

## **Preface**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, having continued for decades, together with all the civilian casualties it has caused, is a tragedy for the entire humankind. It, unfortunately, showcases the worst humans are capable of - selfishness, hatred, and physical violence. Its complicated history has enabled the formation of two distinct narratives regarding the conflict, one of which is the Zionism movement, and the other - Palestinian nationalism. Much can be said about the unfortunate nature of extreme nationalism resulting in the deadly nature of this conflict. Yet it must be recognized that a train of logic exists for both sides regarding their narrative of the ownership of the land of conflict.

This essay is written with the purpose of clarifying the two opposing narratives and discussing the issues regarding present-day media coverage.

## **The History**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been raging with varying intensity for more than seven decades and an end seems distant. The representations of the conflict are very diverse. Some claim an apartheid is being carried out against Palestinians, others claim that Israel is defending itself against terrorists. The latter option is far more commonly seen in the Western world and is the leading position for any kind of Western media coverage. The Western viewpoint is not necessarily false as it does not lack physical evidence, yet the conscious choice of words and phrasing (or the omission of words and phrases) that can be spotted in the news often makes them misleading on purpose. Additionally, many analyses and articles related to the conflict use assumptions and premises whose nature are still up for debate. These aspects of the news coverage create accents that do not lead to an adequate depiction of the conflict and can even spark further conflicts due to manmade misunderstandings). Therefore, the commonly accepted view should not be taken for granted, and the causes of the conflict have to be thoroughly discussed from both points of view and the international media coverage must be questioned across the board.

When talking about the causes of this conflict one thing is clear - finding one clear answer regarding the instigator of this chain of events doesn't matter. It neither helps to resolve the current problems nor can it be beyond dispute. What matters is the perception from both sides. Any kind of timeline, therefore, has to have two rows to understand the two very distinct narratives. Shall we start going down history lane? Back when the Ottoman Empire still existed the region had some stability, yet before WWI with the advancement of the Zionist movement tensions started to rise. The Zionist movement has been compared to European colonialism but with the twist that it's not expansion overseas but a way to flee from European anti-semitism and persecution (for example, there were anti-Jewish programs in imperial Russia). From the Jewish side, the Zionist movement was persuasive, and it was even encouraged by Europeans in order to get rid of the misguided perceived threat of Jewish people. The new immigrants did not want to be reliant on the locals (the Palestinians), thus conflicts were created. The local Palestinians lost jobs because they, for example, were not welcome to work under Jewish farmers. In this context the clash between two nationalisms took its shape - the Zionists (but not always Jewish people everywhere) took this land to be their historic motherland and Palestinians who had lived there for centuries and now formed their nationalism in the backdrop of the crumbling Ottoman Empire.

In 1917 through just 67 words the Zionists gained the biggest support they could wish for - in the form of the Balfour Declaration, which was the British support for a Jewish state in Palestine, noting that no harm should be done to the existing non-Jewish locals. After World War 1 the territory became a British mandate and thus an opportunity appeared for Jewish immigration throughout the interwar years. Stemming from the logic explained earlier, more Jewish immigrants led to more tension with Palestinians, resulting in the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939. After a period of civil protests by the Palestinians, a British commission dubbed Peel's Commission was introduced to investigate this problem. Their solution was a partition plan which was met with dissatisfaction from the Palestinians' side due to both economic and political issues. The Palestinians saw the plan as unjust and moved onto violent protests which eventually were brutally suppressed. Additionally, Peel's report claimed that the two conflicting sides could not be brought under one flag to rule cooperatively, a view that has grown more and more apparent. A lasting peace became increasingly complicated to achieve, and the 1947 United Nations-issued partition plan hardly fixed the issues.

Here we come to the Arab - Israeli war. This is the point where the different interpretations in the public space are extremely profound. From the Israeli side, the war was caused by Arab countries's attacks after its declaration of independence as well as terroristic attacks from the Palestinians. For the Arabs, the conflict was caused by the Israeli rejection of the partition plan and to some extent Zionism in general, as well as a wish to establish the Pan-Arab ideas as an independent and powerful force in the region in the midst of the Cold War. These ideas can be interpreted as just, yet different people will agree on different viewpoints, or they will support both, or neither. Perhaps even more important than all of that is the fact that the Palestinians did not fulfill their goal of nationhood as a result of the war. While summing up the results of the war it is apparent that Israel managed to secure its independence and even gained territory, while the Palestinians ended their nationhood without ever being a nation. Moreover, the 800,000 Palestinians displaced before and during the war (the displacement of Palestinians was a part of the casus belli for the Arab League entering Israel) explains why the war is remembered as a complete disaster for Palestinians.

As far as the Palestinians were concerned, a loss in a war did not remove the nationalist calling. This way, accepting Israel or the rule of other Arab states was far from appealing. Judging by past events, it is clear that the voices of a new-born nationalism are never easily suppressed, thus, it could be said that different forms of resistance were destined to take place. This came in the form of intifadas, both militaristic and economic, with economic resistance sometimes enforced by military strength. Large-scale rejection of taxation and general strikes complemented the Palestinian forces roaming the streets. Israel responded swiftly and strongly with taxation officers supported by the IDA rummaging through Palestinian merchants and cars. Notably, Israel's responses often affected the entirety of Palestinian communities - blockading towns, and implementing so many regulations that Palestinian exports to other countries were practically impossible. Obviously, the Intifadas had a strong military aspect to them, but the Israeli dominance in this field was overwhelming, resulting in a death ratio somewhere in the range of 3:1.

Looking from another angle, the conflict was directly linked to the existence of their nation for the Israelis up to the Oslo Accords, as Palestinians officially hadn't recognized the Israeli right to the land. Although the Oslo Accords had brought some hope for reconciliation, without unanimous support for the PLO, peace was not quite achievable. This leads to the central problem here: how to achieve a peace settlement when there is no acceptable result

for all sides. Extremists from the Palestinian side do not accept Zionism as a whole and for as long as they have the support, agreeing upon any kind of lawful partition is like finding a needle in a haystack. Here we come face to face with the overarching issue. How to join the un-joinable with two cultures and histories and how to partition the indivisible - a land that has always been a whole unit in its own right.

Here Hamas and its nature must be explored. Classified by a considerable part of the world as a terrorist organization, it is a party that was democratically elected in 2006. It pushes against Zionism as a whole and is in favor of violence to achieve its goals. In that sense, they are a radical group that has the popular vote, which, as I see it, is an expected position for people in crisis for decades. In a crisis, people yearn for an easy way out (this explains, for example, why many European countries fell back to authoritarianism after the 1930s economic crisis), and the military actions and absolute victory promised by Hamas were desirable for many. On this note, the current strong opposition to Hamas can only strengthen support for Hamas, since we do not differentiate between Hamas and Gaza as a whole. Some countries in their official stances might only name-drop Hamas but due to the omission of the notion of Gaza as a separate entity, Gazans and Palestinians can only understand this as opposition to them as a collective. This is a highly dangerous way to approach the current situation and can only cause more casualties and spark future conflicts. Thus, a call for Gazans to abandon the principles of Hamas with as much enthusiasm as is diverted to call Hamas terrorists might dent the metaphorical walls enclosing Gaza and the literal wall enclosing the West Bank.

It is more than clear that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is much more than merely a question of counterterrorism, a question of right and wrong, or a question about justice and injustice. The reasons behind the two distinct narratives are so deep-rooted in our history that solving the puzzle has become practically impossible. Even if we removed the historical context and simply considered the moral justification, it would appear that no one is innocent. The terrorist acts done by Hamas showcase heartless human cruelty, and how ignorant one can be toward the suffering they bring upon others. These acts give away even the slightest possibility of spreading mutual understanding and empathy, which might lead to a peaceful future. On the other hand, actions taken in the name of self-defense and nationalism have caused as much harm as the land and glory they have brought to the Israeli people. They are cruel to the local Arab population to the utmost degree.

## **Post-truth**

Since it is impossible to find the culprit in the past, it might be wise to take a step back from the map of the Israeli region and look at the more global and more recent picture. Since the Hamas attack on Israel beginning on October 7th, 2023, the conflict has attracted enormous media attention. The updates regarding this new round of armed conflict can be found on the website of almost every single news agency. Despite reporting the same events, the news from various sources often gives off different interpretations of it. In the Western world, a strong pro-Israeli sentiment can be felt. For example, one of the Latvian magazines spent several pages on witness retellings of the Hamas attack starting on the 7th of October 2023, but the following week, at which point disproportionately more Gazans became killed by Israeli retaliation and were affected on a scale that was exponentially larger compared to the Hamas attack, the conflict was mentioned only in passing and largely with

fear mongering against Iran. Such one-sided news coverage makes it incredibly challenging not to support Israel outright due to the implications an opposite statement could bring - should you support Hamas, you are on the side of a terrorist group, should you be against Israel, you can be considered an anti-semitic, or worse, a neo-nazi. The attentive readers might point out that these statements are not necessarily equal, but in an age of short-form content and headline-dominated media fields, these connotations undoubtedly stick out like a sore thumb. Even while reading so-called more “neutral” and prestigious Western news agencies like BBC or Reuters, a strong distinction between rhetorics could still be felt when compared with some Middle-East-based news corporations, for instance, Al Jazeera. Indeed, often media agents do not turn directly against the regular Gazans but the omission of the experiences inflicted upon civilians in Gaza paints a certain picture in and of itself. For another example, news pieces often mention the death count of Israelis while omitting that of the Palestinians. Such an expression does not necessarily oblige us to group the related news agencies as untrustworthy, but it certainly affects the average reader; in fact, the effect is overwhelming.

Consider the bombing of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City that happened on the 17th of October, 2023, just ten days after the start of the new conflict. At local time around 19:00, an explosion occurred in the courtyard of the hospital, resulting in the death of around 100-300<sup>1</sup> people and more than 300 people injured<sup>2</sup>. A tragedy. Yet what attracted more media attention than the sufferings of the Palestinians was finding out the culprit behind the bombing<sup>3</sup>. Within the following days, both Israel and Hamas put forward proof to support their version of the incident, accusing each other, as one would expect. Countries including the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Canada confirmed that their intelligence sources had indicated that the cause of the explosion was a failed rocket launch from within Gaza by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, several Arab countries backed Hamas, blaming Israeli air strikes as the cause. We see that despite the lack of conclusive evidence from both sides, countries across the globe are nevertheless “picking a side”. These official narratives are often so because their interests are aligned with the picked side. A case in point here would be the support for Hamas from Arab nations. Since the people living in these nations are mostly Arab and Muslim, they undoubtedly feel much closer to Palestinians than to the Israeli people. Thus, when the evidence is missing, people’s beliefs and values start to kick in. The anti-Israel and pro-Palestinian protests throughout the Middle East region in the following week after the bombing serve as ideal proof of the influence of individual values. Similarly, the pro-Israeli sentiment felt in the Western press works in the same manner - it does not matter who is guilty, what matters is who people believe to be guilty.

Yet would a piece of conclusive evidence end the protests or the pro-Israeli sentiment? Should we do a little thought experiment, the answer will be an outright “no”. But why is that so? Provided that humans are completely rational, the rage over the culprit should cease to exist now that conclusive evidence exists, since those who have picked the “wrong” side would now have no reason to blame the opposite side. Notice how the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/19/politics/us-intelligence-assessment-gaza-hospital-blast/index.html>

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/18/al-ahli-arab-hospital-piecing-together-what-happened-as-israel-insists-militant-rocket-to-blame>

<sup>3</sup> As of November 5th, 2023, there is no conclusive evidence that would point out the culprit.

<sup>4</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/18/politics/us-intel-gaza-hospital-blast/index.html>

assumptions are that, firstly, conclusive evidence exists, and, secondly, humans are rational. In reality, these would be incredibly bold assumptions. On the one hand, it is hard to achieve any conclusive evidence, since it is impossible to guarantee the neutrality of the source. Humans tend to question the authenticity of a statement despite a lack of counterarguments, especially when it contradicts their own beliefs. On the other hand, humans are far from rational even if objectively conclusive evidence exists. For instance, despite a large number of proofs available online, many nowadays still believe in the so-called "Flat Earth Theory", which states that, instead of an imperfect sphere, Earth is actually flat. Examples similar to this are abundant and can all be found online, often under the label of "conspiracy theories". The existence of such theories proves that often objective facts and proofs are less important than the beliefs of individuals when it comes to accepting new knowledge. Back to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is obvious that further proof related to the bombing incident, regardless of their authenticity, will not turn the sentiment in the Western world or the Arab nations around, for they simply do not matter.

Post-truth is the most appropriate word describing the situation. It describes circumstances when objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. In our context, the post-truth aspect of public opinion is highly dangerous, since it practically turns any facts and proofs meaningless. In particular, when one favors beliefs and emotions over facts, it is almost impossible to turn one's mind around. Consider a parallel universe in which it turns out that the culprit behind the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital bombing was indeed an Israeli air strike. How much would the evidence truly matter? The hatred and rejection spread from the Western world towards the Arab people as a whole will not disappear, nor will they be forgotten. The Palestinians and the Arab nations will always remember the pro-Israeli rhetoric used in Western news pieces despite the lack of evidence to support Israel's claim. Vice versa, should it turn out that PIJ (Palestinian Islamic Jihad) bombed the hospital, it would stay as a mark of mockery on the face of those who backed Hamas in the early days. It can be felt that the aspects of spreading hatred and a sense of exclusion lay in the very nature of "side-picking", especially when it is related to an armed conflict which is a matter of life and death. Since, understandably, hatred spread cannot be taken back, the aspect of post-truth is truly vicious. It takes away possibilities for mutual understanding and spreading empathy, instead, it separates opposite sides, almost indefinitely, with further resentment and hostility.

## **The Future**

Conflict cannot be solved with another conflict, and a peaceful future cannot be expected when one side is defeated by force. There is little doubt that having two distinct, yet true, narratives greatly complicates the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nonetheless, it should be understood that, ultimately, peace is the only dream for the people involved. Peace is and should be the only solution and the only common goal all sides strive for. Indeed, the historical context regarding the conflict is truly convoluted, yet perhaps it could cease to be. Perhaps, on a societal level, the truth will be appreciated, and, perhaps, despite stark contrast in culture and beliefs, one could be empathetic and compassionate toward others.