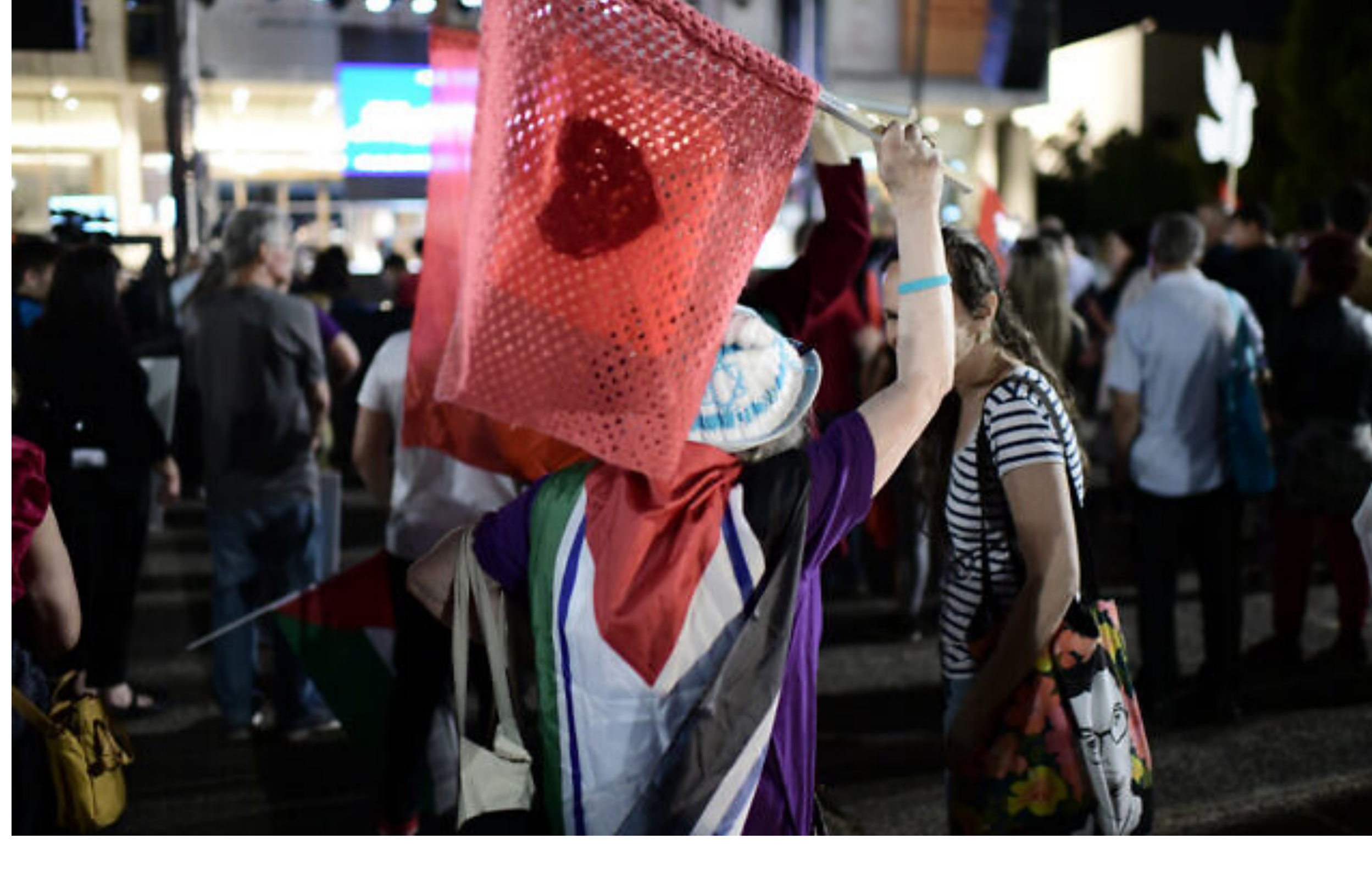


Mixed city rioting injects new urgency into peacebuilding push

Saying violence in Lod and elsewhere showed challenges of building shared society, organizers redouble efforts for sustainable long-term fund

By JAKE EPSTEIN
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Israelis and Arabs demonstrate in support of coexistence in Tel Aviv on June 5, 2021. (Tomer Neuberger/Flash90)

Intracommunal violence that rocked Israeli cities last month has injected a new sense of urgency into organizations working to foster both Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts and Jewish-Arab coexistence, after horrific displays of fighting threw the veil off tensions long simmering just beneath the surface.

The societal rifts are not necessarily new, and activists have long sought to tamp down tensions between Jewish and Arab Israelis on the one hand, and Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, on the other. One program that aims to do so is [Tech2Peace](#), an initiative that combines technology and entrepreneurial training with conflict resolution seminars to build collaborative relationships.

“The violence told the rest of the world what we’ve been aware of, about how urgent this work is,” said Meredith Rothbart, co-founder and CEO of [Amal-Tikva](#), an organization that brings together field experts, organizations, philanthropists, and activists to support Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding.

While many of the efforts fall under the rubric of Israeli-Palestinian peace building, several of the groups involved in the field attempt to boost dialogue between Jewish and Arab Israelis, through shared society collaborative programs.

Some initiatives leverage technology to foster connections, while others focus on dialogue. Some exist solely within Israel, while others take shape across the country’s borders.

All of those efforts appeared to go up in smoke in May, as mixed cities across Israel became hotspots of local mob activity, when Jewish and Arab neighbors brutally clashed with each other — looting businesses, vandalizing homes, assaulting civilians, and setting property ablaze.



Israeli police seen on the streets of the central Israeli city of Lod during rioting in the city on May 12, 2021. (Yossi Aloni/Flash90)

“In terms of the violence between citizens — between civilians — that’s something that wrenched the hearts of veteran peacebuilders, and they thought to themselves, ‘Was all of our work fruitless?’” said Amitai Abouzaglo, the director of international engagement at Amal-Tikva. “So it’s a question of what you do with that despair, what you do with that disappointment.”

He said that by replacing violent political actions with empathy and historical awareness, Israelis and Palestinians would make it possible to create a reality rooted in coexistence.

“The wisdom of this moment is that peacebuilding is a long-term investment, and it’s not a long-term investment that can wait long term,” Abouzaglo said. “It’s a long-term investment that must be made every single day.”

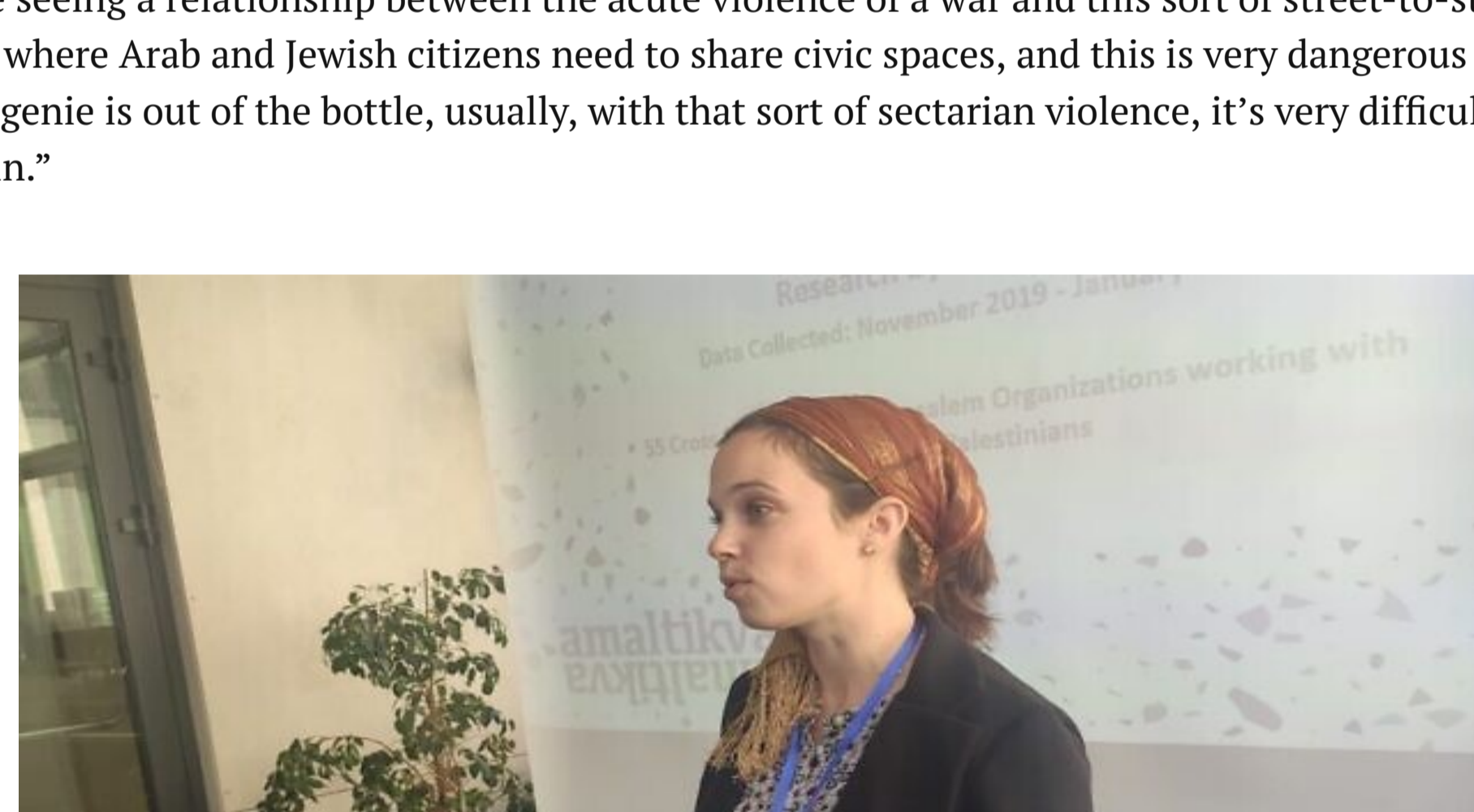


Illustrative: Israeli Jews and Palestinians play soccer, during a weekly meeting organized by Ali Abu Awwad, a Palestinian from the West Bank, on July 22, 2015. (Nati Shohat/Flash90)

Though there was always a sense of urgency when it came to bolstering Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding and shared society efforts, last month’s violence brought it into much sharper focus, said John Lyndon, the executive director of the Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP), a network of some 150 peacebuilding nonprofits and shared society groups working with Israelis and Palestinians.

“What was new was the sort of outbreak of intercommunal violence in mixed cities inside Israel, in lockstep with the escalation taking place in the skies,” Lyndon said, referring to Hamas rocket attacks and Israeli airstrikes during 11 days of intense fighting in and around Gaza.

“We were seeing a relationship between the acute violence of a war and this sort of street-to-street violence in places where Arab and Jewish citizens need to share civic spaces, and this is very dangerous because, once the genie is out of the bottle, usually, with that sort of sectarian violence, it’s very difficult to put it back again.”



Meredith Rothbart, co-founder and CEO of Amal-Tikva (Courtesy)

One silver lining to the violence, Rothbart acknowledged, was the increased attention on groups trying to build a better society and combat violence through cooperation and coexistence. She expressed hopes that the interest could be leveraged into getting more people involved.

“If anything,” she said, “the fact that people are more aware at this point may, hopefully, help make peacebuilding more of a priority.”

Scaling up

After the street violence broke out, Rothbart said Amal-Tikva immediately assessed the peacebuilding field’s needs and what could be done to offer support to individuals doing peace work.

“We took a couple of days in the middle of the war just as a team to reevaluate if our strategy is correct and if we need to have an emergency response,” Rothbart said. “We came out with the same strategy, that what we’re doing is grounded and rooted and is the right direction... Just because the situation got more violent, doesn’t mean the situation changed — it was just more visible.”

A 2020 report by Amal-Tikva highlighted severe underfunding among coexistence and peacebuilding groups, limited professional growth, and development opportunities across the sector.

To address some of these funding shortfalls, the US Congress in December passed the Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act, which will see the US government invest \$250 million to fund peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives between Israelis and Palestinians, and also Jews and Arabs within Israel, over a five-year period.



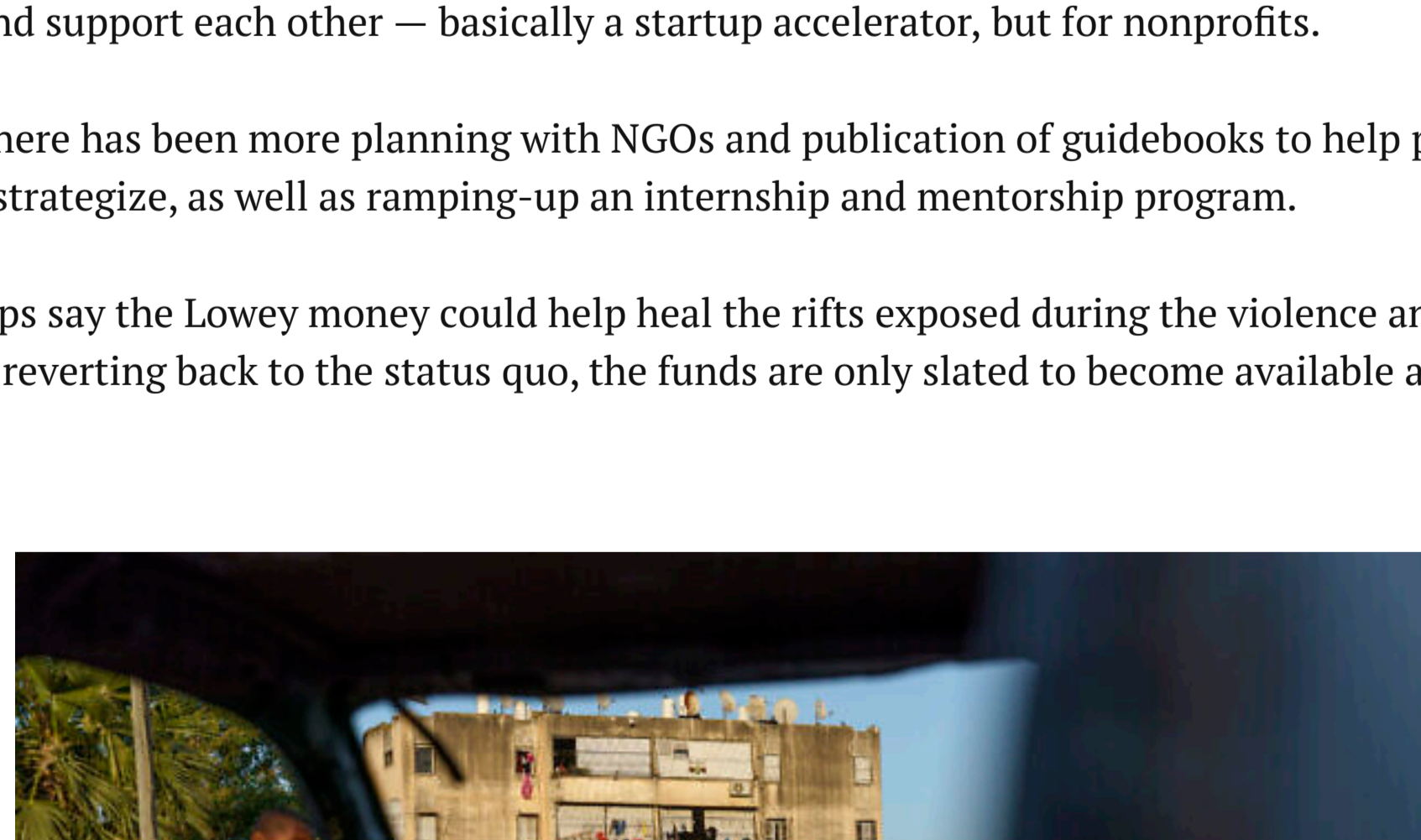
Then-Rep. Nita Lowey in the Capitol, October 16, 2019. (Tom Williams/CQ-Roll Call, Inc via Getty Images via JTA)

Amal-Tikva had been helping prepare the peacebuilding field, and organizations like Tech2Peace, for the inbound Lowey Fund money by helping organizations professionalize, scale up and strengthen their capacity. And last month’s violence served as a stark reminder of how critical it is to boost the capacity of the field.

Rothbart said that, in preparation for organizations to receive the Lowey funding, Amal-Tikva just started a new cohort for its Fieldbuilding 360 program, an initiative that brings together peacebuilding organizations to strategize and support each other — basically a startup accelerator, but for nonprofits.

She said that there has been more planning with NGOs and publication of guidebooks to help peacebuilding organizations strategize, as well as ramping-up an internship and mentorship program.

But while groups say the Lowey money could help heal the rifts exposed during the violence and keep the situation from reverting back to the status quo, the funds are only slated to become available at the end of 2021.

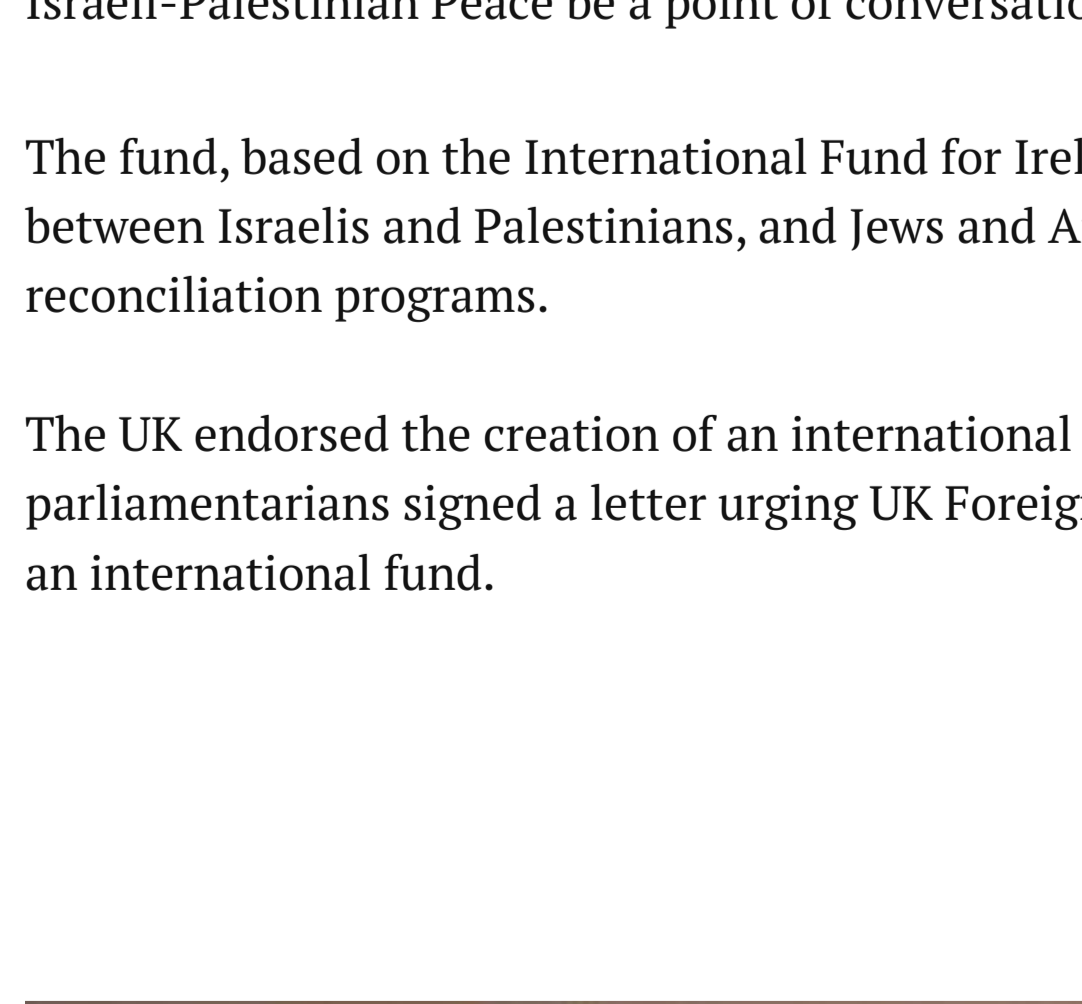


A car belonging to an Arab family sits torched from recent clashes between Arabs, police and Jews outside an apartment building where both Arab and Jewish families live in the Ramat Eshkol neighborhood in the mixed Arab-Jewish town of Lod, central Israel, May 26, 2021. (AP/David Goldman)

With a heightened urgency, ALLMEP, which led lobbying for the creation of the Lowey Fund, and its body of over 150 peacebuilding NGOs, requested earlier this month that the topic of an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace be a point of conversation at the G7 Summit in the UK in mid June.

The fund, based on the International Fund for Ireland, would be designed to break down trust barriers between Israelis and Palestinians, and Jews and Arabs within Israel, through civic engagement and reconciliation programs.

The UK endorsed the creation of an international fund two years ago. Recently, 65 cross-party parliamentarians signed a letter urging UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab to work with the US to establish an international fund.



John Lyndon, executive director of the Alliance for Middle East Peace (Courtesy ALLMEP)

Lyndon noted that a shared international fund would have benefits over one established by an individual donor country, allowing for more efficient disbursements of resources and a centralized way to evaluate and monitor progress.

“The critical truth of this legislation is that it’s not developmental aid, it’s a policy tool,” Lyndon said. “I think people have to think of it that way, rather than a lot of what development agencies do, which is excellent elsewhere, this is actually in service of policy goals, and if implemented with that sort of multinational approach, it can actually undergird an international strategy around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, something we’ve been missing for a very long time.”

A multilateral approach to a sustained, long-term funding effort from American allies around the world could answer the urgency call and unlock more resources sooner, he argued, as well as help rally the globe around the issue of Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts.