Three counter-intuitives on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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Abstract

The article, partly based on work-experience from dialogue meetings between Palestinians and Israelis, attempts to challenge some basic notions of the Conflict Resolution discourse as applied to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They relate to the fields of religion, economics and communication, and are mildly heretic in each. It suggests that three fundamental beliefs that have determined all the international efforts aimed at dissolving the perennial conflict were wrong: One, that religion should be left out of peace processes; a second that economic synergy can promote peace; and the third that promoting a direct interaction between the sides, would be conducive to peace. These premises, concerning ways to go about solving the problem, could in fact be part of the problem.

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1. The peculiar Nature of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, once again threatening to erupt into violence, is perhaps the paradigmatic world conflict of our times. Over the past generation, digital media all over the world featured Palestine and Israel more frequently in their top news stories than any other polity beside the US.[3] This is due of course to the 130-year unresolved strife between Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians. The Oslo peace process failed to transform the relationship between an occupying power and occupied people into one of state-to-state co-existence. It also failed as a tool for conflict management. There is no meeting point or consensus around alternative outcomes that have emerged or gained traction in both societies.[4]

One explanation for the ungainly prominence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is that it seems to serve as a representative example, even a parable, for

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[3] Elad Segev and Menahem Blondheim, 'Online News about Israel and Palestine: A Cross-National Comparison of Prominence and Trends' (2013) *Digital Journalism,* Vol. 1 (1) 1-13.

[4] Zaha Hassan, Daniel Levy, Hallaamal Keir, Marwan Muasher, 'Breaking the Israel-Palestine Status Quo' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* 2021, available at https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/04/19/breaking-israel-palestine-status-quo-pub-84167 (last access 10 May 2023).

some fundamental issues troubling our world system. It brings into a sharp, compact, focus the encounter between the occident and the orient, North and South—or alternatively—the modern and the traditionalist, the 'strong' and the 'week' the rich and the poor. In the vast literature on the topic some regard the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the story of orientalism and colonialism playing itself out, others as foreplay for the clash of civilizations in a particularly rough global neighborhood,[5] and there are of course plenty of other constructions of the conflict's broader meaning. But to all it seems to serve as a key for penetrating the complexities of our troubled contemporary world, and a launchpad for working out its future.

As the litmus test for whether deep-rooted conflicts riddling our world can be resolved peacefully, the best efforts and top resources of many players have been invested in attempts to bring about a lasting peace to the region.[6] Tons of white paper(s) in foreign offices and policy institutes and rivers of white wine in diplomatic events have been consumed in the process of analyzing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and trying to resolve it. All of America's recent presidents,[7]

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[5] Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge, New York et. al.: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 187-191.

[6] Ritchie Ovendale, *The origins of the Arab Israeli Wars* (London et al: Pearson, 2015) 274-300.

[7] Notably, the conflagration between Israel and the militant Hamas movement in Gaza in May 2021, that included heavy air strikes on Gaza, have forced the Middle East onto US President Joe Biden's agenda. Shortly before, the Biden's Administration had announced that it will provide $235m of aid to Palestinians, restoring part of the assistance cut by Donald Trump.

numerous foreign offices and NGOs, let alone the UN, believed they should and they could solve it.

Amidst all this incessant global canvassing, it did appear at some points that a resolution was imminent. The *Oslo Accords* (1993) and *Camp David Summit* (2000)[8] are the prominent examples, and one could go on. But to date, a just and lasting peace between Palestinians and Israelis has proved a chimera. The conflict is resilient and intractable, much better entrenched than the best efforts of its would-be resolvers—be they ideologues or politicians, academics or do-gooders.

In what follows we try to explain this glaring gulf between the expectations of policy experts and their non-materialization; of so much effort and so little progress. We suggest that a number of intuitive theoretical premises of would-be peacemakers require critical evaluation. These premises, concerning ways to go about solving the problem, could in fact be part of the problem. The potential contribution of this kind of re-evaluation transcends the future of this tragic conflict and the fate of the people involved in it. Theoretical infirmities in approaches to resolve it may potentially affect attempts at conflict resolution in other cases too. Being a paradigmatic world conflict, as suggested above, the failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict brings into question the premises

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[8] The summit ended without an agreement.

of our attempts to peacefully settle other current violent contests distant in space, and future ones, distant in time.

2. Theoretical fundamentals of the argument

In launching such a process of re-evaluation, a simple preliminary possibility that need be considered is that not all conflicts that should be resolved can be resolved, let alone peacefully. Perhaps the Israeli-Palestinian conflict happens to be such a case, immune to peaceful resolution or doomed to remain in the best-case scenario a managed conflict.

But we propose here a more positive approach albeit deriving from a critique of entrenched axioms and intuitive hypotheses that have guided previous efforts to reach a solution. More precisely, we propose here three possible misplaced intuitions about conflict resolution that became cemented into faiths— at least as applied to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They relate to the fields of religion, economics and communication, and are mildly heretic in each.

The first assumption to which we take a critical stance concerns the role of religion. Conflict resolution requires pragmatism and compromise, bred of a relativist state of mind. This is precisely what religions are not. Indeed, the role of

religion in exacerbating human conflict and bringing about violence and death is no longer looked at as an irony, a paradoxical aberration. Sadly, our daily news headlines demonstrate why linking religion with conflict, war, and death has become a commonplace. True enough, there were plenty of conflicts and wars that had no religious aspect, and at times notions such as the 'peace of God' or other religion-related moral premises could actually ameliorate conflict. But the notion that religion is bad for peace, or at least for conflict resolution, is commonplace and deeply entrenched.

The second assumption we are questioning is the classical liberal economic view of conflict resolution. In its simplistic form, the assumption would call for pouring tons of money on the protagonists. It would make them happy, mutually economic dependent, and ergo, open for conciliation. A simple starting point is that the collateral damage of war disrupts economic activity: the more vulnerable and extensive such activity, the greater the cost.[9] The logic of this mindset is rather clear: The liberal approach in International Relations suggests that competition over economic resources has been the root-cause of any number

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[9] Andrew Moravcsik, 'The New Liberalism' in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan, Snidal (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 234-254.

of wars throughout history. Ergo, maintaining, free trade prosperity would be a powerful antidote to violence and an incentive for peace.[10]

In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict —featuring two minor economies—engineering an economic new deal is quite realistic and has considerable allure. The same dynamic emerges according liberals with regard to the role of energy resources potentially impacting the conflict. The liberals tend to see energy as a non-political issue that can be utilized to promote interstate cooperation and mutual benefit on the basis of the liberal concept of interdependence.[11]

The third popular idea we want to challenge is the need to establish direct dialog between the conflicting parties. There is a general belief that enemies are socially distant and friends are close, thus, putting enemies in contact, and making them close may improve relations. The underlying premise is that once each side realizes the humanity of its counterpart through contact and dialogue, the road to peace is paved. Hence it is important to create a framework that would put enemies

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[10] Karen Mingst, *Essentials of International Relations* (New York and London: Norton Company, 2008) 210-212.

[11] Stein Tønnesson and Åshild Kolås, 'Energy security in Asia: China, India, Oil and Peace' *Oslo International Peace Research Institute 2006,* Report to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=5694 (last accessed 10 May 2023).

in dialogue. It would both reveal the other side as human and similar, even as a potential friend, and also shed light on the situation by seeing it through the adversary's eyes. It is well-known that one of the ways the United Nations use to advance the cause of peace is to serve as an international forum for the grand debate (as this procedure is called within the UN). Although this method enables diplomats, politicians and personalities to meet and test ideas, discuss problems, articulate standards of international conduct, to advance policy propositions and raise global consciousness about various issues, it has its downsides too. As it has been observed, this has proved in many cases counter-productive. Talk is not always salutary; it may exaggerate and intensify mistrust.[12]

Nevertheless, mediation is universally held in suspicion. While it is as common in international politics as is conflict, there is a common-led perception that mediators intervene because of their interest in the conflict or in obtaining a certain outcome. Thus, although a mediator can play a number of roles simultaneously, such as communicator, formulator, and manipulator, they are all used to accomplish the mediator's objectives. For this reason, mediators can seldom effect deep reconciliation of the parties or a restructuring of their

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[12] Douglas W. Simon and Joseph Romance, *The Challenge of Politics. An Introduction to Political Science*. Seventh Edition (California: SAGE Publications, 2023) 320-321.

perceptions of each other. They have to keep as firm a hand as possible on the procedures of settlement while helping the parties work out the substance of the solution between them.[13]

Examples of both failed and successful mediation in conflicts buttress this notion. The Dayton agreements in Former Yugoslavia are rather a bad example of mediation, while the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001 with the help of international mediation by the USA and the EU that introduced the power-sharing model into the constitution in the Former Republic of Macedonia, was at the time praised as a miraculous act of post-conflict mitigation[14] and still remains a 'Holy Bible' in the political and legal environment of the North Macedonian State.[15] Yet neither brought about deep reconciliation.

3. Revisiting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict according the three counter-intuitives

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[13] William Zartman and Saadia Touval, 'International Mediation: Conflict Resolution and Power Politics' (1985) *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 41 (2) 27-45.

[14] Raymond Taras and Rajat Canguly, *Understanding Ethnic Conflict. The international Dimension* (New York and al: Pearson, 2008) 256-260.

[15] Biljana Vankovska, 'The Role of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the Peace Process in Macedonia' in Stefano Bianchini (ed.), *Regional cooperation peace enforcement, and the role of the treaties in the Balkans* (Ravenna: Longo 2007) 41-64.

A. *Religion*

Religious actors can indeed play a central role in maintaining stability and social cohesion in societies around the world; deficits in religious freedom can serve as a major driver of conflict. This appears to be the driving force behind US initiative, from 2001 onwards, to engage religious actors worldwide in support of various diplomatic, development, and defense initiatives. Although religion had been instrumantalised in the realms of the Cold War, the turn of the millennium brought an unprecedented institutionalisation of religious awareness across the US government that went through alternating Democratic and Republican administrations to date.[16]

Considering the negative aspects of the religion, would-be peace-makers in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict consistently feared raising the dangerous head of the religious aspect of the conflict. They tried to submerge it. That, for instance, was the fundamental approach of Tzipi Livni and Saeb Erekat, the chief negotiators in the last formal round of talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.[17] Such thinking is also part of the reason negotiations with Hamas—an

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[16] Peter Mandaville and Chris Seiple, 'Advancing Global Peace and Security through Religious Engagement: Lessons to Improve US Policy' *United States Institute of Peace*, Report no. 503, 2021.

[17] N. Rubinstein-Shemer, 'Qaradawi's View of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict' *Hudson Institute*, 2016, available at https://www.hudson.org/node/39679 (last accessed 10 May 2023).

expressly religious organization—have not been engaged in with any seriousness by Israeli and Palestinian negotiators or third parties providing their best offices.

The neglect of the religious aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in fact longstanding. As former major general in the Israeli intelligence and National Security Advisor, Yaakov Amidror recently reported, 'I asked one of the masterminds of [the Oslo accords] "tell me, was the religious issue broached in any way?" He answered that "we didn't think of it at all".' Here Amidror commented, quite emphatically, that 'they completely ignored it, as if it didn't exist. No sensitivity to this issue just can't work in a traditionalist society like the Arab community. It simply can't work; it has no chance: nothing, zero, nada.' These are strong words for a veteran intelligence analyst.

But the argument here goes beyond suggesting that religion shouldn't be ignored, and can be ignored only at great risk to the entire peace enterprise. We submit that religion may actually be a path to peace, at least in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Let's go back to basics: All world religions emphatically carry a vision of peace and harmony as a religious ideal, even a godly trait. True enough, in many of them that universal peace can only be reached once all heretics and infidels are slaughtered, burnt on stakes or shot dead. Nevertheless, the fundamental elements of this universal religious (utopic) vision of peace and

harmony, remain stubbornly there. Moreover, most religions—even Christian denominations—are open to the notion that the resolution of religious differences can be postponed to the latter-day.

The long and the short of it is that Jewish and Palestinian religious leaders seem to do much better in their track II peace discussions than do lay politicians and officials representing their respective nations. Islamic religious figures and organizations often have more agency and leverage than is commonly assumed, stemming from their role as intermediaries with society. Depending on their popularity and social capital, they can sometimes negotiate more effective by retaining some authority to speak on personal and social matters. Political Islam also presents itself as an antidote to state collapse (and all the more so to states in the lesser categories of failed, failing or fragile). It purports to bring coherence, rectitude and internal authority—qualities inherent in sovereignty— to currently weak, corrupt, arrogant, alienated states. On the other side, the secular liberals are a poor player –disorganized and far from even the threat of violence, armed only with their claim to rational legitimacy.[18]

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[18] Frederic Wehrey, 'Introduction' in: Frederic Wehrey (ed), 'Islamic Institutions in Arab States: Mapping the Dynamics of Control, Co-option, and Contention' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2021, 1-6.

Consider negotiations between a Jewish spiritual leader and rabbi of a west-bank settlement, Menachem Froman, and Hamas religious leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin. They actually happened, and were reported to be a partial success.[19] Many replications of this ostensibly absurd move ensued, and the results are reported to be encouraging. On the ground too, the religious parties to the conflict seem to manage more or less peacefully. Even Jerusalem, the potential epicenter of religious strife, seems to reflect an overall peaceful religious coexistence, however precarious and fragile.

These observations, let alone the overall proposition they illustrate, are seldom discussed in polite International Relations experts circles. So it should be said loud and clear: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict can't be settled if its religious element isn't. Suppressing it won't help, and if it remains unsettled it is likely to detonate down the road. But at the same time, indications suggest that a religious understanding may be easier to reach than a political on; and the former seems to be a pre-requisite for the latter. So the counter-intuitive suggests that the religious aspect of the conflict not only needs to be addressed, it can possibly be a game-changer, leading the way to peace.

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[19] E. Halevy, 'Israel's Hamas Portfolio' (2008) *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs,* Vol. 2(3) 41-47.

B. *Economics*

The economic aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would suggest that basic theoretical assumption of the liberal school of thinking is much too simplistic, possibly even invalid. It would rather support the neo-realistic approach according to which interdependence means closeness of contact, that in turn raises the prospect of conflict. The bloodiest Wars have been fought between people whose affairs have become closely knit together.[20] Let's recall: before the bloody Intifada of 2000, for a full generation, the Palestinian and Israeli economies were one: they had gradually become, after the Six Day War, fully integrated. This benefited both (obviously synergetic) economies tremendously: we have uncontested economic data on that. The prosperity of the Palestinian areas increased dramatically compared to pre-1967 measures, and the standard of living of their inhabitants skyrocketed. But all the synergy and economic benefits of peaceful coexistence did not prevent the outbreak of the intifada. The intifada did dent Israeli prosperity, but effectively collapsed the Palestinian economy, particularly that of Gaza.[21]

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[20] Kenneth Waltz, 'The Myth of National Interdependence' in Charles Kindleberger (ed.), *The International Cooperation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts London: THE M.I.T. Press, 1970) 205-223, 205.

[21] Avi Ben-Bassat, Reuben Gronau, Asaf Zussman, *Highs and Lows of a Market Economy: The Case of Israel, 1995-2017* (Jerusalem: The Falk Institute, 2020).

The discovery of gas fields in the region has also not been translated into a conduit for co-existence. It hardly served to strengthen interdependence and transform rival interests through regional cooperation, nor did it help to alleviate pre-existing ethnic conflict. For example, the hydrocarbons discovered west of Gaza in 1999, that actually began the current East-Med gas saga, seem to have had zero effect on the relationship between Israel and Gaza Palestinians. It should be remembered that at that time Israel was energy-starved and it's current energy resources yet undiscovered. But the potential of major economic synergy had no impact on political relations. The same dynamic would play out later in the case of expectations that the discovery of Israel's and Cyprus' natural gas reserves would break the diplomatic and commercial ice between Israel and its neighbors and between Turkish and Greek Cypriots in the divided Mediterranean island.[22]

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict thus represents a fundamental problem for the conventional premise that economic interests and benefits determine policy in cases of deep conflict. We apparently need to complicate the issue, and engage in sustained research and thinking on the conditions and situations under which economic cooperation can promote peace, and those which would tend to hinder

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[22] Andreas Stergiou and Marika Karagianni, *Does Energy Cause Ethnic War? East Mediterranean and Caspian Sea Natural Gas and Regional Conflicts* (Newcastle upon Tyne – United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019) 52-114.

it. What is certain, at least in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is that the intuition of pouring money on the conflict with the hope of extinguishing it, won't necessarily work.

C. Communication

The positive role of interaction in ameliorating conflict has proved an engaging idea. Any number of Israelis and Palestinians have come together under this premise, and successful meetings on the ground seemed to underscore the feasibility of peace. We have witnessed this time and again: put Israelis, international mediators, and Palestinians together, and after a short while the Palestinians and Israelis will engage enthusiastically. The would-be international mediators (and usually funders) will be left to engage with their glasses of wine.[23]

But this intuition on the miracle of human contact and the effectiveness of dialogue, however pleasing, should be challenged. On the ground, in workaday contact, uncounted Israelis and Palestinians interacted personally, peacefully, and successfully, for some 30 years after '67. And the intifada came. During that same time-span, interpersonal interaction between Israelis and Egyptians, Jordanians,

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[23] This observation is based on work-experience at the Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace: we witnessed there, first-hand, many efforts aimed at bringing Palestinians and Israelis together for promoting Peace and mutual interests.

let alone Emirate citizens and Saudis, was minimal. Yet de-facto peace between them has become more substantial. The long and the short of it is that interaction and personal contact, at least in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, would seem to intensify conflict; distance and non-interaction could lead to a lasting peace. In other words, good fences, not dialogue, would seem to promote peace in the Middle Eastern case. The same may be true for other cases as well.

This counter-intuitive would seem to follow mid-20th century sociologist Lewis Mumford's notion of the 'paradox of communication'.[24] Close communications between protagonists, Mumford suggested, can actually highlight difference and disagreement, exacerbating rather than ameliorating conflict. Think the American Civil War: it broke out, notwithstanding two centuries of peaceful coexistence between the sections, in the aftermath of America's transportation and communication revolution, once the telegraph and news wire service put Northerners and Southerners in constant contact, exposing them daily to each other.[25]

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[24] Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) 239-242.

[25] Menahem Blondheim, *News over the wires: The telegraph and the flow of public information in America, 1844-1897* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

In the Middle Eastern context, Israel has made facing and directly interacting with its adversaries a foundation of its policy in the conflict. It has called, time and again, for direct negotiations between the sides. Bilateral negotiations occasionally came about; peace didn't. Compare that to the Israeli-Syrian story. The agreements between these waring countries, reached in the aftermath of the 1973 war, have held up admirably, notwithstanding the Lebanese Civil War, two wars between Israel and Lebanon, and the horrendous Syrian Civil War. Israel even provided humanitarian aid to Syrian populations in the course of that tragic engagement. But let's recall how those wondrously resilient agreements were reached: Henry Kissinger's 'shuttle-diplomacy' between the two sides made them happen.[26] That was also the case elsewhere: the major breakthroughs in the Cyprus conflicts came about after foreign involvement (the Annan plan) and similarly the Yugoslavian Wars were settled only through foreign agency.

In contrast, the Oslo accords, negotiated bilaterally between the two sides, collapsed not very long after their signing. Direct interaction between sides to the conflict may in fact be detrimental to peace. Maybe sides to international conflict,

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[26] David A. Hoffman, 'Mediation and the art of shuttle diplomacy' (2011) *Negotiation Journal,* Vol. 27(3) 263-309.

like the sides to any simmering divorce, shouldn't try to 'talk about it' directly, although mothers-in-law routinely recommend it.

4. Conclusion

This short essay is being written in an unusually quiet period in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a lull featuring close and effective peaceful connection between the sides. This is an uncharacteristically benevolent side-effect of the Corona pandemic, and it may represent another counterintuitive. Ever since the 100 Years War paralleling the black-death, possibly even since the ten-plagues of the Exodus, we intuitively think of plagues and other natural disasters as exacerbators of conflict. This debunked truism may properly be added to the three counterintuitive discussed above.

Yet plagues are different when it comes to policy recommendations: we don't recommend bringing them about in the cause of peace. We do think, however, that the other three counterintuitives discussed above have straightforward policy implications. The gist of this review was that the failure of the peace process in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may derive from some of our most fundamental notions about peace-making. One, that religion should be left out of peace processes; a second that economic synergy can promote peace; and

the third that 'talking about it', namely direct interaction between the sides, is conducive to peace. Our recommendation is simple enough: it may be time to think through, adopt, and try out, diametrically opposite approaches, in all three aspects.

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