature of our survey and interviews make it likely that our respondents were largely drawn from a sub-set of participants who retain positive affect for their experiences and alignment with the program ethos. Despite these limitations, we believe investigating the extent and manifestation of identity transcendence within this subset provides valuable insight into what can be achieved with the most engaged participants, who themselves attest to the transformative impact of the program.

**Extent and Retention of Identity Transcendence**

Our survey data suggest that our respondents exhibit and have retained a substantial sense of identity transcendence. In the hand-coding of prompt responses, all exhibited high or medium expressions of each indicator with none demonstrating low or negative associations.<sup>23</sup> Indicators would be categorized as low if there was no explicit mention of or negative association with relevant semantic content. Explicit reference to indicators would be categorized as high if it was repeated or exhibited similarity to exemplar definitional statements—for example, Indicator 3: “I can validate and recognize the pain the other group experiences and that should not negate my own group belonging” (Jewish female respondent). This has been summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1

	Indicator 1 Cognitive ability to understand identity needs of out-group			Indicator 2 Willingness to challenge in-group master narrative			Indicator 3 Integration of in-group and out-group narratives that doesn't threaten in-group membership		
	High	Medium	Low	High	Medium	Low	High	Medium	Low
All respondents (12 of 108 eligible)	8	4	-	6	6	-	9	3	-

23 A qualitative coding framework was developed to evaluate survey transcripts on the three indicators of identity transcendence using a method of content analysis developed by: Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology* (California: Sage, 2013).

When assessing prevalence of identity transcendence as a core impact indicator, we must be skeptical of the direct effect our program has had on participants. This could be affected by program selection criteria, with a potential skew for participants who already exhibit identity transcendence to some degree, and independent events and experiences since the program. As such, accompanying each identity transcendence indicator question, participants were directly asked to reflect and attribute relevant impact for this position to their program experience. The majority of participants attributed their identity transcendence either to a great or partial extent to the program (75% Indicator 1; 58% Indicator 2; 92% Indicator 3). The results of this are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

	Indicator 1			Indicator 2			Indicator 3		
	Program attribution			Program attribution			Program attribution		
	Great extent	Partly	Not at all	Great extent	Partly	Not at all	Great extent	Partly	Not at all
All respondents (12 of 108 eligible)	4	5	3	3	4	5	7	4	1

Our survey analysis indicates that our subset of alumni continue to exhibit a strong level of identity transcendence and that a substantial majority of them attribute this greatly or partially to their program experience. Even though we cannot make unfounded inferences about the wider alumni cohort, our ongoing engagement with our program network indicates similar positive impact through testimonies and correspondence. Even if this experience is not shared more broadly, the extent of this impact on 11% of the cohort is a highly positive finding.

**How Identity Transcendence is Cultivated and How It Is Manifesting**

Having established the existence and durability of identity transcendence within our program participants, we next sought to understand how this had been cultivated in the program, how it was now manifesting in their lives, and what this indicates about the program and wider implications for peace education more generally. In our thematic analysis of the narrative survey submissions and interview transcripts, we noticed three areas of convergence

amongst our respondents and two areas of divergence that are indicative of a program that gathers people from diverse identity experiences into an intense, time-limited shared experience.

*Convergence 1: Safe-Stretch Container*

The program invited students of widely diverse perspectives on a journey (literal and metaphorical) to explore what is perhaps the most divisive issue on university campuses today. For many participants, some encounters were not merely intellectually challenging but emotionally destabilizing, even frightening. The fundamental responsibility of the program leaders was, therefore, to enable the development of an ethos of trust and mutual support within the cohort that can allow for worldviews to be stretched, while supportively containing the reactions to difficult experiences and allowing them to be received positively. An example was given by one of our Jewish interviewees as he recounts the experience of visiting the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem:

Refugee camps are places that many Jews are made to fear because of the place they hold...as the forefront of resistance to Israeli occupation. That carries a lot for people who are brought up in Jewish/Zionist frameworks and who visit Israel in those frameworks. So it was a bit of an opening up of a black box of something I hadn't been exposed to before, been shielded from. And it was the perfect environment to do that in, in a group and an environment that I felt very safe in and then going to a place that at least psychologically I had been made to feel was not safe for me.

Many elements go into creating the safe-stretch container. The preparatory sessions establish boundaries and are designed to build relationship across the different groups. Crucially, they also allow participants to build their trust in the leadership so that they can enter the program with confidence that it has been thought out and will not place them in situations of unrealistic emotional labor or danger. Nonetheless, challenging and provocative encounters are integral to the experience, and regular sharing circles allow difficult experiences to be aired through the course of the trip. The informal sharing and support across difference within the cohort is perhaps most important. One Muslim participant remarked on the importance of the coach journeys: "It was in those rides I had really deep conversations with

everyone and properly got challenged on my views and the fact that we were able to connect with each other on a human level, which I think is the first step before you can consider changing your view.”

These coach journeys, with their sense of travelling together as a group in time that was unregulated by the program, instilled the feeling of “equal status” and “common goals” that Allport identified as two of his four conditions of effective encounter across difference.<sup>24</sup> For our participants, being together in the shared space of the coach reinforced their mutual bond as LSE students. One participant remarked, “I think the one thing that tied it all together is having something in common, there has to be something in common at the beginning, and all of us were LSE students, and we had that shared approach to learning, that brought us together in a way.” This was literally signified in the LSE logo-emblazoned hoodies which most participants wore throughout the trips. These were a visual manifestation of the joint identity creation that was taking place underpinning the formation of the safe-stretch container.

### *Convergence 2: Firm-Listening*

Identity transcendence involves building the confidence to challenge a conflict ethos by hearing, engaging with, and integrating the perspectives of the out-group. This is very countercultural on the topic of Israel-Palestine, where positions are entrenched and people frequently told that activism is a moral imperative. We invited participants to listen to the voices of those with whom they disagree in a way that perhaps recognizes the limits of their own agency but deepens their understanding as the basis for a new kind of engagement with this and other conflicts.

Central to that is the realization that understanding a position with which you disagree does not make you complicit in it or even any less opposed to it. A female Muslim student who acknowledged growing up in an antisemitic environment where Zionism was viewed as an unjustifiable evil, described the profound impact of the program on her approach to disagreement through the simple experience of listening: “I feel like I want to listen now. I want to listen more... Just in the way I see the world, it transformed it, in a lot of ways. The way I see people. Maybe before I used to demonize people or dehumanize people. Now I don't. The biggest evil I ever knew, I've been able to understand it.”

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<sup>24</sup> Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*.

Nonetheless, within the shrill campus debates about free speech, this listening is not without conditions, hence the term “firm listening.” Our participants felt that they benefited from being exposed to positions they found objectionable, but they in no way wanted to legitimize them or support the general promotion of these views in uncontrolled contexts. A female Armenian Christian remarked, “I think free speech is a fundamental right, and real reconciliation only comes after hard, messy and honest conversation. But, without the right format and common goals, perpetrators of social injustice can ignite violence and more injustice with their stories.”

Both these examples illustrate the sophisticated integration of narratives that takes place in identity transcendence. Alternative narratives are far from simply accepted. Rather, they are held in tension through a sensitive description of limits and norms. Luce Irigaray describes this as a “double listening. . . to the language in which we already dwell, but also to the saying that the other addresses to us.” The voices are not conflated but held in critical tension, “taking the risk to open one’s own world in order to move forward to meet with another world.”<sup>25</sup>

Building the courage and confidence to listen to an opinion that angers or disturbs us is central to the program. It seeks to replace certainty with a curiosity that grows as we learn to calm our emotional responses and pay attention to our opponents. As one Pentecostal Christian participant said, “we were there as a group of people who had a curiosity.” Another commented, “The program showed me that everyone has their story. All have their narrative and reasons behind their views and perspective.” But our firm-listeners were keen to avoid the relativization or equivalence of any opinion expressed.

### *Convergence 3: Strategic Empathy*

This firm listening is clearly not oriented towards conclusive resolution of disagreement. Empathy was built, but it did not equate to agreement and was often viewed within a wider framework as a necessary condition of achieving just goals. This we are calling *strategic empathy*, a crucial vehicle for identifying a conflict ethos and illustrative of our first indicator: cognitive ability to understand the identity needs of out-groups.

There was evidence of a genuine empathy that participants developed with people of opposing views, both within the group and among those they

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25 Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World* (London: Continuum, 2008), 11

met on the trip. A female Muslim described the Israeli occupation saying, “I can both firmly oppose it, and even take actions to undo this act, whilst placing myself in the head of the perpetrator to try to understand why this might have been done.”

There was, therefore, more pragmatism than sentimentality about this empathy. Interviewees described how this limited form of empathy has not led them to a place of agreement, but might be harnessed to foster peaceful relations. A male Muslim student with strong pro-Palestinian sympathies recognized this limited empathy as a tool for moving things forward: “I did understand the Israeli-Zionist perspective much more than I had before, not that I agreed with it, but I could understand where they were coming from.” Again, the needs of the out group are understood, but not condoned.

An Evangelical Christian participant identified the building of empathy as a project of building relationships rather than resolving disagreement. Asked in general terms about how we should engage with perpetrators of injustice, he responded:

Of course, often there is a clear perpetrator and a clear victim. But even in these situations it is worth asking, why did the perpetrator commit the crime? Is he simply evil? Or, while still guilty, were there forces outside of him that urged him into that action? Without these questions, without hearing all perspectives, our understanding of a situation will be limited, and therefore our ability to achieve justice hampered.

A female Muslim participant placed a similar emphasis on the necessity of understanding for sustainable justice: “It is counter-productive to ignore the perpetrators. Their justifications need to be effectively counteracted in order to ensure an enduring peace. Their fears need to be understood.”

#### *Divergence 1: Balanced or Normalizing?*

Depending on social group membership, some participants faced obstacles in maintaining an integration of out-group narratives without having their in-group status questioned. Representatives from some groups spoke about a phenomenon of resistance from within their communities to their insights and a perception that they were now somehow “compromised.” This was true in communities suspicious of interfaith initiatives more broadly:

I was surprised at some of the negative comments that I got from some of my evangelical colleagues at the time who effectively criticized me for engaging in an interfaith trip. They said that the very fact that the word *interfaith* was used was an admission that all faiths are equal and that there's no absolute truth. And here I am thinking that's not what it means and not what we were taught.

This was also experienced by those whose co-religionists felt they had been duped by more political agendas in the trip, whether they were perceived to be pro-Zionist or pro-Palestinian. A male Muslim reflected on his return, "People thought I did have that sort of opinion, that's much more pro-Israeli and much more empathetic towards Zionists than I really did...the suspicion was that it's Israeli propaganda."

Not only was the experience of returning to reality after the program heavily influenced by group identities and associated knowledge systems, participants' own personal reflections on the program framing and ethics also somewhat correlated with religious worldviews. Some students themselves looked back uncomfortably on elements of the trip that they now felt masked the reality of the conflict from view. A female Muslim student remarked, "There was so much that was normalized that should not have been normalized." Another Muslim participant remarked simply, "Academically and emotionally, I felt uneasy about the program." A female Christian student felt that it was easier to feel positive about both sides since the most extreme positions in the conflict were absent from the program. "It kind of makes you feel like there's no issue. If everyone you meet seems reasonable, where is it coming from?" Multiple Christian participants shared this reflection on the lack of extreme voices and even a wish for greater exposure to them so as to understand the conflict more fully.

In contrast, a male Jewish participant reflected "I don't think the program shied away from anything, which a lot of programs do...there are always more pieces of the puzzle to put together, but for a [short] trip it did a pretty good job and I'm not sure what I would take out to put something else in." Another female Jewish participant remarked "I thought it was a really good range [of voices that we met] we got kind of as radical as we could without endorsing violence on both sides...So I feel like all different perspectives were offered and I was quite pleased with it."

This perception divergence in the grain of religious worldviews raises an interesting dilemma for the program: how to maintain a safe-stretch container for all participants and their social identities without colluding

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with or reinforcing problematic perceptions through exposure and omission. Different groups have different perceptions about who they feel equipped to hear, who is beyond acceptable bounds, whose absence is deafening, and what all of that implies about the conveners' positionality.

There is no program that can satisfy these competing and irreconcilable perceptions. Nor should there be. Discomfort is one of the tools necessary to expand and develop worldviews as it loosens and challenges core foundational assumptions. Who bears the burden of discomfort and to what degree? The approach of this program is to hold divergent perceptions and build trust through transparency by directly encouraging participants to engage with and critique the program's master narrative to further develop the identity transcendence competency. Participants are encouraged to be firm in their listening and strategic in their empathy, with the organizers as much as with each other and their interlocutors. In particular, the program was annually adjusted in collaboration with alumni challenges to our approach.

This method appears to be supported by the fact that none of our students who expressed robust and critical challenges to the program regretted taking part. One student in fact strengthened in her interfaith commitments as a result: "It also helped to shape my own interfaith work afterwards. I wish perhaps I had been doing more interfaith work before going on the trip to understand the religious dimension of things, more than just the political...I had many lovely memories and made good friends as a result of the program."

Most recognized the constraints within which such a program operates (security, counter-terrorism law, limits of time, and feasibility) and felt it had been a formative experience, shaping how they view this conflict and life more broadly. Even those who had become more engaged in activism on one side since returning understood the balanced approach of the program and saw its benefit: "The Faith Centre understands what a high stakes issue it is and it wants to help people engage with it in a healthy way rather than taking any particular position on things."

### *Divergence 2: Optimism, Pessimism and Hope?*

A second aspect of post-trip divergence was the differing views participants developed of the possibilities for the region based on the same experiences. Common among participants was a sense that the intractable complexities they had encountered had taken away any optimism they may have had

about sustainable peace in the near future. This was particularly true among participants who had previously been shielded from the scale or strength of an opposing view. Having engaged with Palestinians for the first time, one male Jewish participant reflected that, “I had become much more pessimistic and anxious about the future.” A female Muslim participant felt that the experience “made me feel more hopeless about there being a meaningful way to bring about change.”

This kind of confrontation with reality is, of course, no bad thing. Recognizing the extent and embedded nature of a conflict ethos is an important antidote to hubristic peacebuilding attempts, arguably the most harmful form of intervention. It also can provide a reorientation for the site of meaningful action. If a student has an acute sense of realism about what can be achieved in the region and on what timescale, this fundamentally challenges many campus activism approaches that can reinforce appetites for simplistic and one-sided solutions. Three of our participants, one from each Abrahamic faith, who had adopted this more pessimistic outlook after the program, set up a student society on campus dedicated to engaging student activists from different campaigning positions to consider the unintended consequences of simplistic activism inspired by the repeated message they received from interlocutors in the region that “it doesn’t serve us, or you, to import our conflict onto your campus.”

However, if these “easy answers” were lost, most participants expressed the sense that they had encountered—in each other and in those whom they had met in the region—new modes of engagement that presented possibilities for a shared future. If conventional liberal peacebuilding methods were deemed to have failed, the centering of the interreligious encounter represented a new approach that did offer hope for the future which motivated participants themselves to new kinds of action beyond the partisan campus activism. A female Armenian Christian participant said of the program, it “makes me hopeful by reminding me that at our core, in our most innocent state, we want to find kinship not adversaries...I have so much hope and inspiration for action fostered by this program.”

In summary, we can say that the program was destructive of the easy answers and political naivety that participants previously encountered on campus. It cannot be said, therefore, that the majority came back optimistic about peace between Israel and Palestine. But what they do seem to have experienced is an expansion of imagination, such that they were no longer constrained to operate within the social imaginary of their in-group but could see potential for constructive interaction between different, even

competing, social imaginaries.<sup>26</sup> We might hope that graduates from the London School of Economics might one day use these insights to bring about peace in the Middle East. But more immediately, we have seen how this expansion of imagination has contributed (at least until October 2023) to the strengthening of cohesive pluralism on the LSE campus, and in the interfaith and peacebuilding work graduates of the program have gone on to engage in.

## Conclusion and Key Findings

Our research sought to understand the multifaceted expressions of identity transcendence that emerge from an intense encounter program in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict and to assess its durability. Our data confirm the persistence and development of identity transcendence over time in our alumni respondents, and that they themselves attribute this significantly to the program. Our research has also shown that, when provided with a carefully curated container, identity transcendence can flourish and manifest as firm listening and strategic empathy—behaviors that can be drawn upon as effective tools and competencies that further peaceful and productive dialogue outcomes. The more expansive imagination and understanding that results from identity transcendence seeded internal and interpersonal tensions. In particular, they experienced narrative-disrupting encounters that questioned foundational positions on program balance and prospects for peace. While our participants necessarily continue to navigate these in divergent ways, all demonstrated a commitment to, and capacity for, dialogical reasoning with an expanded nexus of positions and persons that informs their evolving understandings.

Finally, with interfaith practitioners particularly in mind, we offer the follow core insights that we learned through the running of this program and our subsequent research that may be of benefit to those attempting to undertake similar work within Higher Education or other community settings.

First, we are concerned that much interfaith work becomes unnecessarily limited by the setting of too strong an ideological agenda or narrow modes of engagement. Our modally plural approach allowed students to participate for a number of different reasons and from a range of perspectives, even more close-minded/sectarian ones. Some took part because they wanted

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26 Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004)

careers in peacemaking. Others may have seen it as their one opportunity to visit Al-Aqsa Mosque. Our refusal to impose expectations for specified outcomes when they returned meant that any initiatives that did happen arose organically. This built trust in us as leaders and reinforced our belief as a center that engagement in dialogue and peacebuilding does not need to come from a place of political neutrality or equivalence of positions. Clearly, some expectations need to be imposed, not least in terms of acceptable conduct. But we believe many interventions, particularly on Israel and Palestine, fail to engage as broadly and effectively as they should because of the implicit or explicit imposition of liberal, dialogical modes of engagement that fail to take into account the totality of participants' beliefs and commitments.

Second, we favor the pursuit of identity transcendence over the idea that participants should develop hybrid or multiple religious belonging. Crucial to the idea of identity transcendence is that you can develop empathy, even solidarity, with an out-group while not impairing your sense of belonging to an in-group. For example, it is perfectly possible to be “a good Jew” while building a strong identification with a Muslim perspective, and so on. This builds on the principles of the modally plural approach. To engage in dialogue and peacebuilding is not to enter a new category of belonging; it is to build a new set of skills, capacities, and insights that enhance your current identity and set of commitments. This idea needs to run through an interfaith intervention, particularly if it is to be an enduring transformation. Accusations from co-religionists that “you’ve sold out” need to be met with the confidence that your identity has expanded, not contracted, as you have listened and built empathy with opponents.

Third, in line with our understanding of “expanded imagination,” we believe that this kind of engagement with intractable religion-related conflict will not be oriented towards consensus-building around shared political aims. Perhaps all this kind of work can do is lay the foundation for a new political paradigm. Our research showed that it is possible to expand imagination from in-group to out-groups, and that this requires an expanded skillset. An attention to the conditions within which these skills of listening and empathy can be cultivated should be the focus of any interfaith intervention. Improving the quality of our listening is perhaps the only goal worth pursuing.

Our program had many particularities, not least the particularities of the LSE and the center out of which we ran this program. It may be impossible for another institution to replicate it. Indeed, the devastating events of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Israeli military response in Gaza,

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may make it impossible for us to replicate it in the future. Nonetheless, this research has demonstrated that we continue to learn from the experiences of these trips, and these insights resource the ongoing work of our center on the LSE campus and beyond. We share our findings in the hope they may also contribute to the wider academic and practical debates about effective engagement with intractable religion-related conflict. In an age where such conflicts appear to be spreading, there are few more important areas of inquiry.

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