Building a Peace Inventory in Bahrain
Facts and Challenges

25 February 2020
# Building a Peace Inventory in Bahrain

## Facts and Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a Peace Inventory</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges facing the development of a peace inventory in Bahrain</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1- Fear and Denial</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Discreet peace initiatives</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3- Difficulties in organizing a peace conference</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Background

Bahrain has been a platform for political and social turmoil since February 2011, and the people of Bahrain had invariably been influenced by democratic marches that broke out in Arab countries, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, in January 2011. The mass movement that had erupted in the Arab world during the period – described by media outlets as “the Arab Spring” – motivated tens of thousands to march into the streets and organize sit-ins for weeks at the Pearl roundabout in Al-Manama – the capital of Bahrain – in demand of a constitutional monarchy that would end the reign of the longest serving Prime Minister in the world – Sheikh Khalifa Al-Khalifa – who had been appointed as the Prime Minister of Bahrain more than 44 years ago.

The demands focused on granting the people of Bahrain the right to elect their own government, giving the parliament the legislative authority, and having elections based on the international principle of “one person, one vote”. Sunni citizens and leaders participated [in the strikes] to a certain extent, especially following the strike in the Pearl roundabout, however, most protesters were Shia citizens. On March 14, 2011, military forces from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates came into the country on a mission announced by the Peninsula Shield Force as being: the protection of vital sites in the tiny island (Al-Arabiya, 14-3-2011).

On March 15, 2011, the King of Bahrain Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa issued a royal decree in which he declared a state of emergency for three months (Bahrain News Agency). Following that, the government of Bahrain announced “cleansing” and demolishing the Pearl roundabout. Tens were killed, and thousands were arrested or fired from their jobs. The Pearl roundabout was not only demolished, it was also renamed as Al-Farouq Junction. The conflict in Bahrain has fragmented the national identity and built strong barriers between the Shia majority and the Sunni Minority, and between supporters of the government and the opposition. The conflict was, and continues to be, fueled by the unstable regional context, and the severe sectarian conflicts in Iraq and Yemen.
Context

It is necessary for peacemakers and conciliatory initiatives to clearly identify the stakeholders and influential elements in the peacemaking process before initiating peacebuilding projects. Lederach\(^3\) asserts that without defining the parties to the conflict and the outlining present peacebuilding initiatives it is difficult to create a realistic and applicable vision on how to support, implement, and sustain an infrastructure for long-term peace (Lederach, J.P. (1997)\(^4\)). Therefore, it is essential to do three things prior to launching any peacebuilding initiative, which are:

1. **Mapping all the parties directly and indirectly involved in the conflict at the local and international levels.**

2. **Mapping the local peace structure, the regional and international parties calling for peace, and whoever is – directly or indirectly – involved in peacebuilding activities, initiatives, and negotiations.**

3. **Documenting all local – governmental and non-governmental – peace initiatives in a detailed manner, to identify their current contributions to peacebuilding, while setting standards and benefiting from their successful tasks and activities, as well as learning from their mistakes and shortcomings to avoid repeating peacebuilding tactics and strategies that have failed in the past.**

---

\(^3\) John Paul Lederach is an American Professor of International Peacebuilding at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, and concurrently Distinguished Scholar at Eastern Mennonite University. He has written widely on conflict resolution and mediation. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Colorado. In 1994 he became the founding director for the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University where he was a professor.

\(^4\) Lederach - Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies pg 88
Lederach assures – based on his long experience in working with long-term conflicts – that the absence of a large-scale inventory for anyone who wants to encroach in any type of peacebuilding activity is a major shortage. He clarifies that this deficiency becomes increasingly complicated and problematic when the conflict reaches its peak and receives wide media coverage. In addition to that, he emphasizes that the absence of such an inventory can seriously jeopardize long-term efforts of building mid-range and mass-level relationships. Such efforts are also being ignored, overlooked, and undermined when seeking short-term results on higher levels (Lederach, J.P., 1997).

A detailed peace inventory is not limited to having a comprehensive overview of current peace initiatives, identities of peacemakers, and ideal activities that had proved their efficiency and influence on the environment, despite the fact that these do contribute to assisting peacemakers in evaluating and predicting how people would potentially respond to current and future peacebuilding initiatives and projects.

[5] Lederach- Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies pg 93
Simultaneously, social and political groups directly involved in and effected by conflicts tend to develop patterned responses to the conflict based on their experience. Conflicts that involve violence, fatal causalities, geographic displacement, torture, imprisonment, and economic losses have a higher likelihood of creating a negative pattern of responses towards existing peace initiatives, which leads to a state of distrust of any peace initiatives or projects in the future. Peacemakers, conflict resolution experts, reconciliation teams, international and local mediators, and NGOs involved in peacebuilding can utilize peace inventories in their efforts at building short-term and long-term strategies for the purpose of achieving sustainable peace.

Many peacemakers and mediators tend to underestimate the role of peace inventories in revealing current and prospective responses to peace initiatives, and abstain from recognizing them. Consequently, this enables peacebuilders to better understand the motives and dangers influencing decisions of politicians, social leaders, religious figures and non-governmental organizations in accepting and supporting future peace initiatives.
Challenges facing the development of a peace inventory in Bahrain

1 Fear and Denial

One of the major barriers facing peacebuilding initiatives – in general – and hindering the development of a peace inventory in Bahrain is the domination of extremist narratives explaining the current political and social situation in Bahrain. Many stakeholders in the conflict don’t view peace and a national reconciliation as necessary requirements in a tangible and serious manner. In this context, the government of Bahrain and pro-government parties tend to propagate an extreme state of denying the existence of a conflict in the first place. The government of Bahrain also claims, through official statements, state-controlled media, and pro-state NGOs that the country is in a stable position on all political, social, and economic levels. On the other hand, some state officials tend to adopt the narrative that Bahrain is facing security threats by a “violent insurgence” that had been effectively countered by security measures.

The government has responded to repeated international calls for dialogue and reconciliation – by the international community and United Nations – with rejection or negligence. These calls included the call of Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al-Hussain, and President of the United States Barrack Obama.

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon had expressed his hope, in his last phone call on January 16, 2016, that Bahrain would take concrete steps to de-escalate current tensions in the country.
The UN source added that: “He encouraged the Foreign Minister and the Government of Bahrain to take further measures in fostering peaceful political dialogue amongst all Bahrainis, and to fully comply with the Kingdom’s international human rights obligations, including the respect of freedom of expression, assembly, and other fundamental freedoms. Such measures would not only promote peace, security, reconciliation and prosperity in Bahrain, but would also contribute to defusing tensions in the region” (UN News Center, January 16, 2016)(6).

President of the United States Barrack Obama in his turn made an historical call for peace, dialogue, and reconciliation in Bahrain in his opening speech at the 2011 UN General Assembly in New York. Obama commented on the situation in Bahrain saying: “America is a close friend of Bahrain, and we will continue to call on the government and the main opposition bloc — Al-Wefaq — to pursue a meaningful dialogue that brings about peaceful change, in response to people’s demands”. He added: “We believe the patriotic bonds that bring Bahrainis together must be more powerful than the sectarian forces that could tear them apart” (The Guardian, May 19, 2011)(7).

On the other hand, some political and social opposition groups have propagated the narrative that the February 14 revolution of 2011 aimed at ending the dictatorship in Bahrain, and that any form of dialogue or peace negotiations with the regime would be a “betrayal” of the revolution. In this context, many political opposition parties based abroad – who call for overthrowing the regime – have expressed a strong rejection to dialogue initiatives with the government.

Meanwhile, the main opposition bloc (Al-Wefaq) – that had been dissolved in 2016 – together with other democratic opposition parties raised moderate demands calling for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy with an elected government that would replace the appointed prime minister and his cabinet, a fair electoral system based on the principle of “one person, one vote”, and an end to the systematic discrimination being carried out against the Shia Majority.

Al-Wefaq and other opposition parties had issued Al-Manama Document\(^{(8)}\) on October 12, 2011, which has been promoted by the opposition as a roadmap towards sustainable peace and reconciliation in Bahrain (Manama Document 2011). Accordingly, determining the parties capable of playing a role in peacebuilding within these groups has become increasingly difficult, due to the complexity of positions and views on dialogue.

As previously mentioned, the government and pro-government parties tend to strongly deny the presence of a crises and refuse to accept the concept of dialogue and peace negotiations with the opposition. Meanwhile, opposition parties that believe in overthrowing the regime regard peace negotiations as attempts to delegitimize the revolution, which makes Al-Wefaq and other democratic opposition groups fearful of the possibility that peacebuilding initiatives might weaken the status of the roadmap towards reconciliation announced in Al-Manama Document. Moreover, they strongly fear derailing attention from the actual causes of the conflict, and neglecting democratic solutions and reforms regarded by the opposition as a prerequisite to achieve sustainable peace.

The objective of developing a peace inventory is not to merely identify existing peace initiatives, one of the main goals behind peace inventories – as stated earlier – is rather to identify community and political leaders regarded by different communities as their representatives, and to identify who amongst them could potentially be in support of peace initiatives.

Based on the above, determining potential peacemakers within the government and the opposition is challenging, due the prevalence of denial within the government for the need of peace initiatives, and the domination of fear and distrust of any new peace initiatives by leading opposition and social groups.

\(^{(8)}\) Manama Document - http://alwefaq.net/cms/2011/10/12/5934/
2 Discreet peace initiatives

One the main barriers facing the development of a comprehensive peace inventory in Bahrain is the preference of peacemakers, political leaders, and social leaders involved in negotiating peace treaties to safeguard their initiatives by complete secrecy. This is driven by a belief that many actors from both sides of the conflict are capable of blocking peace talks, or discrediting, defaming and humiliating the parties involved in them.

Veto players from both sides of the conflict have been successful at cancelling and postponing peace negotiations ever since 2011. They have also succeeded at defaming announced peace initiatives and defaming individuals directly involved in peace activities. One example of this is the defamation of the Bahrain Foundation for Reconciliation and Civil Discourse and its founder – Suhail Al Qosaibi. Despite the fact that the foundation is strictly apolitical and was established with the endorsement of Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa in 2012, it has faced harsh criticism from several governmental figures and hardline pro-government parties.

On July 3, 2016, the foundation led an initiative for a joint prayer between Shias and Sunnis weeks after a suicide bomber exploded himself in a Shia mosque in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia\(^{(9)}\).
Some government officials attended the prayer; however, the initiative was severely criticized by hardline supporters of the government. On the other hand, many prominent opposition and Shia figures believed that the initiative was an attempt to dilute the actual causes behind the ongoing political conflict, and to frame the conflict within the wider context of Shia-Sunni tensions in Bahrain. Thus, the majority of peace initiative holders prefer to work discreetly with minimal publicity, due to a fear of being attacked by both sides of the conflict. Many peace initiatives and activities – including peace negotiations – have been conducted in complete secrecy to prevent the intervention of veto players attempting to block or derail such projects. This increases the difficulty of determining who is doing what in terms of peacebuilding activities and initiatives, which makes the task of developing a comprehensive peace inventory more difficult, given that many peacemakers prefer to continue working in complete secrecy.

3 Discreet peace initiatives

Since freedom of association in Bahrain is restricted and banned in many occasions, the majority of peace initiatives and activities are not coordinated by registered civil society organizations. One of the best possible tools for identifying peacebuilding activities and initiatives exercised elsewhere is to organize an open peace conference and invite all existing and potential organizations and figures involved in peace building activities and initiatives under one umbrella. However, it is not only difficult to identify those activities in Bahrain, it is also equally challenging to organize a peace conference in the country without the approval, endorsement, and supervision of the government.

Many independent figures fear that any peace conference held in Bahrain could be hijacked by the government and forced into accepting a governmental mandate and agenda. On the other hand, it is predicted that any peace conference held under the patronage and supervision of the government would be viewed by the opposition as a public-relations campaign to improve the international image of the government, and thus might probably be widely
boycotted by the opposition and the Shia community. Consequently, it would be substantially difficult to gather all activists involved in peace activities, initiatives, and negotiations in an open peace conference in Bahrain, for drawing a map on current activities, and for identifying the tasks being carried out by the different peace activists involved in the peacebuilding process in the country.
Bibliography


• Manama Document - http://alwefaq.net/cms/2011/10/12/5934/