# *Sulha* Peacemaking and the Politics of Persuasion

Sharon Lang

*This article focuses on the Arab tradition of mediation and reconciliation known as* sulha*, as it is practiced in Galilee villages in tandem with the state justice system in cases of murder. Drawing on incidents occurring between 1992 and 1996, the author describes and analyzes the underlying principles of the* sulha *process, the formation of the mediating body, its mechanisms and procedures, and finally the formal public ceremony that ends the conflict between the families of the victim and the attacker. By highlighting* sulha *practice and its underlying ideals of cooperation, negotiation, and compromise, the author challenges the emphasis on violence and feud that characterizes much of the anthropological literature on Arab society and politics.*

The anthropological literature of Arab society in the Middle East has long privileged feud and violence as the key to understanding Arab village politics, with scholars claiming that, in the absence of centralized state structures, the threat of feud traditionally served to prevent unbridled violence and maintain political order.[1] This type of functionalist analysis reached its peak in the 1970s in the work of Jacob Black-Michaud, who argued that in Middle Eastern societies where feud exists, the institution functions as *the* mechanism of social ordering, the "cohesive force" of society.[2] Assumptions concerning the centrality of violence and blood feud persist in contemporary studies of rural Arab and bedouin sociopolitics in Israel;[3] for example, they undergird Joseph Ginat's entire approach to understanding Arab conflicts.[4]

Yet, my own research in the village society of the Galilee found that virtually every case of murder resulted in mediation and reconciliation rather than revenge. Although functionalist analyses and similar recent interpretations of Middle Eastern society aim to show the rationality behind the political order, their primary thrust tends to ignore the indigenous ideologies, values, and practices of peace and to overestimate feud and violence. Such an approach perpetuates stereotypes of brutality in the social life of the region, both as a reality and as a deterrent, and hence the pathology of Arab politics. The implication that Arabs are essentially violent maintains an "us-versus-them" dichotomy and fixes the Israeli Palestinians in the inferior position in a hierarchical opposition with Israeli Jews.[5] It is therefore important to challenge these assumptions.

---

**Sharon Lang** is assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Redlands, Redlands, California.

*Journal of Palestine Studies* XXXI, no. 3 (Spring 2002), pp. 52-66.

## Reconciliation Instead of Revenge

Throughout the Galilee, as in many parts of the Middle East, the Arab population has traditionally practiced a ritualized process of conflict resolution known as *sulh*, a term glossed by informants as "reconciliation," "cooperation," or "forgiveness." Any specific case of *sulh* is referred to as a *sulha,* as is the formal public ceremony that marks the culmination of the peacemaking negotiations. Mediation is employed widely to resolve disputes, however trivial or serious, between (and sometimes within) families, but this article deals with only one type of *sulha*, the lengthy reconciliation process that follows a murder. Murder *always* entails immediate and active *sulha* responses on the part of interested parties—offenders, victims, and the notables and local leaders acting as mediators—setting in motion a resolution process that aims to restore peaceful social relations in the community. In the case of a murder, anywhere from six months to several years is typically required before the final peace agreement is sealed.[6]

Certainly, in Israel, as elsewhere in the Middle East, crimes today are regulated by law and the state. Yet, rather than being replaced by the state, *sulha* has proven to be a tradition that works in tandem with the civil and state justice system. And while informants claim that *sulha* is currently in rapid decline, especially in urban areas, major *sulha*s involving hundreds and even thousands of men continue to occur each year in Arab villages among bedouin, Druze, Muslims, and Christians; participants even keep written and audiovisual records of *sulha*s. Although *sulha* is often seen by the young as being out of step with modern life in Israel, most informants consider this pre-Islamic custom a positive tradition that bolsters Palestinian identity in Israel by unifying and incorporating Arabs of various religious backgrounds and ethnicities.

In what follows, I offer an analysis and interpretation of *sulha* based on participant observation and interviews carried out in northern Israeli Palestinian communities (sixteen towns and villages in the Galilee region) from September 1992 to April 1996. In focusing on the underlying ideals of cooperation, negotiation, honor, and compromise—the indigenous representation of sociopolitical interaction—so evident in the *sulha* process, I am not trying to claim that local Israeli Palestinian politics are harmonious: as in any social or political system, conflict, competition, and even violence play a part, and *sulha* itself, like all forms of politics, is ridden with contradictions and does not always work. Rather, my aim is to provide a corrective to the pathologization of Arab political and social life that results from the consistent overemphasis on the role of violence and revenge in ethnographic and other academic accounts. Much of the previous literature either has ignored or misconstrued the significance of the *sulha* mediation processes. A more adequate conceptualization of indigenous law and order recognizes *sulha* and opens a window on a quite different sociopolitical landscape than that presented in previous accounts.

## *SHARAF* AND THE PRINCIPLES OF *SULHA*

*Sulha* is predicated on *sharaf* (honor).[7] "In Arab culture . . . you must restore *sharaf*. This man has killed your father . . . it would be a dishonor if you do not take revenge, if you leave your father's killing to be passed by."[8] S*haraf* in Palestinian Israeli society follows the biblical "eye for an eye" logic, expressed by bedouin as "One grave lies next to another." To avenge the murder of a close kinsman is honorable; to fail to do so is dishonorable. Given these basic social norms, powerful pressures push the injured family toward murderous action. But in fact, the vast majority of killings do not lead to counterkillings among Arabs in the Galilee. Instead, most injured families eventually agree to reconcile with the killer of their son, father, brother, or cousin.[9] *Sulha* alleviates emotional and social pressures and serves as a legitimate alternative to retaliation.

The instrument through which *sulha* is effected is the *jaha*, a delegation of notables with personal prestige and experience managing these conflicts. Through the *jaha*'s offices, families can be persuaded that it is possible to "wipe away the stain" on their *sharaf* with *sulha* rather than the blood of the killer or one of his kinsman.[10] The aggressors approach the *jaha*, which then implores the victims to engage in *sulha*. The process of negotiation between the family of the victim, the family of the attacker, and the *jaha* may be seen as a central instance of the politics of persuasion, and one in which the *jaha*, the injured family, and the relatives of the attacker all walk a delicate tightrope. The mediators (Muslim, Christian, and Druze notables) regularly persuade an aggrieved family or clan to forego vengeance and be reconciled with the group that has attacked them. Persuasion to engage in peace negotiations and to offer compensation is effected not only through oratory or rhetoric but also, and especially, through a skillful manipulation of the logic of *sharaf* that proceeds primarily in the realm of honor-laden gestures.

Based on my observations and research into *sulha* as practiced, three basic mechanisms are necessary for the damaged *sharaf* of the injured family to be repaired, thus making reconciliation possible. These are shows of remorse,[11] reverse *musayara*, and magnanimity. In terms of the first mechanism, every murder is experienced as a personal affront, and an immediate psychological consequence of a killing is that the family of the victim feels a deep sense of "humiliation." To counter such feelings, the family of the attacker must perform certain humbling gestures. Far from strutting, as they are perceived by the aggrieved family to be doing in the wake of the murder, they must act out a stylized form of debasement. Although this performance does not automatically restore the *sharaf* of the injured family, it "lowers the temperature" and creates the necessary psychological conditions for them to contemplate reconciliation.

"Reverse *musayara*" refers to the practice whereby the notables constituting the *jaha*, while negotiating and ritually enacting a *sulha*, act toward the

injured family from beginning to end with the elaborate respect and consideration normally reserved for persons of high status. This process may usefully be regarded as a performative reversal of the standard patron-client relationship prevalent in Arab society. In relationships of patronage (*wasta*), the client's request for a favor is flattering for the patron, and each *wasta* favor can be seen as a transaction wherein *sharaf* flows from the client to the patron. The *jaha*—the most reputable men in the community—symbolically turn this relationship on its head (reverse *musayara*) by beseeching an ordinary family (currently reeling under the humiliation of a killing) to be so kind as to grant them a favor—to make peace rather than to avenge themselves. This reverse positioning is extraordinarily flattering for the injured family; the weakened party is placed in a (temporary) position of "patronage" over society's most esteemed men. Such treatment helps to assuage feelings of humiliation further and to effect a partial restoration of lost *sharaf*.

With respect to "magnanimity," the injured family is encouraged to identify the action of reconciling with their attackers as a manifestation of magnanimity (*shahama*)—one of the highest expressions of *sharaf* in indigenous Middle Eastern culture. A man shows magnanimity when, from a position of overwhelming strength, he "forgives" a person who has wronged him and on whom he could legitimately take revenge. *Jaha* members represent this act of forgiveness as the most venerable thing a man can do. According to one leader,

***A man shows magnanimity when, from a position of overwhelming strength, he "forgives" a person who has wronged him and on whom he could legitimately take revenge.***

> If it is an act of *sharaf* to avenge, it is more honor not to revenge; that is why we call him [who forgives] a great person. If he takes revenge, then he is like any other normal person, but when he says, "I could have killed the killer, but I chose not to," that is a great man. In Arab culture there is nothing bigger than forgiveness. This is the highest point, the height of *sharaf*. Some people forgive because they do not have any choice, but when you have a choice and you forgive, this is the highest rank of *sharaf*.

If the injured family is able to perform magnanimity successfully, they may be able to convert their humiliation into *sharaf*, but as is suggested in the above quote, the feat may be difficult. Those who would forgive must convince others that they do so not out of weakness but greatness of spirit.

## An Analytical Description of *Sulha*: Theory and Reality

Keeping in mind the three main manifestations of *sharaf* that make *sulha* possible, one can turn to the official version of the *sulha* process as ex-

pressed by *jaha* notables and other knowledgable informants. According to them, within twenty-four hours of a killing, close male relatives of the aggressor go to the homes of influential notables in the village and surroundings to ask them—even plead with them—to form a committee of mediators to calm the aggrieved and enraged family and induce them to engage in the *sulha* process instead of taking revenge. The initiative is supposed to come from the aggressors who, whatever their reasons for wanting to end the conflict, voluntarily approach the *rijal kibar* ("big men") and, shedding their pride, stand before them *'ara'ya'* ("naked"), *rijal sighar* ("small men"). These humbled aggressors, according to the traditional account, employ set phrases, such as "I am in your house and you must help me; I am in serious trouble and I am in your hands."[12]

There is always a certain disjunction between actual social practice and the idealized models elaborated by interested social actors. Thus, the repentant gesture described above may amount to little more than a phone call from the patriarch of one family to a leading notable. Indeed, in some instances the *jaha* assembles spontaneously, without the aggressor's request, though it is important for the *sulha*'s success that such divergences from the official narrative be elided. In one case, when it became known that the *jaha* had acted on its own accord and that the accused family had not begged or even phoned for assistance, the revelation led to a complete breakdown of the *sulha* process, for the symbolic gesture of supplication by which the aggressor's family begins ritually to express remorse is necessary to set in motion the process of mending social relations.

In the hours after a killing has taken place, notables visit the home of the bereaved family. The purpose beyond offering condolences is to secure *hudna*, a promise of cease-fire. *Hudna* checks the potential destruction and violence of *fawrat al-dam* (literally "the eruption of blood"), the period immediately after a killing, when the victim's family may legitimately exact revenge under local custom. During *fawrat al-dam,* and generally for an extended period thereafter, the male kin of the killer flee their homes to seek refuge with relatives or friends. This departure may be more symbolic than real, since often the killer's family simply relocates to another part of the village, where those seeking revenge can easily follow. This "exile" is another gesture to the aggrieved family; attackers show humility and remorse by demonstrably staying out of sight of those they have offended. As an informant explained, "By moving away from the (victim's) family, the killers are saying, 'We are not proud of what we did, and we do not want to hurt your feelings further.'" Through debasing steps such as voluntary exile and requesting a *jaha*, the family which prior to the *sulha* process was "on top" is brought down in terms of *sharaf* and set on par with the subordinate side.

The *jaha*, made up of the community's most prestigious men, supplicates the victims to agree to a suspension of hostilities and later to accept a *diyyah* (monetary compensation for murder or injury) instead of taking another life. This begging of favors from the family of the victim exemplifies the reverse

patron-client strategy, or reverse *musayara*, described above. Yet *hudna* is not always attained so easily, and the *jaha* may have to deploy persuasive powers that test the members' own *sharaf* abilities.[13] At this point in the *sulha*, oral performance comes to the fore: it is not merely who is speaking and what is said, but the *way* the *jaha* communicates—its skill in playing upon the *musayara* tradition of "polite speech"—that is crucial. As one *jaha* member described the process:

> We make every effort to get the victim's family to agree. . . . We use the beautiful language (*hilwa*). We appeal to their sense of goodness and what is right, and we do not leave until the family agrees. But if they really refuse, we keep trying. We come back day after day. We speak to them each time with all the politeness and respect in the Arabic language. We beg them to be so kind, so honorable as to do us the favor, until finally they cannot refuse us.

From first contact until the *sulha* process is completed, the *jaha* treats the family of the victim with inordinate respect and consideration, never failing to use "beautiful" or "sweet" language.

The offended side—particularly if they are powerful themselves—may be reluctant to grant a cease-fire and may provide a list of demands that may well be humiliating to the attacker's side. The attacker's side may have no choice but to cede to the victims' demands if they wish to resolve the conflict. If the *jaha*'s initial effort is unsuccessful, they return repeatedly and add to their collective weight by bringing additional notables in each successive visit to join the chorus calling for peace. Eventually the disgrace of refusal reaches an intolerable point, and the victim's family cedes. In one case, recounted by one of my *jaha* informants,

> The families refused, of course politely, all the efforts the *jaha* was making. It was all in vain. This one family was an especially hard nut to crack. We tried to tackle it from every side; it did not work. Then a strong elder brother of the local council candidate probably could not tolerate it any longer, because there is a sense that it is an insult to the *jaha* not to yield. He stood up, furious, and said, "Enough! I will not let you go on more than that! These people [the *jaha*] are respected people in our society. They have spent hours and many times coming, asking us, and begging us. How many times are you going to make them feel so very ashamed?" He banged his fist on the table, and everybody in the room was silent. He said, "I want to tell the *jaha*, 'I am for peace,' and I want to see anyone in this room who dares to say 'no.'"

Ultimately, it is embarrassing for the victim's family *not* to acquiesce to the requests of these prestigious men, and elders, including those of a victim's family, feel that they ought to yield to the *jaha*'s requests out of respect for them. The entire *sulha* system is predicated on this hierarchical logic of *sharaf*.

If the *jaha* secure a cease-fire, the *sulha* process goes forward. The next step, according to the official narrative, is for the arbitration committee to make a ruling on the amount of *diyyah* to be paid by the attacker's family to the victim's family. *Jaha* elders claim that the *diyyah* in any particular case corresponds in value to the *diyyah* paid in previous cases involving similar crimes. The figures reported to me were consistently in the range of NIS 100,000 (at the time approximately $30,000) for a murder. Killings that entail disfigurement or any bodily desecration, however, demand additional payment. Apparently impartial *diyyah* decision making hides a process of haggling and negotiation between the family of the victim and the family of the attacker, mediated by the *jaha*, who themselves have personal interests. The latter covertly moderate how much the victims rightfully can demand and how much the aggressors will suffer. Any public discussion concerning the size of the *diyyah* or other conditions would undercut the *jaha*'s image as a wise and unified body that unilaterally makes its ruling in light of custom and precedent.

With the amount of *diyyah* and any other conditions determined, the *sulha* ceremony is arranged. All men of the village and notables from other villages are sent invitations announcing the formal reconciliation of the two families. One person, who may or may not be part of the *jaha*, is generally designated to send invitations and coordinate the *sulha* ceremony. It is important that an adequate number of dignitaries attend the ceremony to confer *sharaf* on the family of the victim and help restore their shattered dignity. There have been cases where a family refused to engage in *sulha* until they were assured that a number of prestigious figures would attend.

The *sulha* ceremony takes place outdoors, in the village center, in front of the municipal building, or in another central space, as *sharaf* relies on public view. The *jaha* initiates proceedings by having an influential member of the offended family, usually the father of the victim, tie a knot in the *rayah* (banner). This symbolic gesture indicates that the victim's family is ready for reconciliation and that it is safe for the family of the killer to proceed. The members of the *jaha* then take the white *rayah* to the killer and his family in another part of the village. "The *rayah* is white and clean," a *jaha* member explains, "the *rayah* has no spots—as if to show that the problem has been cleansed." The *jaha* proceeds through the streets to meet with male members of the victim's family who are lined up in the place where the ceremony will be enacted. There may be as many as several thousand men attending the *sulha*—all watching with solemn anticipation. Women and children's viewing is limited to what can be seen from windows and the sidelines. The *jaha* surrounds the killer to shield him from possible attack. "No one, partic-

ularly not the attacker and his family, dares to utter a word," explained a *jaha* member. "Everyone senses that the less people speak the better—one wrong word might ruin everything. So there is a heavy silence." Again, it is the enactment of rituals and not the words per se that is efficacious.

The final *sulha* ritual is a scene of temporary humiliation, or *sharaf* lowering for the offenders. Whatever the genuineness of the humility, the offenders must publicly go through the prescribed steps conveying shame and remorse. If they perform their moves adequately, the victims will feel assuaged and the egalitarian balance of *sharaf* will be restored. The waiting family of the victim is lined up in the prescribed place outside the municipality or local council building or in a central public space. The killer and all his male relatives arrive and move down the line, shaking the hands of each and every member of the victim's family. "When they put their hands together, the tension must ease," explained a *jaha* informant, who added that this is potentially the most volatile moment of the *sulha*. In one case, the brother of the victim pulled out a knife that had been hidden in his sock and stabbed his brother's murderer at the very instant when he was expected to shake the killer's hand and forgive the deed. In the vast majority of cases, however, the tense moment passes without incident.

After the shaking of hands, the *diyyah* is passed from the family of the attacker to the family of the victim. According to *jaha* informants, it is crucial that these monetary exchanges take place in front of many witnesses (today, the *diyyah* is commonly placed in a transparent plastic bag), since promises made before the tribunal of the community are likely to be kept. The most powerful and wealthy families are reluctant to keep the final payment of *diyyah*, and after taking it during the ceremony may return it afterwards in a calculated display of magnanimity. In one not untypical case, the patriarch of the victim's family took the *diyyah* in his hands during the ceremony, raised it above his head and declared, "I return this money. I do not need this payment to forgive."

Magnanimity on the part of more modest families is a dangerous option, however, as the gesture could be interpreted by the community as weakness: it is important for the injured family to make the public believe that they are forgiving for the right reasons. Of course, the stronger the family (measured by the size of the *hamula*, counting male members only) that has been injured and the weaker their attackers, the more plausible the basis for magnanimity. Such magnanimous gestures as returning the *diyyah* are also easier for powerful families (for whom the enhancement of *sharaf* would be of greater benefit than the money) than for poorer families, who need it to provide for the victim's children. Indeed, without the cultural "resource" of magnanimity, it would be almost impossible for the powerful families to make peace. Generally, the *jaha* finds it far more difficult to practice the strategy of reverse patron-client relations when large and respected families have been attacked by smaller clans, since the supplication and visits by important men have far less effect on them than on ordinary families.

Similarly, when the powerful family is the aggressor, it is more difficult for the *jaha* to persuade them to pay the *diyyah*. Powerful families are supposed to feel more indignation from an affront, and it is potentially more damaging for them to back down into a conciliatory position. These families are more politically invested; their *sharaf* is more brittle. A senior member of perhaps the wealthiest, largest, and most prestigious Muslim family in Israel declared, "We never make peace! A rich and powerful family does not make peace—it is a matter of *sharaf*." According to him, a sense of outrage follows an attack on a big family by a less prominent one. In the logic of the village, this status differential adds immense insult to the murder. Even so, despite the social pressures against accepting humiliation and belittlement, leaders of strong families may desire *sulha* as much as anyone else, and regardless of status, any cycle of revenge that is not halted will result in deaths. The strong man resolves his dilemma by maintaining an uncompromising stance, and when he finally does acquiesce and agree to *sulha,* he plays heavily on the magnanimity of his action.

The *sulha* ceremony ends with the signing of an official peace agreement by leaders from the two warring families, members of the *jaha*, and some of the other dignitaries present. The signatures of the notables give the accord a weight it would not have if only the two families signed it. To break such an agreement is not only to go back on one's publicly given pledge, it is also a direct insult to the important men who mediated the *sulha* and signed the agreement. It is important not to have too many dignitaries sign. If everyone's *sharaf* is at risk then, in effect, no one's is: breaking an agreement that a very large number of people have signed is not a direct affront to any one person's *sharaf*. If, on the other hand, only a few select notables have signed, then breaking the contract would be a clear insult to them. With these high stakes, the two sides are under great pressure not to disrupt the peace.

When the ceremony is over, certain actions are still required before villagers consider that relations have "returned to normal." The penultimate step is that the killer and his kin are taken to the home of the victim to drink bitter coffee, traditionally offered to guests as a symbol of hospitality. It is significant that the attackers go to the home of the victim for coffee because being hospitable is always *sharaf* heightening for the host.[14] By placing the two sides in the positions of host and guest, the victims' *sharaf* is raised, and the aggressors' *sharaf* decreased one last time.

The family of the killer then invites the victim's family to share a feast at their home. If it is considered an honor to be the host, it is a still greater mark of prestige to have a costly and substantial meal arranged solely on one's behalf. Thus, after sipping the bitter coffee a respected elder of the aggressor's family will say, "In the name of God, I invite you to eat with us today." The men of the entire extended family of the victim and all the invited notables—a number which runs to hundreds, sometimes even thousands, of people—will go directly to the killer's home and eat a meal that usually consists

of rice and lamb. Each man tends to eat only a few bites as a symbolic gesture before he gives his place to one of the many who are waiting. This feast completes the peacemaking ritual; it is the final *sharaf* transfer. The victim's family are shown respect as guests for whom this lavish feast was prepared and the aggressors, though forced to pay for this costly affair, are compensated somewhat by having what is considered the honor of preparing the meal.

## *Sulha* and the State

While *sulha* is carried out within local Arab communities, it exists within the context of Israeli state institutions (i.e., local councils, courts, police, elections), and connections between the two are complex and shifting. Officially, the state does not give any legal or written recognition to the *sulha* custom. An Israeli Palestinian who murders for family honor, to avenge the death of kinsmen, or for any other reason is subject to the criminal and penal laws of the state whether or not he engages in *sulha*. In practice, however, the Israeli state allows and even promotes *sulha* to the extent that it is useful for its own purposes. According to officials, the state views the practice as a beneficial system that maintains calm and peaceful relations within and among Arab communities. Thus state authorities usually cooperate and support the process and the elders who facilitate it. Judges may give lesser sentences to perpetrators in cases where *sulha* has been achieved.[15] The police, who have long-standing working relations with the *jaha*, may pressure the latter to conclude *sulha*s, promising limited police involvement in the handling of crimes. At times, the state may permit convicted killers to leave jail for twenty-four hours to participate in *sulha* ceremonies,[16] and on rare occasion even pay the *diyyah*, in the interest of deescalating a conflict.

High-profile members of the government (Arab and Jewish), Knesset deputies, mayors, state officials, and police commanders and officers attend *sulha* ceremonies as invited guests, creating gravity and adding honor to the occasion. In one case that took place in a Druze village in the Galilee, the foreign minister, the minister of the police, the chair of the Knesset, and the director to the Prime Minister's Office all attended and took part in the *sulha* ceremony. This was necessary because the conflict threatened to escalate into civil strife between Christians and Druze. The role of invited politicians in *sulha*s is limited, however: the written agreements they sign have been worked out previously by the *jaha*, and the local Arab leaders remain fully in control.

State and *sulha* politics intersect further at the leadership level. Many of the elders who serve as *jaha* leaders are or were themselves local government officials. The mayor or head of the local village council serves, at least nominally, on the *jaha* in nearly every *sulha* case, and the *sulha* ceremony typically is held inside the local government building.

There is, then, a link of dependence between state institutions and *sulha* processes. Official legal and judicial institutions have become incorporated into preexisting Arab structures and values as much as the other way around. Decisions about whether and how to respond to an attack, for example, may be based on the perceived efficacy and justice of official methods in handling the problem. In one case, the acceptance of the final *sulha* accord was dependent on the court's verdict; the injured family was waiting to hear the length of the jail sentence meted out in order to decide on its next step. In 1996, a killer from Majd al-Krum was to be released from prison after serving only six years of a nine-year term. The family of the attacker knew that their son's freedom would exacerbate the victims' sense of injustice and increase the likelihood of revenge, making *sulha* efforts all the more vital. The attacker's family tried to time the *sulha* to coordinate with their son's release.

State elections and the *sulha* processes are also intricately intertwined. *Hamula* clashes permeate elections for local government. An event such as a blood dispute becomes the focus of popular discussion, and persons involved in the mediation process are thrown into the public eye. Acting as a *sulha* mediator may place a man in a good position to gain political support for local elections.[17] Effecting a *sulha* creates political capital that can be used not only to carry the *jaha* member to further and more prestigious mediation, but also to create goodwill for the prospective candidate and build political alliances. The parties who come to a *jaha* mediator seeking to arrange a *sulha* are indebted to him if the mediation is carried off successfully. This indebtedness may well form the basis for political support in the next local election. Thus serving on a *jaha* not only increases a man's power in terms of *sharaf*, it may also serve as a springboard to local or even national political office.

***Ultimately, the state's systems do not achieve final resolution to conflicts because they do not entail reconciliation between the disputing parties; they do not rectify a situation of injustice and adequately redress the* sharaf *imbalance.***

The *sulha* typically runs parallel to state practices of law and order; these systems generally are not in opposition, and neither has replaced the other. Ultimately, the state's systems do not achieve final resolution to conflicts because they do not entail reconciliation between the disputing parties; they do not rectify a situation of injustice and adequately redress the *sharaf* imbalance. The state does not create an environment in which people feel emotionally able to resume peaceful relations and continue living together in close quarters. The state's criminal justice system, though seen as legitimate, is not considered sufficient by Israeli Palestinians who seek further steps to acquire equity and resolution. *Sulha* reconciliation, on the other hand, brings the two sides face to face and publicly acknowledges the hurt and indignant feelings of the victims. *Sulha* restores *sharaf* by creating a sense of dignity and justice for the hurt family and thus enables peaceful relations to resume and continue over time. The

efficacy and resilience of the *sulha* system lies in the fact that it does indeed recognize and contend with *sharaf*.

## Mending Social Bonds

Reconciliation rituals such as *sulha* are key moments in the constitution, reconstitution, and representation of a sociopolitical order broader and more general than those structures of alliance reinforced by feud. *Sulha* not only mends the social bonds between feuding families in a village, it articulates a solidarity extending to the entire community that takes seriously the goals and ideals represented by the ritual. Notables, witnesses, conflicting factions, and, indeed, the "public" at large—all are drawn into a network of social relations focused on perpetuating the peace made in the *sulha*. Feud "order" is factional; the order embodied in *sulha* is properly "social." Indeed, one informant described the *sulha* practice as "an unwritten social contract." Only through a sovereign disregard for the self-consciousness of social actors—that violence represents a breakdown of order and that order can and must be restored through rituals like *sulha*—can the structural-functionalist thesis be sustained.[18]

Consistent with the attitude toward peace and its disruption rooted in the social imaginary is the *jaha*'s notion of a "pending *sulha*" *(sulha mu'allaqa)*. A *jaha* member will never say that a case is irreconcilable or, as would structural-functionalists such as Black-Michaud, that it is an interminable clash. Rather, a reconciliation case will be deemed "pending" even if it has been indeterminate for decades. By the *jaha* elder's definition, there is no such thing as an irresolvable murder case. One leader puzzled over what he felt was a ridiculous American obsession with factual minutiae during the murder trial of O. J. Simpson. For the *jaha*, murder cases are not about identifying, convicting, and suitably punishing killers; rather they are about bringing disputing sides back into "normal" peaceful relations. A *jaha* notable told me that "1–2 percent of the murder cases still await closure," but he held that eventually even these incidents will be concluded and order restored.

It is impossible to understand the practice of *sulha* without reference to the complex of assumptions, rules, and values associated with *sharaf*. *Sulha* is inextricably connected to *sharaf*, and in many ways is about maintaining, restoring, and negotiating respect and reputation. Indeed, it is because *sulha* redresses the imbalance of *sharaf* created when one individual attacks another that revenge can be foregone. Although the practice of *sulha* often serves as a viable alternative to revenge killing, *sulha* is not reducible to merely a revenge substitute. Revenge and *sulha* are not always mutually exclusive alternatives, and even if a family opts for revenge a *sulha* may subsequently take place. A case that occurred in Makir village, recounted by a *jaha* member, illustrates this point:

> In 1993, there was a killing of one man by a man from another family. The victim's family refused to make peace. The *jaha* knew they were refusing because they wanted to take revenge. And one year later the family of the man who was killed did take revenge. Then the *jaha* knew that there would be *sulha*.

Rather than revenge rendering the *sulha* unnecessary or implausible, *sulha* stood as the obvious next step in finalizing an end to the violence. Because a murder had taken place on both sides, the official routine of the *sulha* ceremony involving set roles for the victims and killers was altered. In this case, *sulha* did not act as a ritual alleviating one family from the burden of revenge while restoring their social standing. There did not have to be a show of humiliation on the killer's side, and begging of the *jaha* to intervene was unnecessary. Neither side had to be magnanimous because they had already proven their "strength." Two *diyyah*s of the same amount (NIS 100,000) were exchanged. The two families lined up facing each other and everyone shook hands with everyone from the other family. A *jaha* elder called this *sulha* "balanced" because the *sharaf* equation was equal. Still, we are left with the valorization of peace and the return to a "normal" state of affairs provided only by the *sulha*. Thus, even though the *jaha* did not succeed in preventing the retaliatory murder, it was still necessary to mark the end of the cycle. Both sides needed the *sulha*'s persuasive force to forego future feuding.

*Sulha* more typically is about redressing an imbalance through a formalized routine to mark a new state of affairs. Ideally, the *sulha* process is effective at two broad levels of signification—the personal and the purely formal. At the personal level, engaging in *sulha* is, for many, a way of confronting and overcoming personal grief. At the formal level, however, the *sulha*'s success in ending the conflict does not depend on the actual intentions or feelings of the participants. It does not matter if "their hearts are not clean (*ndiif*)." Where participants go through the motions of *sulha* begrudgingly, the formal language and gestures of the ritual maintain the appearance of remorse or forgiveness and lessen the chance of either side provoking the other. Sincerity is irrelevant because by participating in the *sulha* the actors enmesh themselves in a web of social relations that will constrain them to observe the peace. To resume the conflict after the *sulha* proceedings are underway would disgrace the families, deeply offend the notables, and shock public opinion. Occasionally this does occur, but such cases are rare. The formal process of the ritual generally provides the desired outcome of restored interpersonal and communal relations.

The ruling assumption of *sulha* is that what is valuable and normal is a state of peace and cooperation rather than a state of violence and conflict. In accordance with this perspective, the *jaha* espouse a belief in a basic human need to forgive. Informants often expressed the view that conflict is "ex-

hausting" and cannot be sustained for long. As one *sulha* leader put it, "Nobody can carry blood—it is so heavy." These notions are allied to the sense that peace is natural and orderly and that conflict is unnatural and chaotic. Peace is a state of equilibrium, disrupted on occasion by violence or conflict. According to the social discourse, things *cannot* remain indefinitely in this state of disequilibrium. Conflict is drawn back toward peace as if by a force of gravitation. The practice of *sulha* embodies a set of assumptions about the kind of relations that ought to exist between people in village society. These views of the social order are perpetuated with every *sulha* as they are represented, retold, and reinscribed in the minds of those who participate.

## Notes

1. Ernest Gellner and Emrys Peters, for example, sought the sources of social cohesion in the very practices where fission appeared to have the upper hand over fusion. For a critique of these arguments, see Henry Munson, "Rethinking Gellner's Segmentary Analysis of Morocco's Ait 'Atta," *Man* 28, no. 2 (1993), pp. 267–80.

2. Jacob Black-Michaud, *Cohesive Force: Feud in the Mediterranean and the Middle East* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975).

3. See Gideon Kressel, *Ascendancy Through Aggression: The Anatomy of a Blood Feud among Urbanized Bedouin* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996).

4. Joseph Ginat, *Blood Disputes among Bedouin and Rural Arabs in Israel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), p. 26. For Ginat, Arabs pursue conflict resolution largely due to state sanctions for homicide, while the institutions of violence and blood revenge are the fundamental, overriding factors of their social behavior.

5. For an exploration of the moral basis of segmentary societies, see Michael Meeker, "Meaning and Society in the Near East: Examples from the Black Sea Turks and the Levantine Arabs," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 7, no. 2 (1976), pp. 243–70; and Paul Dresch, "The Significance of the Course Events Take in Segmentary Systems," *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 2 (1986), pp. 309–24.

6. The information in this article is largely based on field research data I have collected from about fifteen major *sulha*s among Israeli Palestinians since 1992.

7. *Sharaf* is a distinctive idiom of social relations in Arabic that I translate here as "honor," although mindful of the scholarly abuses for which use of this gloss rightly has been criticized.

8. In consideration of requests for anonymity, the names of Palestinian informants quoted throughout this article are not cited; most locations, likewise, are kept intentionally vague.

9. In this article, I narrowly focus on the murder of men. According to my informants, women rarely are murdered by people outside their immediate family. When a woman is murdered by her father, brother, or close male kin, no *sulha* reconciliation process follows. See further Sharon Lang, "Sharaf Politics: Constructing Male Prestige in Israeli-Palestinian Society" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2000).

10. All the men of the killer's *hamula* (in theory, up to five generations) may be held responsible for a murder and hence are in danger of being targeted for revenge.

11. *Musayara* means to be nice to or patient with someone.

12. This step is an example of standard patronage relations. The killers become clients of the notable men. It is the hope of these "beggars" (*sa'ilun*) that the distinguished men they have approached will agree to assist them and travel as a *jaha* to the home of the victim's family.

13. Although most victims claimed that the murderer's motivations were an irrelevant factor when deciding whether to engage in *sulha*, one man stated, "If someone kills another intentionally, the *sulha* is very difficult. If he killed the victim accidentally, there can be a *sulha* much more easily. In the case with my

family, the killer meant to do what he did, so we cannot make *sulha*."

14. Cf. Herzfeld, *The Poetics of Manhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 36.

15. See Kressel, *Ascendancy Through Aggression*.

16. A *jaha* told me that they insist in these instances that the killer be allowed to participate in the *sulha* ceremony unhandcuffed. To convince the aggrieved side of his remorse, it is necessary that the killer appear to be a free man, voluntarily participating in the reconciliation process.

17. Cf. Ginat, *Blood Disputes*, p. 71.

18. Structural-functionalist analyses do not deny the existence of mediation. Indeed, scholars like Black-Michaud see it as an important component of social life, but they dismiss reconciliation rituals and mediation processes as merely temporary, strategic halts to feuds, which, in principle, are interminable. Black-Michaud suggests that blood money—a key part of the reconciliation process—actually functions as a mnemonic device, keeping the memory of the feud alive until one of the parties is ready to reignite it. Even later accounts ultimately reduce mediation to an adjunct of a system of balanced opposition and feud. See Ginat, *Blood Disputes*.