

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict... Why? The Other Side's Point of View...

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Why are we where we are? As in many explanations for regional conflicts the answer lies, in my view, in history and geography. The Middle-East, and more specifically, the south-western corner of Asia has been a prolific source of major religions over the last five millennia. Humanity has benefited from this, in the sense that the three largest monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) have set the social value model, on the basis of which much of human society has progressed over the ages. However, by definition, this is a region whose peoples have relatively entrenched religious belief systems. Another highly correlated factor is that, geographically, it straddles a crossroads amidst three continents (Asia, Africa and Europe), a number of major trade routes, three seas, and an ocean. Both religion and geography make it highly fertile ground for conflict, and the region's history bears out abundant proof to corroborate this. All three monotheistic religions were hailed, over the millennia, as a reason to prevail over the 'center' of the Old World, or the 'Holy Land' (biblical Palestine).

Over the bulk of the last 1500 years the religion that prevailed most in this holy patch has been Islam. For roughly the first two-thirds of this period it was mainly under some form of Arab rule. For most of the last third of this period, it has been under some form of Ottoman (non-Arab Islamic) rule, and for the last hundred or so years, it has obviously been under British mandate, and then Israeli rule. There had, however, almost always been a majority Arab population in the biblical land of Palestine over the last one and half millennia. I doubt most, even most modern Israeli historians, would dispute this.

Now, within this context one may address, more learnedly, the Arab psyche and frame of mind in respect to more recent regional developments. Ever since the downfall of the Abbasid empire (around the thirteenth century AD), Arabs have been under the influence or rule of some non-Arab (foreign) ethnic group. The typical Arab looks back to this golden period as the representation of the height and epitome of Arab culture. The Abbasid Empire represented an era when Arab and Islamic science, arts, culture, Arab unity and self-determination flourished. Subsequent to this period, towards the end of the Ottoman period, and with the onset of the colonial period the yearning for independence and a revival of Arab and Islamic glory during the golden age grew stronger and ever more potent. The movement for independence was fortified in the 19th and 20th century colonial period by the fact that the British and French colonizers (who had colonized most of the Arab world), in contrast to the Ottomans, did not assimilate or engender Islam or Arab culture and heritage. The backlash to Western domination was strong, and country after country in the Arab world rebelled and gained independence in the second and third quarters of the 20th century. Palestine was under British mandate in the first half of the 20th century. The first four decades of the 20th century saw mainly Western Jewish immigration into British mandated Palestine, and what was, in the view of Arabs, another form of colonization that was built on settlement of Europeans en masse!

However, the struggle for independence from the British, was as strong in British mandated Palestine, as it was in other parts of the Arab world. Conflict resulted, not only with the British, but also with the Jewish population, who were viewed as a European extension of the British coming to crowd out the indigenous Arab population, and to withhold their hoped for independence, and their land.

The Israeli depiction of developments is, naturally, different. Jews suffering from prejudice and persecution across the ages, but more recently in Europe (persecution which saw its ugliest forms, and climaxed under, Nazi Germany), aspired to one national home where they may live independently and free from their suffering under the rule of others. The British had earlier offered them British mandated Palestine as a national home under the 1917 Balfour Declaration. In the view of Arabs, the British (the West) offered them a home in a land that was not theirs to offer.

In the view of Israelis, they have a legal right to land they have settled in, or in some cases bought, and cultivated based on the license of the ruler of that land (i.e. the British). An interesting legal question is whether the British had the right to grant this license. Notwithstanding, since the creation of Israel in 1948 (further to a 1947 non-binding UN General Assembly resolution on the partition of Palestine), the conflict naturally worsened with reports of horrific acts perpetrated by both sides. However, Israel was obviously stronger militarily and geo-politically, as is evidenced by the Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and the creation of an Israeli state with the absence of a Palestinian one. Another dispute exists over how many Palestinians were dispossessed of their homes and land, and terrorized away from their ancestral birthplace, from within pre-1948 and/or pre-1967 borders. The mutually conflicting struggle for independence based on highly variant perceptions of reality by both sides, and the dispute over occupied land, caused the 1948 war, the 1956 war, the 1967 war, the 1973 war, the last two intifadas, the Lebanon war and the Gaza invasion.

Underlying the terrifying acts that both sides are perpetrating against each other is a very different, and sometimes distorted, or incomplete, depiction of reality each side presents to each of their respective populaces, and stakeholders around them (i.e. the West and the Arab/Islamic world).

To Israelis, settling on disputed land is depicted as a biblical right, a means of salvation from historical persecution, and cultivation of that which is barren. To Arabs, depicted as further dispossession by a violent European colonialist movement (the Zionist movement), where liberation through counter-violence, represented as the only means of achieving a somewhat 'fair' partition of the land, when the bargaining (peace negotiation) table is inherently tipped against them due to the 'unfair' geopolitical balance of powers (i.e. the West, and more centrally, the USA, almost blindly backing Israel).

To Israelis, occupation is depicted as the 'only' means of controlling Arab violence and protecting settlements. To Arabs, occupation is the ultimate form of 'terror', in the sense that one is alive but living life like an automaton, or vegetable, destined to be robbed of one's independence, one's freedom, one's self-esteem, and almost be driven like cattle from one checkpoint to the other. To Arabs it is occupation, through violence and terror that came first. It is this psychological state that creates the suicide bomber, that leads to innocent deaths, that leads to home demolitions, to homeless brothers and sisters of suicide bombers, and hence the creation of more suicide bombers, and so the cycle goes on. It is as if though militants on each side are programmed to rob the other of independence, of freedom, of peace of mind, and of salvation from suffering, with onlookers baffled as to when or where this "chicken and egg" cycle began.

Again as Arabs see it, this cycle of terror started with the terror of malevolent occupation, the terror of dispossession of a homeland and a home to belong to through fear and banishment, with home

demolitions viewed as an extension of this terror, as is the killing of innocent bystanders at Israeli assassination operations, or the dramatic deterioration of the economy and quality of Palestinian life due to curfews and checkpoints in the occupied territories. The Israeli and allied western media, however, depict the latter developments as a response beginning with Arab violence (considered the only “terrorism” carried out in the region). Regardless of where one believes the truth lies, the two sides have irreconcilable perceptions of reality, and frequently mutually exclusive aspirations towards what constitutes full self-determination, peace of mind, and satisfaction of national aspirations. The World community has to therefore assess what the minimal sustainable and compatible aspirations of both sides are, and enforce a compromise solution with a significant degree of external intervention. Intervention that goes beyond establishing a committee (the quartet), and encouraging both sides to arrive at a final solution that is based on general principles (the roadmap) and frameworks, to actually deploying resources on the ground to ensure and guarantee compliance with a multilaterally agreed final solution. This is necessary because the impact of this conflict goes way beyond the region to impacting the quality of life of the Western world, and 1.3 billion Muslims in the Islamic world, to a considerable degree, and therefore by consequence, the quality of life and progress of human society. Furthermore, external intervention is required because there is a clearly asymmetric state of affairs in military terms, in security resource terms, and in terms of geopolitical influence between Israel and the Palestinians.

Finally, we as World society, are provided with quite conflicting pictures of what is transpiring on the ground from both sides, and through media sources biased to each. We desperately need a balanced picture presented, not only to us, but also to the populaces of, and the wider group of stakeholders **around**, each of the conflicting sides. This requires the presence of a well-balanced mix of international observers, alongside a well balanced mix of international security resources to assist the Palestinians with curbing militants on their side, and the Israelis with curbing their military from provoking Palestinian militants. Without ending the uncontrolled spiral of hatred and violence through deployment of international security resources, neither side will be capable of thinking with their minds, with emotional intelligence, and with the required degree of empathy towards the other, to achieve both side’s national aspirations to a degree that is sustainable and mutually compatible. This means arriving at a solution that is not only viewed as being sustainable in the eyes of Israel and the West, but also in the eyes of Palestinians and the Arab and Islamic worlds. To be so, the solution must be based on an interpretation of international law that meets the minimum criteria set by both sides, and enforced on the ground with a balanced mix of international observers and security resources. Here, we must keep in mind that the very UN General Assembly that supported the creation of the State of Israel, has every year, for most of two decades, with an overwhelming majority vote (over 80% of voting member states), supported a two state solution that is based on the June 1967 borders, that includes East Jerusalem on the Palestinian side, and the right of return and/or the right to compensation for Palestinian refugees. This position has been supported by the International Court of Justice’s deliberations on its legal ruling relating to the Israeli built partition barrier, again with an overwhelming majority vote of 14 judges to 1.

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