An Analysis of Intercultural Conflict Between Israelis & Palestinians

Group #1

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# Introduction

# The area of Israel Palestine is located within the Middle East sharing borders with Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and the Mediterranean Sea. Author and historian Tom Segev once remarked, “'The Promised Land had, by the stroke of a pen, become twice-promised” (Bartov, 2000) Since then, the Israeli Palestinian conflict appears to be the most controversial and fiercely contested topic in the Middle East. The American Journal of International Law (1923) reports how the conflict stemmed after British-backed Arab forces drove out the Ottoman Turks in the area now recognized as Israel Palestine, eventually assigned by the League of Nations to be a Mandatory under British control (British Mandate for Palestine, 1923).

# After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, two distinct identities were forming in this region. Theodor Herzl laid out a solution to widespread anti-Semitism across Europe, “Jews [needed to] create their own state, in which they could constitute a majority and be able to exercise self-determination” (Berry & Philo, 2004). Rather than just a religion, their identity was transforming into one of a people deserving of a state. The surrounding Arabs, on the other hand, began identifying themselves as Palestinians as a resistance against the Ottoman Turks (Berry & Philo, 2004).

# According to Berry & Philo (2004), the first promise by the British of ownership to the land was through correspondence between Sir Henry McMahon, British High Commissioner in Egypt and Sharif Hussein, Emir of Mecca, offering up the territory to the Arabs in exchange for their support alongside the British for overthrowing the Ottoman Turks. Berry & Philo (2004) go on to explain other agreements being discussed during this time,

# “Negotiations between Britain, France, and Russia (later to include Italy) led to the secretive Sykes-Picot agreement, which sought to establish ‘spheres of influence’ for the European powers within the region.” (p. 6)

# Berry & Philo (2004) discuss yet another document conflicting with European public policy regarding the area that was once under control of the Ottoman Turks expressing the support for a Jewish homeland through the Balfour Declaration in 1917.

An influx of Jewish migrants fleeing Hitler’s Germany and other countries where anti-Semitism threatened the wellbeing of millions of Jewish individuals nearly doubled the Jewish population in Palestine, leading to the Arab Revolt that demanded Palestinian independence (Grinberg, 2013). In an effort to appease the Palestinians, the British released the White Paper of 1939, promising eventual independence to the Palestinians as well as restricting Jewish immigration into Palestine (Apter, 2008). However, as this was in the beginning years of World War II, this was a wildly unpopular policy among the international community and Britain then turned over the dispute to the United Nations. In 1947, the UN attempted to make a deal, splitting up the land and giving half of it to the Palestinians and half of it to the Jewish people, establishing Israel, while Jerusalem would remain under UN control (Apter, 2008). The Palestinians rejected this proposal and fought a brief war backed by surrounding Arab states with the Israelis, which the Israelis won and got control of more Palestinian mandated land, marking the end of the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 (Berry & Philo, 2004).

During this time, Palestinians were driven out of their mandated land. Arab Palestinians had more of their UN mandated land seized, and Jewish settlers migrated into the mandated land for Palestinians. As a result, tensions rose. In 1967, the Six Days War was fought over the land by Israel, Palestine, and Palestine’s surrounding Arab supporters, with Israel not only taking parts of mandated Palestine, but seizing land from surrounding Arab countries (Berry & Philo, 2004). Throughout this time, conflict arose and became even more deadly, with extremist groups continuing to form in the region. Furthermore, Israeli settlers began moving in to Gaza and the West Bank, angering Palestinians even more by cutting off their communities and driving them out of what was originally their mandated land. Palestinians often felt as if occupation was excruciating and felt even more hopeless that they’d ever get their own homeland. This unrest eventually gave way to the First Intifada of 1987 where Berry & Philo (2004) notes that what began as massive protests and civil resistance turned deadly. Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) responded by violent squashing the rebellion, later leading to the United Nations General Assembly condemning their actions during the intifada (Berry & Philo, 2004).

As a result of the First Intifada, growing frustrations among a group of Palestinians gave birth to a new extremist group called Hamas that would soon change the political landscape and the direction of negotiations between Israel and Palestine forever (Beauchamp 2017). The Oslo Accords follow the First Intifada in an attempt to restore the Palestinian hope that perhaps independence could be reached one day, establishing a limited-self government called the Palestinian Authority (Vox, 2016). Although this appeared to be a move in the right direction to restore peace in the Middle East, extremists on both sides reacted violently, with a far-right Israeli assassinating the then Israeli Prime Minister Rabin (Schmemann 1995). This gave way to the Second Intifada, resulting in a deadlier conflict than the first.

At this point, the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians seemed more hopeless than ever, with the barriers to peace looking as if they were impossible to overcome. In 2006, Hamas won the majority under the Palestinian Authority and fought violent armed battled with the more peaceful pro-Palestinian groups, disassociating themselves from the Palestinian Authority (Beauchamp, 2017). In Gaza, they began caring for their Palestinian citizens in an effort to legitimize their position of authority and become popular among the Palestinians. Eventually, they took complete control of the Gaza strip. The Israeli government continues to impose further restrictions and discriminatory policies on to Palestinians and the politics have shifted further right, with Benjamin Netanyahu as the Prime Minister. Furthermore, in May 1, 2017, Hamas is willing for the Palestinians to establish a state within territories occupied by Israel, which signifies an easing tension showed by the tolerance of Hamas.

­­Challenges Impeding Peace

With such a complex & intricate situation in the Middle East, it is important to take a step back and analyze some of the major factors preventing peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Both sides feel as though they have the rightful claim to the area of land in the Middle East, claims that are rooted in the hearts of the people. These differences have led to bloodshed and unrest for decades, stemming back from a plethora of issues that the two states don’t see eye to eye on. However, many of said issues can be boiled down into three major categories that prevent peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. This section will cover the different stances each respective side has when it comes to military power, territorial desires, and religious priorities.

Earlier we discussed the wars between the two parties involved so it should come as no surprise that there is clear evidence of violent behavior from both sides. Both sides have displayed acts of violent aggression but that does not mean that both sides are fighting an equal fight. In 2013, Israel reportedly spent over $16 billion dollars on its military relating to the conflict between the two states. To put that in comparison, in that same year the entire Palestinian budget totaled at just about $4 billion dollars (Suazo, 2014). This discrepancy between the two sides creates problems by allowing the Israelis to do more when it comes to manpower. For example, in 2014 Israel increased the amount of military personnel inside the Jordan Valley. They declared their intent “to maintain a long-term military presence”, justifying it by claiming their military presence there is critical for maintaining its security (Sherwood, 2014). One solution to peace between the two states involves a ceasefire. Temporarily laying down their weapons to discuss rather than duel. Ceasefires are good temporary halts to the violence, however if this discrepancy between military power exists, Israel has no real reason to establish a long-lasting peace treaty. In a dispute about territory the side with the sharpest stick has no reason to lay down their spear. Even during a ceasefire, the Israelis are not exempt from mobilizing their military, occupying contested space based on the sheer disproportion between the two armies.

The second major issue preventing peace between these two sides is the conflict of interest regarding the territory in which both sides wish to occupy. The first and arguably most pressing issue is the issue with Jerusalem. Both sides seek to claim Jerusalem as a capital for themselves. After the 1967 war, the two began talks surrounding the idea of a “shared capital”. The problem with this solution is the way in which Jerusalem would be divided. Some political figures such as former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry suggest division based on the 1949 green line. This line placed clear, distinguishable boundaries between the two states until the 1967 war threw that progress away. The idea of bringing it back would benefit both parties by once again establishing borders between the two. However, turning this plan into action is easier said than done. For this to happen, one needs to go back to the issue with Jerusalem. Both sides refuse to allow the opposition to take control of Jerusalem. If one side lost access to Jerusalem, they would also lose access to the heart of the city, as well as extremely valued holy sites that date back for centuries (Sherwood, 2014). To sacrifice Jerusalem is to sacrifice an irreplaceable piece of religious history.

Both Israel and Palestine are both deeply rooted in religion. Because religion is so highly valued in both these societies, it often influences warfare decisions and overarching infrastructures that dictate how the regions are governed. It is easy to look at this entire conflict and simply label it as simply a “territorial conflict”, but what makes this situation so complicated is that territory is not the only value at risk here. To Israelis’, Jerusalem is their homeland with religious ties dating back to the bible. To the Palestinian’s, that territory has forever been marked as land apart of Muslim religious trust (Eldad, 2013). There are deeper ties to this land than just where the borders lay. Claims to these regions have religious significance and value to both sides. Value that either side is currently not willing to give up.

# Intercultural Conflict Resolution

This section will explore how intercultural conflicts in general can be resolved and will apply these paradigms to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Prolonged contact between groups that are in conflict can often reduce animosity according to Gordon Allport in *The Nature of Prejudice*. However, there are many instances of protracted, modern conflicts not between states, but between “identity groups” living within the same social structure. In spite of the contact facilitated by sharing the same government, many such conflicts have continued for decades, with the contact between these peoples seeming to be ineffectual at reducing their animosity. In fact, some of the most violent conflicts of the last half century, such as genocides in Bosnia or Rwanda, were between cultural groups that lived in the same region for generations, even sharing common language, history, and culture (Kelman, 1999). Nonetheless, it seems a single cultural difference is enough to divide these groups and cause neighbors to turn on each other with violent results. Close contact is far from a certain means of preventing or remedying intercultural conflict.

According to Kelman, this is because mere contact between peoples is not enough. The contact must meet certain conditions. It needs to be on “equal status [and] in the pursuit of common goals” such that it “leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups” (Kelman, 1999). This allows the groups to learn to appreciate what each other have in common through their encounters rather than focusing on what divides them. These encounters can also help dispel falsely perceived differences that do not hold up under actual in-person interactions.

Israelis and Palestinians live in close contact with each other, sharing the same region of land along the eastern shore of the mediterranean. They also currently live under a common government, and share history in the region dating back centuries. However, they have been in a deep-rooted, prolonged conflict with each other since the creation of Israel, and their interactions through proximity seem to have done nothing to lessen their divide. This is because the contact between these groups does not meet the requirements of equality and common interests that is necessary for positive intercultural interactions. Kelman notes several factors specific to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that create a “negative interdependence” rather than building a sense of common humanity (Kelman, 1999).

First, due to the circumstances under which their interactions usually occur, each group tends to only see the worst of the other. Israelis primarily meet only poor Palestinian laborers who come into Jewish regions in search of work due to the high-levels of unemployment in the Palestinian neighborhoods. Palestinians on the other hand, primarily interact with Israeli soldiers who restrict travel across the border and are naturally suspicious of Palestinians. Since each only sees the members of the other group that are least-like and most-opposed to themselves, these contacts “are the antithesis of the equal-status contacts in pursuit of common interests [necessary] for positive changes in intergroup relations” (Kelman, 1999). Thus the interactions between Israelis and Palestinians are too unequal to foster peace.

The interactions between Israelis and Palestinians also do not meet the condition of pursuing common goals due to the cultural heritage of each group. “Relationship to the land is a central element of the national identity of each people, and that relationship is viewed as exclusive in the national narrative through which each people’s identity is expressed” (Kelman, 1999). Each people regard the land of Israel, and as stated above, the city of Jerusalem in particular, as their homeland, and they each deny the right of the other to it. Thus each sees the other as a threat to their identity, making the pursuit of mutual goals impossible. Both sides have the same goal of possessing the same land and claiming it as their own due to their heritage, and these goals are mutually exclusive with one another. These conflicting goals have led to extreme levels of distrust between Israelis and Palestinians. In fact, “each side has been convinced that the ultimate intention of the other is to destroy it—indeed, that its own destruction is inherent in the other’s ideology” (Kelman, 1999). Not only are common goals necessary for fostering peace, but as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows, the lack of common goals, and indeed opposing goals, can lead to extreme levels of animosity.

The inequality and conflicting goals present in Israeli-Palestinian interactions coincide with a systematic acceptance of the conflict, in effect ensuring that these interactions and animosity between the groups remains the status quo. Israel was established as an ethnic state, that is, “as the homeland of the Jewish people only” (Rouhana & Ghanem, 1998). Therefore, the government and social institutions exist for the benefit of the Jewish people exclusively. Non-Jews, such as the Palestinians, although they may inhabit the same land and live under the same government, are considered unequal before the government compared with the Jews. There is no expectation that the government should work for Palestinians’ best interest, as the support of Jews is its sole endeavor. Interactions between Palestinians and Israelis as equals and in pursuit of common goals are therefore made difficult and almost impossible by Israel’s status as an ethnic state.

# Attempts at Conflict Resolution

This section will examine past attempts at conflict resolution and will evaluate their levels of effectiveness. It will also present possible paths forward with suggestions for constructive practices and warnings against destructive practices.

One interesting study of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which was analyzed by Ifat Maoz in the article “An Experiment in Peace” sought to reduce animosity by circumventing the challenges that prevent the conditions for peace-building interactions from being met. The study brought teenagers together from Israeli and Palestinian high schools for two day workshops. The students all expressed high levels of interest in participating in the study and said that prior to this experience they had few if any interactions with people of the other cultural group (Maoz, 2000). They were asked both qualitative and quantitative questions about what they thought of the other group before and after the study.

The workshops began with casual personal conversation, which was meant to build relationships, and then transitioned to discussing the conflict. This progression was made in order to build the sense of common humanity, necessary for interactions to reduce conflict. Even when discussing the conflict, the interactions were designed “to enable youth to explore the group realities of the other side and to make it easier for them to feel empathy and to take into the self the experiences of the other” (Maoz, 2000). This was accomplished by encouraging the students to share personal experiences about how they have been affected by the conflict. Thus, it was discussed in terms of individual people for whom they could feel a connection, rather than in impersonal terms of the elements that divide them such as national identity.

The administrators of the study observed similar changes in the students in both groups as a result of the study. This indicates that through fostering mutually equal interaction, it is possible to reduce animosity between these groups. Prior to the study, each group of youths had negative views about the other despite (or as a result of) previously having very few interactions with members of the other group. Going into the experience, the Israeli students generally indicated that they viewed Palestinians as deficient intellectually, as a result of “negative stereotypes of Arabs on the cognitive educational and achievement dimensions” (Maoz, 2000). Meanwhile, going into the workshops, Palestinians viewed Israelis negatively “on expressive, social and emotional dimensions” (Maoz, 2000). Although the negative stereotypes were not the same, both groups viewed the other as deficient in some crucial area of their humanity. Following the interactions through the workshops, the students were asked again to rate their views of the other group, and both sides significantly improved their ratings of the other group.

The students’ conversations during the workshops gave some indication of why they felt this way about the other side and of how their views were changed through the interactions. Both sides had experienced violence from the other side. The Israelis had seen “terror attacks of Palestinians towards Israeli citizens, on the one hand, and violence of Israeli soldiers and security forces towards Palestinians” (Maoz, 2000). However, through the workshops, the Israelis expressed that they realized the Palestinians were not as violent as they thought. They blamed their flawed views on too much negative media attention on violent Palestinians. Likewise, the Palestinians expressed that they could understand the Israeli’s fears since they had experienced violence, often first-hand or from personal accounts, from the Israeli security forces. Therefore, it is possible to reduce tensions and negative perceptions of groups in conflict if conditions can be created where equal and personal interactions are possible.

# Application of the Dialectical Method

The application of the dialectical method could help us see multitude of ways to deal with the Israeli and Palestinian conflict. By combining and acknowledging the previous attempts, challenges, and possibly, new ways to ensure the security of the peace between the two conflicting societies, the possibility for peace might be closer within a few paradigms. Of course, when it comes to intercultural communication, it is important to note that going beyond what the paradigms tell us, such as analyzing the context that influenced recent actions, can help give us an conscious understanding to why a certain action was taken.

Taking a look back at the stances each side takes, they both perceive each other in an aggressive formation. In the previous example about the increased military presence in Jordan Valley, the Israelis see this stance only as a defensive movement towards the Palestinians, not for aggressive purposes. Wanting to ensure that Jordan Valley is secure, a deeper meaning lies behind the defensive actions influenced by their historic context between the Palestinians. If we look at the very beginning that stemmed this conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis, the Palestinians are the first ones to make a violent move against the Israelis, prompting independence. If we look at this paradigm along with other violent actions from the Palestinians from an individual in Israel point of view, the idea of putting in military forces in the Jordan Valley seems justified since our only intention is to defend against the Palestinians whom we ascribed as having an aggressive behavior. Of course, this is only understanding the conflict in only one paradigm, now we take a look at how the Palestinians look at this action in their point of view along with the historical contexts that influenced the action they are about to take.

Now, imagine that you have gotten out of college and managed to buy your own home. Along with your own room, a restroom all for yourself, a kitchen you can cook in, and a new found independence and freedom. How would one react if someone suddenly barges into your new home and claims half of it as one of their own without your consent? Would one retaliate as someone disrespects the home you have worked so hard to achieve? This perspective is seen through the eyes of an individual Palestinian. In the very beginning, the Palestinians already felt betrayed by the British that they are allowing someone to occupy the land that the Arabs have been working so hard to gain. After the UN and the British allowed the Jewish people to claim half of the land that the Palestinians owned, they then declared their independence. This triggers a breaking point that even though the Palestinians made it vocal that they do not want the Jews in their land, they still allowed the Jews, which are seen as trespassers in the eyes of Palestinians, to carry on. Making the first aggressive move to defend their homeland, the Arabs of Palestine and the surrounding countries then invaded Israel, which caused a war known as “Al-Nakbah” (The Catastrophe), eventually creating a domino effect that strengthened tensions until this present day.

# Conclusion

The dialectical perspective is a very powerful tool in terms of understanding conflict. Analyzing the motives, needs, and points of view from all sides of a conflict can help us to avoid some of the most common mistakes when examining an intercultural conflict. An outsider’s tendencies may be to take the side of the cultural with which they are most familiar, or try to determine a morally right or wrong side in a conflict when there may not be a clear answer to that question. Many conflicts devolve to the point of becoming a simple chain of retaliation by one side for the immediately preceding actions of the other side, and without the dialectical perspective, understanding a conflict becomes a process of backtracking through the actions of those on each side of the conflict and viewing the initial aggressor as the “bad guy” in the situation.

Non-dialectical approaches to understanding conflict often lack the level of understanding of both sides that is present, and this is what makes the dialectical approach a better tool for understanding conflict. The dialectical perspective provides greater amounts of insight into the motives and determining factors behind conflicts, and what dialectical tensions initiated the conflicts. If one wishes to be more mindful of the dialectical perspective in the future, they may want to stop and take the time to understand the underlying nature of an intercultural conflict. This gives them all the information they may need to be more mindful of a conflict when reacting to it.

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