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The Temple of Understanding

Analyzing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

7/28/16

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It must be understood that the Israeli-Palestinian "conflict" is not a conventional war, nor is it even a singular event. In reality it is a decades long struggle for land ownership in a small, densely populated region. There have been multiple wars within this conflict and violence is frequent, however it is less of an event and more of a situation, constantly playing out in the daily lives of the region's inhabitants.

Ethnically and religiously, the population of Israel and Palestine is almost evenly split between 6.8 million Israeli Jews and 6.2 million Palestinian Arabs who follow Islam or sometimes Christianity (Harms and Ferry). However, in spite of the obvious ethno-religious differences, the conflict was neither started, nor perpetuated by them. Jews, Muslims, and Christians coexisted in relative peace for millennia, trading with one another and living side by side (Lust). The conflict that has become so ingrained in modern thought is a recent development, driven by opposing nationalist claims to the same land.

History

The first Jewish settlers conquered the land of Canaan around 1300 BCE after Moses led the Jewish people out of Egypt. As biblical and archaeological history explains, the Jewish tribes inhabited this region for the next millennium until the Romans took control in the first century BCE (Harms and Ferry). Although a few thousand Jews remained in Palestine after the Roman Era, the majority of the population was scattered throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia.

According to the the Torah, God promised the Jewish people a messiah would return the exiled population to their homeland if they waited faithfully, so most Jews accepted their position as a diasporic community without desire to form a new nation. God's promise is and was a key aspect of the Jewish faith, the motivation behind zionism, and the cornerstone of the modern state of Israel (Lust).

After the Roman conquest, the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, and the dispersion of the Jews, the other inhabitants of Ancient Palestine continued living in the region as they always had, farming the land in agricultural communities (Palestine). Palestine passed through Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Mongol, Persian, and Ottoman empires over the course of the next two millennia as the inhabitants of the region adopted Christianity or Islam, accepted Arabic as their language, and gradually developed a unique identity as Palestinians (Khalidi).

The role of Jews was that of passive preparation for the Messiah. For many centuries there was no desire to return to Palestine, and the notion of returning to Israel before God's messiah saved the Jews was dismissed as heretical by most of the Orthodox community (Harms and Ferry; Katz). Therefore, the relations between the Arabs and the Jews during this period were cordial and based off of mutual respect. In Muslim lands as a whole, the Jews fared comparatively better than their relatives in Christian nations. A small Jewish presence of a few thousand was continuously existent in Palestine, especially around Jerusalem, but it was not until the latter half of the 19th century that the idea of rebuilding a Jewish nation in the Holy Land was even discussed legitimately.

The Growth of Modern Zionism

Modern Zionism has its roots in the intellectual enlightenment of the 19th century. Governments began to accord their Jewish citizens greater rights and for the first time, Jews

began to participate in mainstream European society. A new population of well educated, secular Jews began to grow within Europe, debating, among many things, the possibility of a permanent nation state to unite the exiled peoples. As a wave of Nationalism spread across Europe, Germany unified, Italy unified, and smaller kingdoms became absorbed into ethnically based nation states. As these educated, successful Jews watched their neighbors' passionate unifications, they too felt a need for a nationalist state.

Building off of the promise to one day return to Israel, these politically active secular Jews began to merge traditional religious belief with socialist values, creating a radical, left wing plan to settle in Palestine and create a modern Jewish state. Although these ideas were originally shunned by religious jews and dismissed as unrealistic by others, a small but passionate community began to develop around the goal for a Jewish state in Palestine (Harms and Ferry). Waves of pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe also reminded Jews of the anti-semitism and violence that would always be a part of life in Europe (Lust).

An initial group of Jewish Zionists left for Palestine in 1882 and by the 1890s, an entire international zionist community had developed (Harms and Ferry). Waves of immigration continued throughout the following decade and by 1900 nearly 50,000 Jews lived in Palestine, with the population increasing to 85,000 Jews in 1914. By 1931, of the nearly 1 million people living in the region, 175,000 were Jewish (Lust).

It was in this period that the relations between the Jewish settlers and the native Palestinians became more complicated and eventually more strained.

The Origins of the Conflict

During the 19th century, tax policies instituted by the Ottoman leaders forced the Palestinian farmers to register their land to wealthy landlords in order to avoid costly monetary

burdens. The registry in turn stripped the peasants of their right to the land and over time, the landlords sold the farmland to wealthy Jewish immigrants seeking a home in Palestine (Harms and Ferry).

As the decades went by, more and more of the land that had been entirely Palestinian was bought by the Jewish settlers and the respectful relations that had persisted for centuries became clouded with resentment over land ownership. Palestinians continued to constitute a majority of the regional population, however Israeli settlers had a growing presence as well (A History of Conflict; Vogel).

In the years following World War I, these developments were only accelerated. The Balfour declaration by the British Foreign minister in 1917, declared support for the creation of a Jewish national state in Palestine, thus confirming Arab suspicions that Europeans had a preference for the Jewish settlers (Lust). Now under the rule of Britain, the Jews and the Palestinians continued to coexist, however each group gradually became more isolated culturally and geographically from one another. Jewish settlers became more organized as well, forming united political organizations and creating a Jewish city to welcome immigrants- Tel Aviv (Harms and Ferry).

After the tragedy of the Holocaust during WWII, Europeans and the world community as a whole attempted to make amends for the horrors of the genocide by supporting Jewish immigration to Palestine. Considering the recent genocide and the growing population of Jews in Israel, the United Nations Resolution 106 divided Palestine into two regions; a Jewish and an Arab state.

Most Jewish settlers were thrilled to have their own nation state, but the Arabs were outraged at the seemingly arbitrary partition based on a sudden decision. Although the Israelis

felt that the resolution granted them full nationhood, in reality the partition was merely a suggestion for a peaceful split (Hammond, "The Myth of the U.N. Creation of Israel). It had no binding power and did not grant either group a nation (Hammond, "The Myth of the U.N. Creation of Israel). The morning after the British left, 5 Arab nations: Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, invaded Israel to regain their lost land (Chronology of the First Arab-Israeli Conflict).

Unexpectedly, the outnumbered Israeli forces won the war and actually captured land from the Palestinians. Jerusalem, the Western Judean mountains, and the Jezreel valley were all captured by the Israelis (The Arab- Israeli War of 1948). Only Gaza and the West Bank escaped Israeli capture, however they were soon annexed by Jordan (Chronology of the First Arab-Israeli Conflict).

In 1967, another war broke out, but this time Israel invaded first (Lust). Tension between the Arab nations and Israel had risen once again, but Israel was determined to strike first and surprise their enemies. A successful attack on Egypt captured the Sinai Peninsula, while other units captured Gaza and the West Bank, as well as the Golan Heights in Syria (A History of Conflict). The war lasted only 6 days. Because of this war, Israel occupies Palestine and still retains military control over the territory despite lack of political control (Endless War). The Golan region is still under Israeli control as well, however the Sinai Peninsula was lost to Egypt in 1978 as part of the Camp David Accords (Lust).

The effects of these wars are still felt in the Middle East today. 726,000 Palestinians were displaced as a result of the Israeli annexation of portions of Palestine and hundreds of thousands of other Palestinians remained under Israeli control in the annexed regions (Palestinian Loss of Land 1946-2010). Because of this, Israel has a significant Arab minority (nearly 25%), within its

own borders which causes even more controversy and debate (Lust). As a whole, the current situation in Israel and Palestine was largely born out of these wars.

Separation of Gaza and West Bank

The geographic and political separation of Gaza and the West Bank profoundly impacts the Palestinian people as well. Movement into and out of Gaza is prohibited and since the West Bank and Gaza share no border, movement between them is impossible (Movement and Access Restrictions in the West Bank). The territory has zero legal imports and exports and exists mainly as a self-sustaining community to the detriment of its 1.8 million citizens (Gaza Crisis). Overcrowding, unemployment, disease, poverty; all these problems are omnipresent in the region and major factors leading to a general lack of economic development. In terms of society, this lack of economic development contributes to radicalization and extremism which further deteriorate the relations with Israel and compound the pre-existing problems in Gaza (Gaza Crisis).

Politically, the territory suffers as well. After winning elections within Gaza in 2006, the radical, right wing political party Hamas assumed control of the territory. Against the wishes of the moderate Fatah party, Hamas engages in violent action against Israel utilizing terrorism as a political tool to achieve independence. The violence occurs within Gaza as well, since Hamas fought against the Fatah party in 2007 to secure its power. After this conflict Hamas has been the sole governing party in Gaza and the Fatah (commonly known as the Palestinian Liberation Organization) has been the sole party in the West Bank.

When Hamas funded terror groups launch missiles into Israel from Gaza, Western Media does not say “The Hamas Party in Gaza” carried out a terrorist attack. Instead, the news would read “Palestine” carried out an attack on Israel (Karkat; Gaza Crisis). The shared blame for

actions that are not made in unison paints the moderate Palestinian politicians in a negative light (Adwan).

Israel often carries out indiscriminate bombing of Gaza, and although they loosely target areas of terrorist activity, the land is too crowded that hundreds of civilians die in fighting targeted at Hamas (Gaza Crisis). This only compounds the pre-existing problems of the region and further motivates Gaza citizens to support Hamas. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy and a cycle of violence that cannot be solved with violence.

Greater organization by the Palestinian Authority is a good starting place to regain control of Gaza and prevent extremist groups like Hamas from controlling the government.

Growth of Settlements

Lots of the recent tension in the region can be attributed to growth of Israeli settlements within the West Bank. Although illegal under international law, thousands of Israeli Jews have established walled off communities throughout the West Bank. The Israeli military will enter a village or a farming community in Palestine and simply tell the citizens it is taking the land (Jalil; Lust; Vogel). The next day, the old village will be demolished and a new set of row homes will spring up in its place. With a current settlement population of more than 500,000, the tensions within the West Bank are continually rising (Harms and Ferry).

In this process, not only is land taken from the Palestinians, but daily life in the West Bank is complicated dramatically (Movement and Access Restrictions). Due to the Israeli military's defense of the settlements and the complicated road network linking Israeli towns, movement for Palestinians is limited and at some times even altogether restricted (Adwan). To further complicate matters, the Israeli government is undergoing a massive construction campaign throughout the West Bank. A series of walls, fences, and barriers are being built to enclose the Palestinian regions (Israeli Apartheid Wall Destroys Palestinian Lives). The newly created "apartheid wall" as it is often referred to, is planned to be 403 miles in length and enclose nearly all of the West Bank. Simple things like visiting relatives or going to work are now difficult and sometimes even impossible for citizens of West Bank (Adwan). The difficulties will only increase in the future. In the image below, only the area in light grey is actually controlled by Palestine. The Yellow line marks the 400 mile long apartheid wall, while the shaded region is former Palestinian territory past the Green line (official border), but now open to full Israeli use. The dark grey are Israeli settlements in the West Bank under control by the government of Israel and its military, but still technically within Palestine.

Perhaps the most troubling situation of all is the lack of employment opportunities that even the most educated Palestinians have. Even if a child is able to stay in school and perform well, youth unemployment hovers around 30% (Jalil; Vogel; Harms and Ferry).

Connection to SDGs

All of the SDGs are important as both ways to end the conflict and goals after the conflict is ended. The most important goals are to end poverty, reduce inequality, and improve education (Israel's Contribution to the 2015 Post-Development Agenda). Trying to improve these three goals would immediately have a noticeable impact on the other SDGs as well, so if the future of Israel and Palestine is to be peaceful and prosperous, the sustainable development goals must be taken into account.

Future of the Region

The only thing both sides seem to agree on is that the current situation cannot continue. For both people to have a sustainable future, a solution-not a band-aid-is needed. The two most commonly proposed plans involve a one-state and a two-state solution.

Referencing the centuries of coexistence and peace in Palestine, proponents of the one-state solution believe it's possible for both territories to re-unify. Democratic elections or a half-Arab half-Jewish government would be created to govern the country (Karkat).

The most realistic and pragmatic solution will involve a two-state system in which Israel will continue to exist and Palestine will achieve full statehood under the rule of the Fatah party (Adwan; Vogel; Lust). Most Palestinians and Israelis prefer this solution and are willing to make sacrifices to achieve the peace they hope for. However, extremist factions on both sides continue to prevent dialogue from occurring. In order to achieve these goals, the governments of Israel

and Palestine must engage one another in a peaceful and productive way, as well as educate their youth in a way that prevents future violence, not fosters it.

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