

Conflict Transformation and Human Rights in Israel-Palestine.

Charles Elkins

Peace, Mediation and Conflict Research

Master's Thesis

May 3rd, 2016

University of Tampere

Supervisor: Anitta Kynsilehto

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Abstract

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is currently embroiled in a deep-seeded political impasse. The source of this diplomatic deadlock is the separate theoretical trajectories characterising each side's approach to the conflict. Israel is more content with managing the conflict whilst the Palestinian leaderships desperately seek an outright resolution. Alternatively, at the grassroots level Palestinians are far more concerned with effectuating change in their own personal circumstances. This encompasses issues which do not directly relate to the resolution the Palestinian leaderships seek. A distinct switch in discourse from nationalism to human and civil rights is occurring on the ground. Such a switch exemplifies this political disillusionment and is indicative of the alternative theory conflict transformation theory. Parlevliet argues conflict transformation should be analysed in conjunction with human rights. In this regard, the current climate in Israel-Palestine offers a unique case study in which to apply and answer Parlevliet's call. In doing so, this study takes Lederach's contribution to the theory of conflict transformation and analyses it alongside Parlevliet's argument in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the growing call for human rights. It demonstrates the multi-layered and holistic nature of the human rights argument by showing how the switch in discourse attempts to address issues along the micro-macro spectrum. In accordance with conflict transformation, the thesis draws upon a number of theories and methodologies to explicate how the switch to a human rights discourse circumnavigates a host of ideological and political barriers, which impede a possible resolution to the much protracted conflict. It concludes by exposing the cyclical nature of the micro-macro polemics, and how they ultimately reinforce each other in strangling any diplomatic possibility for opening up more alternative discourses to the current political approaches to the conflict.

Acknowledgements

The depth of analysis in this thesis was made possible by a number of indispensable organisations and individuals. From the outset, I owe the Palestine-Israel Journal my most sincere gratitude for giving me the opportunity to travel to the Holy Land and experience the conflict first hand. The journal is a beacon of hope in an otherwise disturbing climate of pessimism and cynicism. My experiences working at their offices in East Jerusalem and witnessing the conflict from the ground has left an indefinable impression on my own understanding of the complexity in finding peace. Without their help and support a number of key interviews in the following research would not have been possible. On that note, I would also like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to all those interviewees willing to take the time to talk and discuss their views on the conflict. All of your knowledge proved indispensable and greatly enriched my own perspective. Finally, I would also like to extend a great thanks to my wife, Mon, for her support throughout the entire process.

Glossary

Al-Nakba – A colloquial Arab term referring to the displacement of 700,000 Palestinian refugees during the first major Arab-Israeli war in 1948. Roughly translates as “the Catastrophe.”

Benjamin Netanyahu – Current Israeli prime minister serving fourth premiership after winning the nomination in last year’s 2015 general election.

East Jerusalem – Predominantly Arab half of the city considered the future Palestinian capital under the terms of the two-state solution. Israeli and Palestinian definitions differ. The former bases its definition on the municipal boundaries drawn by Israeli authorities after the Six-Day war in 1967. The latter refer to the 1949 Armistice Agreements. Israel’s occupation of East Jerusalem is deemed illegal according to international law.

Fatah – A Palestinian political party founded in 1959 and largest faction of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. Fatah are the current reigning party serving the Palestinian Authority. The party retains control in the West Bank but lost a general election in the Gaza Strip in 2006. No general elections have taken place in the West Bank since 2005.

Gaza Strip – One of two separate geographical territories constituting the proposed Palestinian state. Currently self-governing and located on the Mediterranean coast. The territory comprises a total area of 362 square kilometres with a population of approximately 1.6 million.

Green Line – The demarcation line distinguishing between west and east Jerusalem. Often used to refer to the pre-1967 borders by other nation states or international bodies like the UN.

Hamas – An Islamist political party with militant and social wings operating in the Gaza Strip. Elected into power in 2006 ousting the former ruling Fatah party. Founded after the first *Intifada* in 1987 as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Intifada – An Arabic term translated as “uprising” in English. In terms of the conflict there have been two *intifadas* each lasting several years. The first *Intifada* lasted from December 1987 until the Madrid Conference in 1991. The second *Intifada* took place from September 2000 to February 2005 in reaction to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon visiting the Temple Mount. Both *Intifadas* were violent but it is generally considered the first began as a civil demonstration.

Israeli Defences Forces (IDF) – Israeli military.

Judea and Samaria – Hebrew terms for the West Bank. Roughly, Samaria is north of Jerusalem and Judea South.

Knesset – The Israeli Parliament building.

Mahmoud Abbas – President of Palestinian Authority since 2005, and chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation since 2004. Leader of the Fatah party.

One-State Solution – A proposed resolution advocating the unification of Israel and the Palestinian Territories under a single government.

Operation Cast Lead – Code name for Israel's three week military offensive against Hamas in the Gaza Strip between December 2008 and January 2009.

Operation Protective Edge – Israel's 2014 military operation in the Gaza Strip against Hamas, Also known as 51 Day War.

Oslo Accords – A set of agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation mediated by the Norwegian government in the early to mid-eighties. Negotiations took place in Oslo with the actual signings taking place elsewhere. Oslo I was signed in Washington D.C. in 1993, and Oslo II in Taba, Egypt in 1995. The agreements remain the blue print to resolving the conflict.

Palestinian Authority (PA) – Sometimes referred to as the Palestine National Authority (PNA), the PA is the interim self-governing body formed in 1994 pursuant of the Oslo I Accords between the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the government of Israel.

Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) – Founded in 1964 to liberate Palestine through armed struggle. Recognised as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people by over 100 countries.

Saeb Erekat – Member of Fatah and Chief Palestinian negotiator during the Oslo Accords.

Separation Barrier – Israeli constructed wall separating the state of Israel from the occupied West Bank. Initial construction began in 2003 and is set to total 700km in length upon completion. Built to stem the flow of suicide bombing during the second *Intifada*, Israel refers to national security to justify the wall's construction. Opponents claim the wall is an attempt

to annex large swathes of Palestinian land. A similar separation wall also exists along the territory comprising the Gaza Strip.

Settlements – Civilian communities constructed by Israel throughout the West Bank and East Jerusalem to settle Jewish Israelis. According to international law all settlements within the territories are illegal. In 2005 the settlements in Gaza were evacuated and destroyed.

Two-State Solution – The popular and most politically discussed resolution proposing the formation of two states: Israel and Palestine. The former is based on the 1967 borders before the occupation with West Jerusalem as its capital, and the latter constitutes the West Bank, Gaza Strip with East Jerusalem as its capital.

West Bank – The occupied Palestinian territory west of Jerusalem running along the Jordan River.

West Jerusalem – Predominantly Jewish half of the city. Refers to the section of the city which remained under Israeli control after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.

Zionism – A political and nationalist ideology, founded in the late 19th century by Theodor Herzl, advocating the re-establishment of a Jewish homeland.

Illustrations

- Ir Amim., *Greater Jerusalem*, <http://www.ir-amim.org.il/en/maps/greater-jerusalem-2015>, 2015, pp. 47
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Introduction

“One state two state all that stuff, this is a conflict about boundaries, identity, existence, and all those things. It always has been, whether you want to start back 150 years ago, 1947, 1948, wherever you want to start. The conflict stays the same. I don’t see anything on the horizon that is going to change that.”¹

Gerald Steinberg’s pessimistic prediction regarding the current state of affairs of the much protracted and divisive Israel-Palestine conflict is indicative of the current impasse stifling the possibility of a future resolution. On the international stage, the two-state solution is the universally accepted package for resolving the conflict, with the Gaza Strip and West Bank set aside to form an independent and viable Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. However, questions of contiguity, persistent settlement building, and political divisions amongst the Palestinians themselves have persistently undermined the prospect of implementing the two-state solution since it was formally agreed upon nearly 25 years ago at Oslo. Nevertheless, the alternative seems even more implausible. If the two peoples cannot satisfy their own ambitions for self-determination via separation, then surely binding the two together in a single state is beyond the realms of possibility. A single state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea appears premised on the absurd idea “that two nations that could not negotiate a divorce should get married instead.”²

It is the restrictive limitations of these rigid forms of thinking that have perpetuated the increasing disillusionment with the peace process between Palestinians and Israelis at the political, civil and grass roots levels. Chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, solemnly admits the current relationship between the PA and the Knesset is “below zero...There is no trust now, no trust whatsoever.”³ Similar rhetoric is found emanating from the Israel camp. Minister of Education Naftali Bennet was quoted in Hebrew newspapers blaming the lack of progress in the peace process on the absence of a reliable Palestinian partner.⁴ Current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu echoed these sentiments as he charged Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas of refusing to sit at the negotiating table, and accused the Palestinians of

¹ Steinberg, G., Interview 10/8/15

² Freedman, J., *Yearning for the Same Land*, <http://www.newstatesman.com/2012/07/yearning-same-land>, 18th July, 2012

³ Erekat, S., Interview, 1/7/15

⁴ MiddleEastMonitor., *Bennet: There is no Palestinian Partner for Peace*, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/10084-bennett-there-is-no-palestinian-partner-for-peace>, 4th March, 2014

consistently refusing to end the conflict in his most recent UN General Assembly address.⁵ This is despite former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert contradicting these views in stating he found the president of the Palestinian Authority (PA) “to be a genuine, serious and trustworthy partner for peace negotiations.”⁶

At the civic level, a host of NGOs operate within Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the diaspora with the aim of achieving a multitude of important goals, from human rights (AL Haq), to educating Israelis about the occupation (Gush Shalom), to finding a resolution along the two-state solution framework (PIJ). Simultaneously, Steinberg’s own NGO Monitor tracks and meticulously scrutinizes the funding and activities of these very NGOs in order to undermine their work and raise awareness amongst the political right in Israel of their liberalist agendas, which are often perceived as threatening the Jewish state.

One level down and it is almost universally accepted amongst scholars and activists that at the grassroots level Israeli society lacks the will to initiate change to the current status quo. Adam Keller, lead spokesperson for the NGO Gush Shalom explains this is because “Israelis, in general, think peace was something that was already tried and failed.”⁷ On the Palestinian side, any remnants of optimism with the peace process become increasingly diminished each time negotiations fail and people have to deal with the consequences of yet another costly military offensive by Israel. Nearly fifty years of occupation, and over twenty years of broken agreements and failed peace talks have rendered the Palestinians a defeated people. “Their spirits have been broken...All the hopes that they harboured for decades, all the sacrifices they made...came to dust.”⁸ It is not difficult to locate these embittered feelings of disillusionment when speaking to Palestinians on the ground. Haitham Khatib for instance, a self-employed photojournalist and author, dejectedly admits fellow Palestinians are moving across the border to live in Jordan because of the occupation.⁹ The underlining feeling is that Israelis have succeeded in forcing Palestinians to relinquish their claim to the land. The sense of mistrust in the significant other, alongside a growing understanding of the conflict in *realpolitik* terms

⁵ Netanyahu, B., as quoted in Jerusalem Post., *Full Text of PM Netanyahu’s Address to the UN General Assembly*, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Full-text-of-PM-Netanyahus-address-to-the-UN-General-Assembly-419717>, 1/10/2015

⁶ Olmert, E., as quoted in Al Jazeera English., *Upfront- Headliner: An Exclusive Interview with Ehud Olmert*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mx-Tc2Sh7c4>, 3rd October, 2015

⁷ Keller, A., Interview, Skype, 2/9/15

⁸ Finkelstein, N., Interview, Skype, 25/11/2015

⁹ Khatib, H., Interview, Skype, 10/12/2015