

A close-up, textured view of the Israeli flag, showing the white field with the blue Star of David and the blue, white, green, and red stripes. The fabric has a visible weave pattern.

ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO DIALOGUES About Israel-Palestine

A FREE RESOURCE FROM



*Essential Guide to Dialogues
About Israel-Palestine*

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Introduction to the Guide

THIS GUIDE OFFERS ADVICE, general principles, and instructions to help you facilitate a constructive conversation about Israel-Palestine in multiple contexts.

In an ideal version of dialogues about Israel-Palestine—whether focusing on a specific event or discussing it more generally—the participants would meet in groups of five to eight people with a trained facilitator for a highly structured conversation that promotes careful listening, reflection, and authentic connections.

This guide is written for anyone leading a hard conversation about the topic—such as dialogue facilitators, college or secondary educators, and faith leaders. Use this guide to create communication agreements, intervene when necessary, and ask carefully designed prompts that invite people to speak about the complexities and dilemmas as well as their convictions and values. We encourage you to adapt this guide as needed for your unique context.

Dialogue has the most impact when conducted among members of an existing group, team, or community, rather than a group of strangers. This might be congregants in a synagogue, mosque, or church, students on a campus, or colleagues in an organization. You can use the dialogues outlined here for one-time events, as part of a series of dialogues over weeks or months, for small gatherings, and for programs that involve large numbers of people broken into multiple groups.

For highly polarized situations, a trained facilitator may be necessary. Essential Partners (EP) offers [regular workshops](#) to train facilitators, acquire new tools, practice skills, and learn the elements of dialogue design. There may also be times when an external facilitator is needed. To that end, we offer direct facilitation services as well as more in-depth, longer-term collaborations.

However, many people will not require training to use this guide—just comfort and skill in working with groups, an ability to support participants with diverse perspectives, and a willingness to hold space during difficult moments. Whether you have never done anything like this or you are an experienced facilitator, we hope you find what you need here.

If you do use this guide, we have two requests. First, please [share insights from your experience](#) with us so we can improve future editions. Second, please cite Essential Partners and this document appropriately, not only as an act of respect but also to ensure that people who read any materials you distribute will know how to contact us with questions or feedback.

Finally, remember that this work is messy and human. You and others will make missteps along the way. Some comments may be hard to hear. People will have different levels of understanding, varied experiences, and identities that inform their perspectives.

Aim to create a space of openness, hope, and care. Whatever other people may bring, invite them to meet you in that space.

A NOTE ON OUR TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this guide, for the sake of consistency and clarity, we follow news style guides in referring to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the geographic area as Israel-Palestine. However, we encourage anyone leading conversations to reflect on this usage and to adapt the terminology as necessary in order to create the conditions for effective dialogue in your context.

WHAT WE MEAN BY DIALOGUE

Founded in 1989, Essential Partners (known formerly as the Public Conversations Project) helps people build relationships across differences to address their communities' most pressing challenges. We give people the means to strengthen cohesion, deepen belonging, and renew hope wherever they live, work, worship, and learn together.

The measurable outcomes of EP's Reflective Structured Dialogue framework—trust; understanding; belonging; influence; and social cohesion across differences of identities, perspectives, and values—effectively disrupt the cycle of polarization around partisan politics, divisive topics, or local issues and make it possible for people to move forward together more effectively.

To some, dialogue is a way of talking. To us, dialogue is a way of living together with our differences, leaning into our curiosity, lifting up individual experiences, and affirming our shared humanity. It's the everyday practice of democracy.

HOW IS DIALOGUE DIFFERENT FROM DEBATE?

► Free Resource: [Distinguishing Debate from Dialogue](#)

Debate, advocacy, and protest are all valid and important tools in a democracy. In long-standing conflicts, however—especially those that involve identity, trauma, or a sense of threat—debate particularly can lead to polarization or us-versus-them dynamics.

Our Distinguishing Dialogue From Debate resource provides a visual comparison between the characteristics of debate and the characteristics of dialogue, which is the kind of engagement we aim to promote through this guide. Dialogue fosters understanding, curiosity, and connection, even across deep divides.

The recommendations in this guide assume that something is going on that makes it hard or impossible for people to talk about this issue (for example, one of these [common patterns of polarized situations](#)). Our approach is designed to stop those patterns and make a new, healthier, less toxic conversation possible.

Creating a Space for Dialogue

Our dialogue framework, Reflective Structured Dialogue, is designed to shift dysfunctional cycles of communication and relationships. These cycles can arise as a result of human tendencies or as a result of larger influences, such as media narratives, periods of increased violence and trauma, or divisive political campaigns. To interrupt these cycles, you need to create an intentional space, one that feels different when people enter into it.

Participants may report that dialogue feels unnatural. That's because it is. To have a different conversation about a contentious issue, we have to step away from our typical, natural, ingrained habits of conversation.

Intentional choices and shared communication agreements are powerful tools to help people navigate away from old patterns and develop new capacities within the space of dialogue.

COMMUNICATION AGREEMENTS

Communication agreements are general rules for the way people will interact during the dialogue. You might propose a set of agreements like the one below, or you might co-create them with your participants—particularly if you'll be together multiple times over an extended period, as in a classroom setting.

Our [Moments of Dissent](#) exercise can help you co-create agreements. If you can't do that, you might invite participants to adjust or add to the basic set of agreements listed below.

In either case, it is crucial that the participants all actively commit to these agreements. In Reflective Structured Dialogue, agreements should be as observable and objective as possible, to make it easier and more legitimate for a facilitator to step in.

A BASIC SET OF PROPOSED AGREEMENTS

When conflicts are polarized, agreements like the ones listed below discourage old ritualized patterns of communication. They also create an environment in which participants can have intentional and personal exchanges of perspectives, experiences, hopes, and fears.

- We will speak only for ourselves and allow others to speak only for themselves. We will not speak for others who are not in the room or expect ourselves or others to represent, defend, or explain an entire group.
- We will refrain from criticizing the views of other participants and from trying to persuade them to change their views.
- We will refer to others and their perspectives as they request to be referred to.
- We will check out our assumptions by asking questions.

- We will participate within the time frames requested by the facilitator—and share airtime during less structured time frames.
- We will not interrupt except to indicate that we cannot hear a speaker.
- We will “pass” or “pass for now” if we are not ready or willing to respond.
- Regarding confidentiality: When we discuss our experience here with people outside the group, we will not attach names or other identifying information to particular comments unless we have permission to do so.
- We will resist the urge to continue our discussion with one another via email or social media between dialogue sessions since the distance created by screens can contribute to polarized dynamics.

When you plan a dialogue, you need to determine whether there is a good fit between this set of agreements and the circumstances in which you are working. We always recommend doing this with—rather than for—the people who will be participating.

If these agreements aren't a good fit, you may want to create new agreements with your group to meet their needs (see the exercise linked above for how to do that). Either way, we invite you to adjust the agreements as needed to help people feel ownership and agency in the dialogue itself.

A NOTE REGARDING CONFIDENTIALITY

Different circumstances warrant different approaches to confidentiality. In single-session groups in which many people are strangers to each other, a lighter confidentiality agreement may suffice, such as: “If asked to keep something confidential, we will honor that request.”

In groups whose members belong to the same community, we suggest a stronger confidentiality agreement at the outset. It can be loosened at the end of the dialogue if there is full agreement to do so. In a highly polarized, high-stakes situation, participants may even want the fact of their participation in the dialogue to be held in strictest confidence.

A confidentiality agreement is only as strong as participants' trust that their fellow participants will abide by the agreement after the dialogue ends. If participants require confidentiality but they don't trust their fellow participants to keep it, you might re-think your plan (e.g., start with affinity groups or lead trust-building dialogues on less contentious topics). This takes time.

LOGISTICS (HOW, WHERE, WHAT)

Convening is an art. By considering and addressing the needs of the participants in the space—whether virtually or in-person—you help create a context for dialogue that feels welcoming to each of them. Here are some common considerations when convening a dialogue.

- Does this location feel equally welcoming or neutral to all the participants? (For example, we generally do not recommend holding an interfaith gathering at one faith institution like a church, synagogue, or mosque, even if it's free space.)
- Do I have accommodations for people who share that they have visual and auditory impairments, mobility limitations, and other needs?
- Are there convenient restrooms, refreshments, and opportunities for breaks?
- Have all dietary needs and restrictions been accounted for? (Particularly for these conversations, it may be important to ensure that you have delicious kosher and/or halal options available.)
- Can I offer participants technical assistance during virtual dialogues?
- What if someone arrives late? What if they need to leave early?

These are not incidental considerations. You may be wrapped up in preparing the design of the dialogue and readying yourself as the facilitator, but the human experience of being welcomed into a space—physical or virtual—can make all the difference. For more on intentional convening, we recommend Priya Parker's book *The Art of Gathering*.

Structures for Reflection, Speaking & Listening

Structures for reflecting, speaking, and listening can interrupt old patterns and make space for new ways of being together. In our approach, Reflective Structured Dialogue, conversation structures often include the sequence of sections of the conversation and the time allotted to each section. A period of time when only one person may speak is a structure. A set time for questions is a structure. The use of regular silent reflection opportunities is a structure. A defined time for a “less structured conversation” is also a structure.

Over the years we have learned to favor the use of two powerful structures for difficult dialogues: the go-round and the intentional pause.

THE GO-ROUND

In a go-round, one person speaks at a time for an allotted length of time. The certainty that each person will have an opportunity to speak helps all the participants listen more deeply. It also creates a sense of fairness among the speakers. In other conversations, some participants might typically feel authorized to speak for more time, or speak many times, without sharing the space. Others might feel less authority to speak up and, as a result, might not have their voices and perspectives heard. We recommend structuring your dialogue with a few go-rounds, each of which includes these steps:

- The facilitator reads a prompt or question aloud, and they indicate how much time each person will have to respond to the prompt (we have some sample questions at the end of this guide)
- The facilitator invites a short pause (30 seconds to 2 minutes) before the first person responds, to allow participants to collect their thoughts or take notes
- The facilitator repeats the prompt or question
- The facilitator identifies and invites a first speaker
- Each participant is given an allotted time to speak and an opportunity to pass rather than speak if they prefer not to respond or aren't ready to respond yet (the facilitator uses a timer to ensure equality of timing)
- After each person is done speaking, the group takes a single-breath pause
- Then the next person is given an opportunity to talk, and so on around the circle
- Anyone who passes instead of speaking during the go-round will be given a chance to speak when all the others have spoken

Consider varying the speaker order from one prompt to the next, so the same person doesn't carry the burden of speaking first (or last) each time.

THE INTENTIONAL PAUSE

Fresh and constructive conversation often requires thoughtful pauses—which typically last from 30 seconds to 2 minutes—but the value of the silent pause is often under-appreciated by people who design and facilitate dialogues on divisive issues.

A pause can serve many functions. It encourages reflection. It encourages people to make their own distinctive, thoughtful contributions rather than reacting to what others have said. Pauses promote better listening. Most listeners can concentrate better when they know there will be a pause during which they can gather their thoughts.

We ask participants to pause between speakers during a go-round and again in between each go-round. Pauses between the speakers let everyone take in and reflect on what they just heard. Pauses between go-rounds give participants a chance to think about what they've heard and write down questions they have to ask each other later.

Pauses can also offer intentional opportunities to check in about participant safety and well-being. If you notice body language changing, or tempers flaring, pauses can provide an opportunity for both participants and facilitators to take a breath and transparently think together about their next steps.

REFLECT, WRITE, RESPOND

For situations where the differences in perspective are particularly sharp or the topic has a highly personal impact on community members, it can be enormously helpful to give participants a structure that supports them as they process their first, often most intense emotional responses to a dialogue prompt. One way to do that is through the reflect, write, respond model:

- Read the question aloud. Pause for two breaths. Read it a second time. Share the question in writing on a whiteboard, in the chat, or in a handout
- Use the intentional pause to give your participants a moment to reflect on the question. Encourage them to write down notes about what they are feeling and want to share when it's their turn to respond
- Begin your go-round
- Deploy the reflect, write, respond structure as often as needed. In high-intensity dialogues, you may consider using it between each speaker of a go-round as well

Preparing for Dialogue

Eighty percent of the success of a dialogue is a result of preparation. The design of the dialogue itself, the way people are invited to participate, the preparation of participants before they arrive, the preparation you do as a facilitator or convener—this is where the real work of disrupting polarized cycles happens.

The new conversations, insights, reflections, and relationships that materialize during the dialogue itself are all largely a product of preparation.

PURPOSE IS YOUR GUIDE

Many conversations go off the rails because the participants don't share a common purpose. At the end of this guide, we offer a few sets of conversation purposes along with discussion prompts for each. All of them serve the goal of mutual understanding, which can shift old dynamics of conflict and polarization and invite richer relationships and authentic connections.

Be clear and up-front about the purpose of the dialogue, so that people can opt in from the beginning. Some people may need to join a dialogue for reflection and support among people with similar perspectives or identities (for example: a group of Muslim people or Jewish people speaking about how to support each other amidst a rise of Islamophobia or anti-Semitism, respectively). Some people may be interested in and prepared for a conversation that wrestles with the complexities of the situation and how to address it.

Not every person will be able to commit to every purpose of a dialogue right now, for many reasons. That's understandable. We never want to force people into a conversation that they are not ready to have yet.

We often encourage people who opt out of dialogue to get involved in the specific issue they care about in other ways (such as advocacy work, restorative justice work, mental health care, or fundraising). Dialogue is a powerful tool to build community and address divisions, but it is not the only option.

PREPARING PARTICIPANTS FOR DIALOGUE

Dialogue can be a chance for participants to reflect on the identities and values they hold, to explore their complexity and that of others, and to remember that we're all more than who we're born to, what religion we follow, or how we define our nationality.

However, when the stakes are high, or when there are experiences of trauma in the group, dialogue comes with a risk. Done poorly, dialogue can be damaging or re-traumatizing. It can even reinforce the very dynamics we work to disrupt. Participant preparation is key to creating a space where people can feel a sense of agency and intentionality with how they bring their identities, values, and emotions to the group.

There are several ways to bring participants into the planning of a conversation, to ensure alignment between your hopes and the participants' hopes, and to help people prepare themselves for a new conversation within the context of this difficult topic. Preparation ensures that the participants have what they need—both literally and metaphorically. Some common steps include:

- **Surveys:** with questions to identify specific triggers, language to avoid, and dietary and accessibility needs, or to provide a space for participants to reflect on how they want to show up for the conversation.
- **One-on-One Interviews:** to build a foundation of trust and rapport with the facilitator and to help the participants ground themselves in the experience of feeling deeply heard.
- **Reflective Exercises:** to map participants' own experiences, values, and identities, and/or to help them identify the internal resources they will need (see our free exercises [Step Inside This House](#) and [My Political Autobiography](#)).
- **Focus Group or Affinity Group Dialogues:** in highly polarized situations with low levels of trust between groups, these can help participants share things they may not share with the “other side” while also making space for surprising differences—and surprising commonalities—within their own “side,” before bringing groups together.
- **Co-creating Agreements:** with a planning team or with participants themselves through an exercise like [Moments of Dissent](#).

PREPARING TO FACILITATE

Ours is a de-centered facilitation model. You do not need to be an expert, nor do you need to direct the conversation. Your role as the facilitator is to support the participants in achieving their purpose and to guide them through the structure of the conversation.

This will probably require little intervention on your part, particularly if you enter the room with a shared purpose, clear communication agreements, and a meeting design that reflects the purpose and the specific needs of the group.

Because your role as the facilitator will be to serve the participants, it may be challenging to stay grounded when the topic is emotionally charged. This is especially true if you have strong feelings or a vested stake or interest in the issue you're facilitating.

The goal for you as the facilitator, whatever your own identities or perspectives, is to still be able to help every person in the group be heard and to help them all hear one another with legitimacy. To do that requires thoughtful preparation and reflection—but it does not mean you have to be “neutral” or to omit important parts of yourself.

First, you may find it helpful to discuss your feelings and viewpoints about Israel-Palestine with friends, family, or associates. This may lessen any frustration you feel when playing a role that requires you to hold back from contributing your ideas or perspectives to the conversation.

Second, think about your personality, as well as your strengths and weaknesses as a facilitator. Identify strategies that enable you to rely on your strengths and minimize your weaknesses. For example:

- If you know that you're shy about intervening, role-play stepping in to bring folks back to the agreements with someone you trust who can give you candid feedback. We give some tips on intervening later in this guide.
- If you know that particular personal traits or viewpoints could “push your buttons,” prepare yourself to find something you appreciate—or at least understand—in someone who has those traits or viewpoints.
- If you struggle with your confidence or sense of self as a facilitator, take some time to reflect beforehand on times in the past when you've either listened to a friend, colleague, student, or family member in a way you were proud of—or when you've stepped into a challenge in the past and succeeded. Think about what you did or didn't do then to help the situation go the way it did. Think about what you were able to find within yourself to access the strength you needed. Then ask yourself: how can I bring that into this conversation?

Finally, if you have access to other facilitators, they might help you prepare emotionally and develop skills. You could even plan to co-facilitate. You can discuss concerns and brainstorm ways to handle common challenges and your own personal “nightmare” scenario. You can role-play ways of responding to various challenges.

TIPS FOR FACILITATING CONVERSATIONS RELATED TO THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

The following tips have been adapted with permission from a resource by our colleagues at the [Sustained Dialogue Institute](#). They will be helpful whether you are preparing to facilitate conversations related to Israel-Palestine, Gaza, the West Bank, or specific related conflicts (as of the writing of this guide, the Israel-Hamas war and humanitarian crisis in Gaza are top of mind).

Please note that in each of these tips, you can always bring the conversation back on track by returning to the purpose and agreements that the group has agreed to hold.

- **It may be tempting for participants to revert to the same old debates about dates, locations, missile strikes, and troop movements.** If your group begins debating the definition of terms, dates, locations, or accountability for a specific incident, reroute them back to a prompt that elicits personal experiences and reflections of their values. Remember that everyone is an expert in their own experience. For example, participant A identifies as Palestinian. Participant B disputes that, saying the territory A is from is not technically part of Palestine. If you do not intervene at that point, the group may fall into a debate about “what/where is Palestine” and lose track of the purpose of the dialogue. An appropriate intervention might invite participant A to share: “What does it mean for you to be Palestinian?” or “How does being Palestinian make you feel?” or “How does

your Palestinian identity influence your daily life?” You might also refer back to an agreement to speak for yourself or check your assumptions.

- **A participant’s religious or ethnic identity does not determine their beliefs about Israel-Palestine.** Be careful not to make assumptions or make decisions (like purpose, questions, or group participants) based on assumptions. Instead, use the preparation steps to fill any gaps or answer any questions in order to design or customize your dialogue.
- **Be careful not to conflate distinct identities.** A Palestinian, an Arab, and a Muslim are all different categories. Palestinians are people who connect their heritage to the geographic region of Palestine. Arab people are members of an international racial or ethnic community with roots in the Arabian peninsula and/or the Arabic language. A Muslim identifies with one of the faith traditions of Islam. While someone can be an Arab Palestinian Muslim, there are also non-Arab Palestinians, Arab Christians, and non-Arab Muslims. Similarly, a Jewish person and an Israeli person are not the same. There are many Israelis who are not Jewish; there are a great number of Muslim and Christian Israelis. There are Arab Israelis as well as Israelis with European heritage. If you mean to speak about Jewish people, use the word “Jewish.” If you mean to speak about Jewish Israelis, use the words “Israeli Jews.” In addition, many people live in Israel and have Israeli passports but consider themselves Palestinian. Make sure to notice how participants in a dialogue self-identify—and write down how they self-identify if needed—to avoid missteps. Remember that each person gets to self-define with each of these terms—it is not up to you to define any terms for them.
- **Try to avoid having one person in a group with a different perspective or identity from the majority of participants.** When an individual has a different perspective or identity from the rest of the group, it can make the person feel particularly vulnerable, even unsafe. This can be a challenging dynamic. If other participants ask an isolated person too many questions, that person may feel pushed to play spokesperson. That person may take up more space in an attempt to equalize the imbalance. The greatest vulnerability for the group is that polarization will emerge between the majority and the isolated person. In that case, they will all lose the opportunity that dialogue offers to learn about each other’s perspectives and to reflect on their own views. To avoid this dynamic, explore in your preparation how each individual feels about the situation. Can anything be done to encourage a more balanced discussion? You can also raise your concern transparently with the full group, after checking in with the isolated person. We recommend trying to make sure that no one person feels as though they are the “only one,” whatever that means for your conversation.
- **Familiarize yourself with key dates, places, and groups that people reference when they discuss Israel-Palestine.** Some of those are 1948 (Israel declares independence; the Naqba/Catastrophe; war begins), 1967 (called either the “Six-Day War” or “the Naqsa/Setback”), 1973 (the “Yom Kippur War”), 1987 (First Intifada), 2000 (Second Intifada), and 2005 (Israeli disengagement from

Gaza). There are a lot of groups with power in Israel-Palestine. Some of them in Israel are the Knesset (parliament) and the Israeli Defense Force (army). Some of them in Palestine are the Palestinian Authority, Fatah/PLO, and Hamas. Finally, there are places that people reference when they discuss Israel-Palestine, such as the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, Jerusalem (Old Jerusalem, Temple Mount, the Dome of the Rock), and Jaffa. If people refer to a date, group, or place without explaining the meaning, invite them to offer context by asking, “How has that place/date impacted your life or perspective?”

- **Specific words can be complicated and loaded.** We encourage facilitators to repeat the language a participant uses, even if it’s not a word that you agree with or have heard from others. You may want to connect this to the agreement to refer to people how they would like to be referred to. For example, different groups call the boundary between Israel and Palestine “the fence,” “the wall,” or “the apartheid wall.” It will likely not work for you to just pick one of these terms and ask the entire group to use it. Respecting the choices each participant makes with their language, and encouraging other participants to respect those choices, even if they don’t agree, is a powerful counter-cultural decision that can change the dynamics of the conversation.
- **Remember that Israel-Palestine is an intersectional topic.** It relates to religion, race, ethnicity, geography, refugee and immigration status, language, socio-economic status, veteran status, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, gender, access to education, and more. What makes one participant passionate might not affect another. Invite participants to check out their assumptions with clarifying questions so that everyone can understand why others feel the way they do.

Interventions: The Basics

Sometimes people who join (or facilitate) Reflective Structured Dialogue find that they are being encouraged both to do things that they haven't done before and to refrain from things they do in other contexts—as managers, elected officials, parents, teachers, or mediators, for example.

A shared purpose and communication agreements help everyone understand what makes this conversation different. In the same way, our general recommendation is to intervene only when the clear purpose or at least one observable, objective agreement has been breached. This is why a shared purpose and co-created agreements are so important. They help everyone opt into this different way of communication.

If a participant has clearly forgotten to observe an agreement, or fallen back into old cycles of debate or argument, it is time to intervene. We recommend assuming the best intentions. It is especially important to intervene with compassion if the oversight happens at the beginning of a dialogue session, so participants will trust that the agreements, and your role in upholding them, are being taken seriously. Here are a few types of compassionate intervention:

- **You can make simple interventions that don't overtly name a violation.** This is only recommended if the infraction is minor and does not indicate a larger pattern that must be named and addressed. In the case of occasional interrupting, a simple intervention would be, "Excuse me for one moment, I just want to see if they are finished speaking."
- **You can suggest a positive direction rather than naming an infraction.** For example, if a participant begins their statement with a judgment of someone else's response, they are violating the agreement about refraining from criticism. You might intervene by asking, "Would you be willing to rephrase your comment so it doesn't seem to criticize what the other person said?"
- **You can ask more about what you are noticing.** For example, suppose one participant's comments strongly suggest (in your mind) that anyone who doesn't agree is immoral. You can express curiosity about the needs of the group by saying, "It sounds like you have really strong feelings about this. How are those of you who have different views hearing what they are saying?" By taking this approach, you remain in the role of servant to the dialogue, purpose, and agreements. You give the speaker a chance to reflect on their manner. You also give others a chance for feedback. Finally, you are modeling curiosity for the group and resisting the impulse to assume knowledge of others' intentions or feelings.
- **You can acknowledge what is valuable, appropriate, or understandable about an oversight.** For example, "When a conversation gets this energetic and fast-paced it's often hard not to interrupt. How would you like to slow down? Perhaps you could raise your hands when you want to speak?"

Interrupting someone can be tricky. But interventions are a gift to the group, helping them have the conversation they want to have. They are also a necessary part of facilitation. If this is a challenge for you, you may want to tell participants explicitly at the beginning of the session: “To do my job I may have to interrupt someone, much as I hate to do it. I hope you’ll understand.”

Remember that no facilitator is perfect. If you let a significant violation of an agreement slip by, and later it seems that this impacted the group or some members of the group, mention it, apologize for letting it go, and say why you think it’s important to acknowledge or remember it now. Facilitators do not need to be—and should not try to be—more or less than human.

Finally: when in doubt, be transparent about the way you are managing the situation. You can always ask the group if you’re uncertain about a misstep. If the group seems to be straying from its purpose, your job is to raise this concern and help them either return to or renegotiate their shared purpose.

INTERVENTION TIPS

For less experienced facilitators, holding space for a dialogue about a divisive topic can be stressful. Reflective Structured Dialogue is designed to mitigate the most catastrophic outcomes, but there may still be uncomfortable moments and challenges. Here are two tips for when the situation calls for more than returning to the agreements and purpose.

ON STRONG EMOTIONS

Speaking and listening about divisive issues, especially those that touch upon a person’s sense of safety and their identity, can be upsetting. It is rare for emotional responses to be so strong that they pose a dilemma for the facilitator. However, this topic particularly often intersects with deep values, identities, and physical safety. Understandably, individuals may become upset, tearful, fearful, or angry.

The structure and spirit of dialogue usually create an open-hearted and engaged environment, even if someone becomes very emotional. Sometimes an expression of deep emotions takes the dialogue to a deeper level. Our first advice is to take your lead from the person who is upset. You might ask what would be most helpful for them or suggest that the group take a break.

Sometimes a participant who is much more emotional than the others takes a disproportionate amount of the group’s time and energy. As the facilitator, you should guard against focusing so much on one participant that you lose track of the whole group’s purpose or needs. If you sense one person creating a gravitational pull of emotions, feel free to pause the dialogue, take a break, and check in with the person, or invite each person to take one minute to journal about how they are right now before doing a timed go-around to reset the equilibrium.

That said, if a participant becomes so angry that they verbally attack another participant, it is essential to intervene firmly and unequivocally. Call for an immediate break or address it in the group setting. If you are using a version of the agreements we suggest in this guide, that person will have violated at least one agreement or the purpose of the conversation, which allows you to intervene with legitimacy and confidence.

If the focus of the anger was another participant, check in with them first. Are they able or willing to continue in the dialogue? What do they need to feel safe?

Then turn to the person who became angry, noting what has happened in language that is as non-judgmental as possible. Focus on what you observed (think: who, what, when, where). For example, “You raised your voice quite a bit and then stood up as you were speaking.” Invite the participant to reflect on how this falls outside the agreements and/or the purpose of the dialogue, and ask them if they can continue participating in the dialogue in a way that is in alignment with the agreements and purpose.

It may be that you or at least one participant decides that it is impossible to proceed. In that case, you might move directly to the closing section. You may even skip the closing go-around. Make sure to remind people of confidentiality and the next steps. Invite participants to reflect on the experience in some way.

Either way, check in with all participants to confirm that they want to continue the conversation. In circumstances where it is important to continue to work, study, worship, or live together in the long term, but the trust in the process has been broken, we recommend that facilitators reach out to each participant between conversations to ask them needs to be in place in order for them to rejoin. Then rebuild trust as slowly as is needed. Reach out to EP directly with questions on that process.

ON REPEATED BREACHES OF AGREEMENTS

We often facilitate dialogues where the conflict is so divided that it is easy for people to fall back into old patterns. Gentle nudges to return to agreements are more frequent then. For example, “I’d like to invite people who haven’t spoken as much to respond first” or “remember to speak only for yourself.” We also generally recommend using a timer to enforce equitable sharing time in go-rounds.

If repeated breaches of agreements seem to impact the group or get in the way of the purpose of the dialogue, a break can be very useful.

During the break, you can have a private conversation with any participants who seem to be having trouble following the agreements and see if they want to: stay (with renewed commitment to the agreements); leave (perhaps with an opportunity to say some parting words to the group); or ask the group to re-negotiate the agreement that they find hard to follow.

If you or a participant decide that they need to leave, acknowledge that it can be hard to know in advance how someone will experience the dialogue. Express appreciation that they showed up and engaged as well as they were able. They may have another opportunity to engage in dialogue around this issue in the future.

A Sample Dialogue Agenda

This agenda runs 75–90 minutes total with 6 participants plus a facilitator.

Often we draft a script prior to the dialogue and read the script verbatim. This ensures that, no matter what happens in the room, you will be able to maintain both structure and care.

[Click here to download a sample facilitator script.](#) Incorporate the exercises, reflections, and prompts in this guide to adapt this script in a way that meets the needs of your context.

3 minutes	Welcome
5 minutes	Purpose and description of your role as facilitator
5–10 minutes	Confirmation of or commitment to agreements
5 minutes	Review dialogue plan together
	Describe go-round process
	Describe the less structured time
15 minutes	Go-round: Prompt 1
15 minutes	Go-round: Prompt 2
15 minutes	Go-round: Prompt 3 <i>or</i> closing prompt
15 minutes	Closing prompt <i>or</i> less structured time
2 minutes	Review confidentiality agreement (if applicable)
5 minutes	Closing

Dialogue Prompts with Purposes

Every question is an invitation. The design of a given question will invite different parts of a person into the space. Questions that invite old cycles, harmful narratives, and sharpened conflict will be met with old cycles, interpersonal harm, and high conflict. Questions that invite personal reflections, curiosity, and compassion will be met with stronger relationships, deeper understanding, and greater resilience.

You can plug the question sets and purpose statements from this section directly into the [sample dialogue script](#).

TO BETTER UNDERSTAND DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

The purpose of this set of prompts is to open a space for people who have different perspectives on the present situation to speak in ways that can be understood and listen in order to understand. Use these prompts to help people in your context reach a deeper, more complex understanding of those who have different perspectives about the conflict.

- Could you share an experience from your life that would help people understand how you have come to your beliefs about this situation?
OR
Could you share an experience from your life that would help people understand your feelings about what's happening now? In what ways have your experiences and feelings shaped the values that guide your thinking?
- When you think about this conflict at this moment, what core value or commitment is at the heart of this for you?
- What are some ways in which some of your core values on this issue bump up against other values you hold, or how your beliefs and feelings are more complex than others might understand?
OR
Where if at all do you feel pulled in different directions by competing values, commitments, or relationships?
- Closing Prompt: What is one thing you would like people who have a different perspective about the conflict to understand about your experiences and values? What is one thing you want to continue reflecting about, talking about, or working on to help you understand people who have different experiences or values on this topic?

FOR INTRA-GROUP / INTRA-FAITH DIALOGUES

The purpose of this set of prompts is for people within a faith or ethnic community—or who are members of a shared faith tradition—to reflect on the impact of the conflict on their lives.

- How have events related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict affected you personally? Is there something you'd be willing to share about your life experiences that might help others understand your response to the conflict?
- As you think about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, what's at the heart of the matter for you? How does that connect with your religious identity—or any of your other identities?
- Within your thinking about the conflict, do you have some areas of uncertainty or value conflicts that you're willing to speak about? For example, can you think of a time when the values you hold dear related to this issue bumped up against other values that are also important to you, or a time when you felt yourself pulled in two directions?
- Closing Prompt: As you leave this conversation, what is one way that you would like this group to support each other in navigating this difficult time?

The purpose of this set of dialogue prompts is for people within a shared community to build a sense of belonging, even amidst differences among members of that community.

- When have you felt a sense of belonging with other members of your group or faith community, and what contributed to that feeling?
- How have your hopes, fears, and views about Israel-Palestine changed over time? What experiences or relationships influenced those changes?
- Closing Prompt: How has the Israeli-Palestinian conflict affected your feelings of belonging? Where do you feel a sense of belonging in your faith or ethnic community, and where do you feel tension?

The purpose of this set of dialogue prompts is to gain a deeper, richer, more complex understanding of the stories and values that shape people's perspectives about Israel-Palestine.

- In your religious or ethnic upbringing, how were you raised to think about the situation in Israel-Palestine? Is there a specific experience you could share that might help us better understand how you were raised?
- What values, beliefs, or worldviews were passed down to you through these experiences? What is at the heart of that story, for you?
- How has your perspective shifted since that upbringing, if at all? Whether your perspective has shifted or changed over time or not, what do you wish others would understand about your perspective and why it matters to you?
- Closing Prompt: What is one next conversation that you wish you could have as we continue to engage around this topic within our congregation/organization moving forward?

FOR DIALOGUE ON THE IMPACT OF THIS CONFLICT IN YOUR WORKPLACE OR INSTITUTION

The purpose of this set of questions is to give people a space to speak about how the Israel-Palestine conflict is impacting them—personally and in their working lives—and to provide the opportunity to make requests, name needs, or articulate a preferred future.

Option 1

- In order to successfully show up to the many different roles you inhabit—in both your personal and professional life—what do you first want other people to understand about what’s going on for you (about you, your perspective on this conflict, and/or the impact it is having on you)?
- Write down three examples of the stress, pressure, and anxiety you have in relation to your work right now. What do you find is the most challenging? What might those challenges reveal about what is most valuable or meaningful to you?
- As you look at those examples, describe ways in which you feel pulled in different directions, or where your response to incidents in the conflict makes you feel conflicted about what to do or say.
- Closing Prompt: As you encounter ongoing stressors as you leave this space, what is one thing from this group you want to hold onto or ask for? What is one thing you want to be able to offer to others?

Option 2

- How have you been affected by the ways people around you have responded to you or failed to respond to you in this time?
- What is a source of strength or support that you’ve found within or outside of yourself in these moments of difficulty? Or how might co-workers “show up” for you right now in ways you would appreciate, even if they hold different beliefs or identities?
- Closing Prompt: What of your gifts, qualities, and skills would you like to call on as we leave that might enable you to be present for others, especially those holding different views?

TO FIND STRENGTH IN A TIME OF DIFFICULTY

The purpose of this set of questions is to give people who are under stress a place to name and explore those challenges—and the opportunity to reflect on the strengths they bring, or have found in the past, to meet this moment of heartache and difficulty.

- Tell us about a time in your life when you've had to find the strength or internal resources to overcome a significant personal or professional challenge.
- How did your experiences in that situation shape who you are now? How might you call upon those strengths and resources in this moment of difficulty? And/or what other resources do you wish were available at that time? What support or resources do you wish you had access to then?
- Closing Prompt: What is one offer of mutual support you hope to share with others who might be struggling in the midst of this crisis or one similar to it?

FOR DIALOGUE ON A SCHOOL CAMPUS

The purpose of this first set of prompts is to create an opportunity for participants to reflect on and make meaning of their experiences of belonging and community, their engagement with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the experiences of their fellow students.

- Share a story about a time when you felt like you really belonged to a community. What about that experience helped you to feel like you belonged?
- As you reflect on all you've shared and heard about belonging, where do you see a connection—or disconnection—between your experience of belonging and your experience of campus engagement around events in Israel-Palestine?
- Closing Prompt: Based on what you've heard today, what is one thing that you or others might do to help people start to or continue to engage around this issue in ways that promote belonging, safety, and constructive engagement?

The purpose of this second set of school dialogue prompts is to create an opportunity for participants to reflect on your experiences and perspectives as they relate to what is happening in Israel and Gaza, to listen to and to be listened to by those who hold different perspectives, and to reach a deeper, more complex understanding of those who have different perspectives about the conflict.

- Share an experience that has shaped your perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. How has that experience influenced the way you feel about the current situation?
- When you think about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the current moment, what is at the heart of the matter for you?
- What is one thing you would like people who have a different perspective about the conflict to understand about your experiences and values?
- Closing Prompt: what from this conversation do you want to continue thinking about, talking about, or working on after this dialogue ends?

FOR EDUCATORS IN DIALOGUE WITH FELLOW EDUCATORS

The purpose of this dialogue is to create a space for you to reflect on the complexities surrounding if, when, and how you might choose to engage in discussions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within your school community.

- Share an experience that has informed the way you think about whether or how much you share your own identity, values, personal history, or religious and political beliefs with others in your school community (e.g., other teachers, students, parents, administrators), particularly about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. What value(s) guides this decision?
- In your current role, how do you feel pulled in different directions by whether and how to share your own identity, values, personal history, and religious or political beliefs about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?
- Closing: When you think about the experiences and tensions you've shared and heard here today, what do you want to keep in mind as you engage with students, teachers, parents, and administrators in the coming weeks as this issue remains top of mind?

Additional Resources

SUPPORT FOR FACILITATORS

- Article: [The Role of Strong Emotions in Dialogue](#)
- Resource: [Harnessing Strong Emotions in Dialogue for Deliberation](#)
- Exercise: [EP's Stereotyping Exercise](#)
- Resource: [Dialogue with Experts in the Room](#)
- Worksheet: [Building Readiness for Dialogue](#)

FOR CLASSROOM EDUCATORS

- Resource: [EP's Dialogic Classroom and Trauma-Informed Principles](#)
- Exercise: [Building Agreements With Moments of Dissent](#)
- Article: [Holding Space in a Moment of Crisis](#)
- Articles & Resources: [Teaching About the Israeli-Hamas War](#)

FURTHER TRAINING, COACHING & COLLABORATION

- Training: [Essential Partners workshops](#) (scholarships available)
- Coaching: [Schedule a free one-on-one call with an EP expert](#)
- Collaboration: [Schedule a consultation with an EP program team member](#)