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Societal Factors Perpetuating the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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November 22, 2012

Preface

Nobody was very comfortable with it, but everyone knew they could not stop it. I was going to Palestine. Having found an opportunity with Grand Rapids-based non-profit Paidia International Development, I made plans to stay in the West Bank for six weeks in the summer of 2012 while teaching at their ESL Adventure Camp. It was time for me to see firsthand the place that I had come to know so much about, a passion first ignited by Professors Coeli Fitzpatrick and Majd Al-Mallah in their Honors Islamic Middle East class.

The ESL Adventure Camp, I thought, would be a great opportunity for my Honors senior project. Originally, I planned to record and analyze the effectiveness of the chosen curriculum in the Palestinian summer camp environment and write a corresponding research paper. For all six weeks of the ESL Adventure Camp, I was more or less zealous with my journaling, despite the fact that work was often an all-day process and my immune system couldn't always compete with the spread of illness that comes with one hundred twenty children.

This proposed senior project was a failure from the start. While the ESL Adventure Camp itself was a good experience, what I had proposed to do with the information I gathered would prove impossible. The theoretical side of this project did not align with reality. The time commitment was between 5 and 8 hours a day, depending on the turnout of the night-time session of the camp. The GrapeSeed ESL curriculum that we were using was completely impractical for our purposes. While the teaching strategy of language acquisition through repeated exposure is widely accepted as the most natural way to learn any language, the children that attended the summer camp were those whose parents had the money to send them to a private school. The private school had already exposed students to the grammatical rules and vocabulary of the English language. English language skills varied widely amongst the campers,

and we found that the GrapeSeed curriculum was not flexible enough for what we were trying to do. We had planned to create an "English only environment" at the camp so that the campers would have practical opportunities to use English; however, we quickly found that volunteers were too eager to practice their Arabic language skills with the children. The structure and discipline system that I considered "standard" was nowhere to be found, and as someone who is not the most comfortable with kids to begin with, this was very scary. While I was primarily a teacher, with one hundred twenty kids running around, the four counselors were hardly enough to make sure the children didn't poke their eyes out or make each other cry. This was not the English teaching experience that I had expected; I was a glorified baby-sitter with flash cards. While the ESL Adventure Camp did help CEO Erich Strehl decide to choose a different English curriculum for Paidia's on-going after school English program, it was not going to fit into the plan for my senior project. In Palestine, nothing was what I anticipated.

The days were long, the sun was hot, and the ants may have been immortal. You learned to look twice before throwing the trash into the dumpster, lest a street cat be disturbed in his search for food. Somehow, though, the town of Beit Sahour seemed less foreign than I had expected. Only when I went into places like Tel Aviv and Jerusalem was there any indication that something was not right here. I could flash my American passport and instantly be waved through any checkpoint.

My brief time in the West Bank showed me that I had misunderstood the conflict in the most fundamental way. I had missed the people. Meeting and befriending various Palestinians provided insight into the human aspect of the situation. Because I was a foreigner, Palestinians were always eager to make sure that I was aware of the nature of the occupation and the history of the Palestinian struggle, and they did show me, though perhaps not in the way they intended.

It was the way the shekel was called “the currency of occupation.” It was the way our coworker would yell to Palestinian Authority officers, “I hate your government!” It was the way our neighbor’s daughter said, “She wants to know if because you are American you are for the Jews.” It was the way a man driving by the camp site yelled to a particularly muscular volunteer, “We could have used your arm in the Second Intifada!” These experiences, even in the safety of Beit Sahour, were small reminders that the injustice is there. Maybe the only difference between me and everyone else is my passport.

Introduction

"There is room for everyone at the rendezvous of victory." --Aimé Césaire

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has long exemplified the effects of disjointedness on the ability of a people to respond to injustice. There are arguments on both the Israeli and the Palestinian side that are very passionate and moving; unfortunately, it is rare for legitimate dialogue that engages both basic positions to occur. Instead, there is a general unwillingness to truly listen to those holding another set of beliefs. Most frequently, one side of the conflict is portrayed as correct and the other as evil; however, this conflict is far too complicated to be dichotomized in such a manner. In a conflict so dramatic and frustrating, it is necessary to understand what is preventing progress toward peace. From the Oslo Accords to the Camp David Accords to the direct talks of 2010, it is clear to see that numerous efforts have been made to negotiate peace in recent years, but to no avail. Where political theory fails, though, sociological theory is able to explain the seemingly perpetual nature of this conflict. Considering the prevalence of the Israeli perspective as well as a general misunderstanding of Middle Eastern society in the United States, the author has taken on the task of attempting to understand the Palestinian society as a political and cultural unit, particularly as it pertains to negotiations with Israel.

It is clear that there are features of Palestinian society that render its people and its leaders ill-equipped, if not completely incapable of effectively negotiating with the Israeli government. The fragmented national identity of the Palestinians, exacerbated by the Israeli Occupation, prevents the Palestinian political leaders from engaging in decisive and effective negotiations with the Israeli government. Because of the diversity of the Palestinian population in terms of religion, lifestyle, and location, political divisions have developed and decreased the

possibility for collaboration. Further disabling the Palestinian cause is the influence of the international community and its false construction of Palestinians as fundamentally different. The sociological concept of "othering," or the "process which serves to mark and name those thought to be different from oneself" (Weis 1995:18), can be used to explain how viewing Palestinians as the morally inferior other often results in blind, unconditional support of Israel. Finally, and most tragically, the emerging non-governmental organizations and advocacy groups for the pro-Palestinian movement often address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a manner that does not serve the interests of the Palestinians as a whole. While these factors are not the sole reasons for the on-going struggle, they do serve as roadblocks to peace.

Part I: Palestinian Society

Individual identity is highly nuanced, and clear definitions of a "Palestinian" cannot be formulated because Palestinian society includes individuals from "Christian and Muslim communities, as well as rural/urban, Gaza/West Bank, and other divides" (Hallward 2007: 86). Palestinians have multiple identities on the basis of religion and ethnicity, citizenship, and residency. The problem for Palestine is that individual and group identities have not converged to create one prevailing national identity; indeed, the fragmented Palestinian identity can be understood as an issue of arrested development. Where a cohesive national identity typically forms, individual identity has been disrupted by the trauma of the Israeli Occupation. While "state identity is as artificial as the state itself, and at best, is layered over preexisting identities" (Wilmer 1998:107), the creation of such an identity is necessary for collective action to take place on behalf of all Palestinians.

Religion, Ethnicity, and Citizenship

Religious and ethnic identities are notoriously divisive independent of the presence of conflict in a region. In Israel/Palestine, they become much more of an issue. This is partially specific to the "Holy Land," as the three Abrahamic religions vie for influence and control of holy sites contained within the territory. Contrary to the popular perception, this struggle does not exclusively involve the Jewish Israelis against the Muslim Palestinians. There is a significant Christian minority within the Palestinian Territories; indeed, Bethlehem in the West Bank is highly concentrated with Christians owing to its historical religious value. According to the 2011 numbers from the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, in addition to approximately six million Jews, the population of Israel includes 129,800 Druze, 155,100 Christians, and 1,354,300 Muslims (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012). Christian and Muslims do live in the same communities (Hallward 2007: 86), but the difference of religion, even in tolerant communities, has the potential to create disunion amongst neighbors. In a society in which religion is the center of life, for both social and spiritual purposes, it is inevitable that religious differences will result in divisions within the community.

Despite their shared experience of oppression, Palestinian identity is further called into question when it becomes necessary to reconcile ethnicity and citizenship. There are many Arabs who are also Israeli citizens, and while the physical difference between Mizrahi Jews and Arabs is small enough that one might confuse the two, the label is a crucial deciding factor for identity. Similarly, the status of being a citizen of Israel versus refugee is of vital importance. All other factors being equal, citizenship in Israel will allow one to lead a very different life than that of a resident of the West Bank or Gaza. Thus, in terms of the security of an Israeli state, granting citizenship to a select group of Palestinians was a most strategic move. Israeli Palestinians,

though they have many rights that non-citizens lack including access to many holy sites, are marginalized within their state and by their ethnic peers, who are disdainful toward the fact that they have cooperated with the Israeli government (Agbaria and Mustafa 2012:732). Indeed, cooperation with the Israeli government is seen as betrayal by some Palestinians; however, for others it is simply a way to function somewhat normally in an undesirable political situation. This condition of being in an occupied territory has created even further division between Palestinians in geopolitical terms.

Arbitrary Geopolitical Boundaries and Their Implications

Because the geography of Palestine is interrupted by the arbitrary political borders of Israel, the very state of being an occupied territory is problematic in establishing a cohesive national identity. "Restrictions on mobility transform social relations in cities and villages. Residence patterns, work, and the character of cities, towns, and villages are remapped…" (Wick 2011: 25), and the result is further division amongst Palestinians. The West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, though all home to "Palestinians," lack the unity that a contiguous territory could make possible. Residents of villages, towns, and refugee camps have common experiences, understandings, and worldviews that allow them to define themselves as a collective. Extending this "sameness" beyond the local level, however, is nearly impossible. Though the distance between Gaza and the West Bank seems short, it is made ever wider by the limitations imposed on travel. The two areas are both "Palestinian," but they are inaccessible to one another. Palestinians in the West Bank are effectively cut off from Palestinians in Gaza. Thus, the Israeli Occupation has influenced the Palestinians' institutionally and cognitively incoherent national identity by expanding the potential for differences and reducing the potential for collaboration.

Within the West Bank specifically, there is a vast difference between living in a refugee camp and living in a town or village. Refugee camps are rarely very far from other towns; indeed, approximately three miles from the relatively wealthy town of Beit Sahour is ‘Aida Refugee Camp. The degree to which the living conditions differ, though, is astronomical. In Beit Sahour, homes are large and many children attend private school. Residents of ‘Aida Camp, though, face the nightly threat of Israelis entering the camp and making arrests. Clearly, the experiences of all Palestinians are not equal.

Furthermore, the experiences of all refugees are not equal. The situation of refugees is even further complicated by the fact that many have fled Israel/Palestine altogether. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinians Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), there are around 2 million Palestinian refugees currently residing in Jordan, 1.1 million in Gaza, 780,000 in the West Bank, 470,000 in Syria, 425,000 in Lebanon, and 40,000 in Kuwait . The cultural differences between these nations, though imperceptible to the average Western eye, are such that maintaining homogeneity between Palestinians residing outside Israel/Palestine is impossible (Maisel 2012). The fragmented Palestinian identity has created a situation in which a people is not only oppressed by others, but has internalized attitudes that result in an inability to remedy the problem.

Part II: The Problematic Discourse of the International Community

Scholarly literature regarding identity and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has emphasized the construction of Palestinians as some mysterious “other” by the international community. International actors have viewed the Palestinians through a lens of Orientalism and Zionism for so long that they cannot begin to think about the conflict differently. Indeed, the “fundamental structures of international politics are social rather than strictly material” (Wendt 1995: 74),

which means that the expectations and beliefs of the international community impute motives onto the Palestinians' behaviors. This problematic discourse reflects the construction of conflict, indicating that the way actors talk about the conflict creates perspectives that are incompatible with progress.

Orientalism

Orientalist perspectives have had a significant impact on the way that outsiders perceive the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Said 1985:99). Foreigners have defined the Palestinians and even Arabs in general not by experiencing them but rather by judging what they have been told about them and pegging it to their own standards. The very juxtaposition of East versus West puts the Palestinians in a category that is fundamentally construed as "different." While this experience is by no means unique to Palestinian Arabs, it has a unique effect on the conflict in particular. Because the international community has been called upon numerous times to intervene in this situation, it is direly important that foreigners properly understand the nature of the conflict. However, decisive action in favor of the Palestinians has been consistently shut down by the United States. Jews, though of the same geographic origins, are considered more "Western" than the Palestinians; somehow, Jews have escaped the negative label of "Oriental." While Jews have experienced the negative end of "othering" in the past, Michelle Mart (2004) suggests that the "Christianization" of Israel and Jews in 1950 shifted this view. Because the Cold War pitted the God-fearing West against the atheist Communists, Jews were "swept up in the ecumenical tide of 'Judeo-Christian' values and identity" (Mart 2004:109) Furthermore, Israelis' struggle with "foes outside the Judeo-Christian family," that is, their Arab and predominantly Muslim neighbors, resonated with Americans; in short, Israelis seemed no different from Americans (Mart

2004:109). The Jews and Israelis have been established as familiar and "like us" while the Palestinians have remained foreign and mysterious.

Zionism

The impact of Zionism has also fueled the stalemate that is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While Zionism and Orientalism are described as different categories, the two ideologies are inherently intertwined. Indeed, Edward Said suggests that the "sustained Zionist assault on Palestinian nationalism has quite literally been led and staffed by Orientalists" (1985:99). Zionism, or the movement for the establishment of a Jewish state from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River, often appeals to Christians because of the previously referenced struggle against those outside the Judeo-Christian family. In addition, many believe that the Old Testament covenant between God and Abraham gives the Jewish state religious legitimacy. The Palestinians thus become the religious "other" despite the fact that many Palestinians are Christians themselves. This viewing of history through a religious filter has been especially harmful in constructing the Palestinians as a morally inferior other. Religious arguments for the existence of a Jewish state have created a culture that is eager to label the Palestinians as terrorists and a backward people. The effects of labeling theory aside, the lack of support from key players in the international community—namely the United States—has further disabled the Palestinians in their quest for statehood. The primary effect of painting the Palestinians as inherently different is hypernationalism on the part of Israel. This concept put forth by John J. Mearsheimer (1990) suggests that "the belief that other nations or nation-states are both inferior and threatening is perhaps the single greatest domestic threat to peace."

The Language and Gestures of Conflict

The impact of language and gestures is another factor in the perpetuation of conflict. The way domestic and international actors report the conflict constructs beliefs that are incompatible with negotiations and progress toward peace. These beliefs guide the foreign policy of pro-Israel actors, and as a result, the Palestinians must overcome the obstacle of negative international perceptions. The international community, in any bilateral struggle, acts as a "constructed normative order from which the collective actors either draw strength and support, or against which they struggle to define and legitimate their own positions" (Wilmer 1998: 92). Unconditional support from the United States has given Israel disproportionate strength. The extensive military aid to Israel, around $3 billion annually (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006:31), is justified by claims of a "special love" between the United States and Israel and the assertion that Israel is a "strategic asset" in the Middle East (Walker 2012). This gesture simultaneously builds Israel up and tears down the Palestinian people. The foreign policy of the United States has constructed an Israel that no one would dare to question, and the Palestinians are ill-equipped to challenge such an Israel.

The media plays a crucial role in communicating the attitude of Israel's superiority. The language used to report incidents in Israel/Palestine will inevitably introduce bias simply as a result of word choice; this requires no concerted effort on the part of the reporter, and indeed it often occurs without the individual having an awareness of its presence. Indeed, a purely objective story is less appealing than a sensationalized one. The same story may be reported, but the "facts" may be conveyed in a vastly different way simply by word choice and what is included or omitted. In the American media, Israeli military actions against Palestinians are most often called "responses" to Palestinian threats (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting 2002). This

leads to asymmetric intervention on the part of the international community, and such asymmetry in favor of Israel serves to further alienate the Palestinians and define them as the deviant other (Emerson and Messinger 1977). Furthermore, a widespread belief is that this conflict "has been going on forever," and that it will continue to go on forever. This outlook, though not historically accurate, has been shaped by the rhetoric surrounding the conflict and the Palestinians themselves. The myth of "ancient hatreds" (Wilmer 1998: 105) put forth by the Western media poses the Palestinians as a people lacking the ability to ever live in peace. As a result, the Palestinians have always engaged in "a normative struggle, a struggle of rhetoric—the rhetoric used to rationalize the perpetration of harm against them—and the rhetoric they used to combat it" (Wilmer 1998: 91).

Part III: The Trouble of Non-Governmental Foreign Support

While foreign support for the Palestinians is encouraging, there are significant issues with the manner in which some new non-governmental organizations and advocacy groups for the pro-Palestinian movement engage the conflict. The intentions of these groups are sound, as they are typically based on concern for human rights; however, they construct conversations that are not conducive to real dialogue and lack the power of persuasion. The manner in which they approach the topic is often abrasive, and their discussions are often comprised of the same basic arguments expressed in only slightly different ways. It is necessary to first understand what makes a non-governmental organization or advocacy group effective. Furthermore, to understand the ineffective actions of many pro-Palestinian groups, it is crucial to understand the process that many experience in becoming knowledgeable about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This process can be articulated based on the author's observations of the proceedings of classes, lectures, events, and meetings in which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was discussed.

Seven Habits of Highly Effective Interest Groups

The effective habits of interest groups and advocates are frequently absent from the toolbox of the pro-Palestinian organizations, and as a result, their ability to advocate for the cause suffers. According to Richard Hoefer, there are seven tactics that are most frequently used by interest groups: "develop consensus among experts; pursue issues in court; aid the election of particular candidates; work with Congress on policy formulation; work with government agencies on policy formulation; use the media to influence public opinion" and "engage in demonstrations or protests" (Hoefer 2001:7). While highly effective interest groups emphasize the importance of the first six tactics, the less effective interest groups will tend to attribute high importance to demonstrating and protesting. Pro-Palestinian advocacy groups often engage in demonstrations and protests to raise awareness; however, according to Hoefer, this activity does not have the significant influence that the other tactics hold. The other most obvious issue for pro-Palestinian advocacy groups is the issue of developing consensus among experts. Unfortunately, it is often the case that individuals within these groups differ on what should be done to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it is not an exaggeration to say that the same issue exists within the Palestinians themselves as well as the scholars who are most familiar with the conflict. The issue of the two- versus one-state solution is one of many areas of disagreement, and without the power of an agreed-upon proposed solution, the pro-Palestinian movement falls flat.

The Process of Awareness

All students first approach the topic with ignorance, and they are highly impressionable at this point. As their awareness is expanded by scholarly readings and attendance at classes and lectures, they will often become incredibly angry. Regardless of how the material is presented to

them by lecturers and professors, they tend to gravitate toward an extreme perspective of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The newly-aware individual may be infuriated by the injustices experienced by the Palestinians, even without seeing it firsthand. It is right to be angry at injustice; however, the manner in which this anger manifests itself in subsequent arguments is detrimental to the Palestinian cause. Over-identifying with the hardships of others does nothing to strengthen a logical argument, and anger may lead these individuals to emphasize the wrong argument. They often discuss America's influence in the conflict in a way that attaches blame to the average, uninformed individual. They develop a superiority complex, as they have become members of a select group that knows "the truth as it really is." Unfortunately, the drive to "raise awareness" tends to result in an overly confrontational style of arguing that will convince few others. These individuals ultimately alienate their audience, and any sympathy for the Palestinian cause is dampened by the flawed rhetorical devices employed by their "advocates."

Overdone and Ineffective Arguments

"It is immoral." "It violates international law." "This is exactly what the Nazis did." These and myriad other arguments against actions of Israel, though new and exciting to the recent "convert" to the Palestinian cause, have been overused. In addition, those new to the debate will often become overzealous and make extreme statements. These statements give the opposition the opportunity both to prove an individual wrong and to make the pro-Palestinian movement seem hateful, a disposition that is ineffective in the process of negotiation. Rather than saying what they mean to say, these pro-Palestinian individuals mistake shock for persuasion.

The invocation of human rights is a powerful move in debate, particularly in an era in which human rights issues are at the forefront of consciousness. Although defending the basic

human rights of the Palestinians is a valid argument, it often devolves into never-ending statistics battles and disparaging comments about Israelis as people. One might cite the massacre of children with advanced weaponry, and the other might cite the bombing of civilian public transportation. The banter sways no one, and the "winner" of the debate wins only because he could recite more numbers. Ultimately, it is necessary to realize that Israelis and Palestinians both have compelling stories of tragedy stemming from the conflict, and neither people is pure evil. There are both Israeli and Palestinian individuals who commit heinous acts, and both Israeli and Palestinian lives have been lost. Deciding "who started it" is rarely the first step in ending it.

The extreme arguments are problematic because they not only alienate listeners but also create an unattractive image of pro-Palestinian movements. For example, as noted in Part II, there is a trend of reporting Israeli violence as a "response" to Palestinian violence in the American media. Oftentimes, it is the case that pro-Palestinian groups will utilize the converse argument to justify violence. Rather than taking a more realistic stance that both Israelis and Palestinians commit violent acts, these individuals rationalize the use of violence by Palestinians. Indeed, it is this kind of extreme belief that prevents pro-Palestinian groups from gaining more support. Instead of downplaying Palestinian violence, it is necessary that violent ways of resisting the Occupation are condemned, as many non-governmental organizations have already done. While violence has been effective in the past, as in the recent escalation in violence in Gaza, it is a discrediting way to operate. In this era of human rights awareness, the use of violence is no longer an acceptable tool, as is evident by the increase in Palestinian non-violent resistance in these last years.

These previously referenced arguments are made because they are easy, not because they are effective. Indeed, Dr. Norman Finkelstein, once one of Israel's harshest critics, has given up

"Israel-bashing" because "no one really defends Israel anymore" (Haaretz, "Norman Finkelstein bids farewell to Israel-bashing). Convincing others that it would be better for both the Israelis and the Palestinians if the state was restructured will be markedly more difficult if one only bashes Israel.

Conclusion

As a people struggling for recognition, the Palestinians must overcome these numerous societal roadblocks. As the situation is currently, peace is not possible. Current efforts toward peace cannot realize change without a significant shift in approach and attitude. Not all Jews and indeed not all Israelis support Israel's action against the Palestinians. Similarly, there are Palestinians who would like to wipe Israel off the map, while others would accept a fair two-state solution. The different conceptions of how to handle the conflict must be reconciled in order that this internal strife might be overcome. For peace to be possible, a concrete common goal must be developed amongst Palestinians, and they must acknowledge the necessity of dialogue with Israel. The current lack of meaningful dialogue between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and even within the Palestinians themselves, has hindered negotiations for long enough.

Talk of the conflict in terms of a "winner" and a "loser" will only strengthen the lines dividing the Israelis and the Palestinians, perpetuating the "conflict mentality" that renders actors unwilling to compromise. Rather than arguing for or against one side of the issue, the next generation of pro-peace activists must approach the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with renewed consciousness. It is crucial to let go of the old arguments that had no real effect on the approach to resolving the conflict. Talking about it must no longer be a tally of rights and wrongs or a

debate of legitimacy, and it especially must no longer be an emotionally-charged tongue-lashing for those who disagree.

At what point will the desire for well-being outweigh the desire to "win"? When will people let go of past wrongs for their own good and for the good of the other? As long as people believe that the violence is worth it, this conflict will persist. In recent years, acts of non-violent resistance have become increasingly frequent. It is direly important that pro-Palestinian groups promote these forms of resistance over acts of violence. We must equip both Palestinians and Israelis with tools to prevent the escalation of violence. Both have developed a mentality of victimhood, and rather than asserting one's victimhood and the other's guilt, we must overthrow the old way of thinking. Dr. Norman Finkelstein has suggested that an extreme stance, regardless of its basis in principle, will never resolve this conflict. An argument, he suggests, is only as effective as the support behind it. If an argument is too extreme to garner support, the rightness of the argument is inconsequential. It is necessary to rise above pride and principle and instead act for the greater good. There is indeed room for everyone at the rendezvous of victory.

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