

Deconstructing the Political Sub-Conscious of the Israeli-Palestinian

Conflict

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The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most protracted conflicts in modern history. The efforts made and resources invested to solve this conflict are enormous. Nonetheless, when we look at the current reality one notices that almost nothing changes. One has to ask him/herself why? Why is it so complex and why there isn't any or much change? These questions are relevant regarding the planned summit to take place in Washington in November. Is it going to lead to a break through? Well before referring to this specific question I would like to present to you an in-depth analysis of some of the main roots of stagnation. I decided to do it this way because I assumed that most of you follow the news on the conflict and know of the details of the recent developments in the region.

In the following lecture I will present two main arguments, aiming to answer the questions I raised earlier. After sketching the arguments I will explain them in detail by presenting the roots of stagnation in Israeli-Palestinian relations or what I call the subconscious factors of the conflict.

First argument:

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a conflict over every aspect of the human existence. It is a conflict over time, history, space, place, identity, morality, security, resources, and modes of struggle. In other words it is a mixture of tangible and intangible

resources fed by deep mistrust between the two sides. The presence of these factors all together is what makes this conflict hard to resolve.

Most of the attention devoted to this conflict has focused on the tangible dimensions of it, such as the borders, Jerusalem, the refugees, etc'. This leads to applying traditional modes of conflict resolution in order to deal with it, seeking partition, guaranteeing security measures, deterrence, etc.

There isn't enough attention paid to intangible resources of the conflict. When such an attention is devoted it is usually devoted to traditional intangible resources such as sense of threat and security.

Therefore, I argue that we have to pay more attention to non-traditional intangible resources of the conflict, such as perceptions of time and history, moral values, inferiority complex and its influence on strategies of struggle, etc in order to be able to move ahead with solving the conflict.

Second Argument:

My second argument is that any method to deal with transforming or solving the conflict has to be based on genuine mutual recognition between the two sides. This means to deconstruct the conceptual structures that characterize and determine the nature of the conflict, which were constructed over time. In other words, only deconstructing the subconscious factors feeding the conflict and understanding the interplay between the tangible and intangible factors that feed it could be helpful in providing answers to questions such as why there isn't moving towards solution.

Therefore, in the following paper I aim to analyze the “subtext” or subconscious structures of the conflict. My analysis will not directly touch upon the regular daily arguments regarding borders, refugees, Jerusalem, etc. But it will not ignore them.

Understanding the interplay between the dimensions I will present briefly can enable a better understanding of the conflict. These dimensions are complementary and feed each other.

Important notes:

- 1- Although I address both sides of the conflict, I would like to make clear that I do not view them in symmetrical terms.
- 2- I do not also view them in bi-polar and dichotomous terms.
- 3- Although Israel has more power and therefore is more responsible at least for what has been going on in the last 40 years, the two sides switch roles sometimes, as I will try to demonstrate.

Roots of Stagnation in Israeli-Palestinian relations

1-Conceptions of History, Narrativity and Rights: Each of the two sides has constructed his identity in through an ancient and indispensable relationship with the homeland - Palestine/Israel. Each of the sides utilizes history, archeology and other scientific tools to establish his connection with the land. Each of the sides narrates his relationship with the land in a total form that excludes the other side. Black historical halls are filled with national romanticism.

The Jewish historical narrative has become over time the dominant one, silencing Palestinian history. The Zionist narrative has been always based on two main axis. The first is time and the second is space with a dialectical relationship between them.

Time is a socio-political institution in which humans organize their life. But time is also an existential characteristic by which individuals and peoples define themselves. One can differentiate between linear/circular time; continuous/fractured time; full/empty time; primitive/modern time; fast/slow time. These differences are socio-politically constructed. They could be used in politically, especially in conflict situations in order to characterize the self as a particular historical subject as well as characterize the other.

The Zionist movement has viewed itself as a modern national movement characterized by an open, progressive, continuous linear time frame, characterizing the Palestinians as stagnant and primitive and therefore absent from modern time.

Space is also a socio-political institution. One differentiates between land and territory; territory and homeland etc. The relationship with the land could be instrumental or romantic, could be political or cultural.

The interplay between time and space in the Zionist narrative is a very important factor in the conflict.

The Zionist narrative claimed that Jews have rich history in Palestine and sought to bridge the temporal gap that was created as a result of the forceful exile by emptying Palestine from any history during the Jewish absence. In Heideggerian terms the Zionist narrative suspended Palestinian history and emptied it from any historical or cultural meaning in order to justify its own narration.

The suspension of Palestinian time is manifested in different policies in the space in which the conflict takes place. One of the main tools of suspending the Palestinian time/space relationship is by "othering" the Palestinians and turning them into non-people. The dehumanization of Palestinians started with claiming that Palestine is "a land without people for a people without land". Although, Zionist had to face hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in the early years of the 20th century, these Palestinians were never credited the status of a people. This view lasted until recently and is still dominant among wide circles of the Israeli population. In the official Israeli discourse the formula was transformed and took new forms such as "they are all terrorists" or the "no partner" formula. Studies of Israeli school textbooks conducted by Danny Bar-Tal or Elie Podeh have demonstrated this claim clearly.

The construction of the Palestinian "other", who forced himself into Israeli reality either by terrorist activity or by the mere existence of millions of Palestinians in the same piece of land, especially after 1967 has led to the establishment of two separate temporal zones; the modern, progressive, linear and quick zone and the primitive, stagnant, fractured and slow zone. These zones were invested with valuational characteristics. Whereas the first reflects the sphere of normality (Israel), the second is

the sphere of abnormality or the "state of exception" in Agambenian terms (the occupied territories).

In the state of exception life is bare and the difference between humans and animals disappear. In such a state death, which is another form of temporal suspension becomes legitimate tool to guarantee life in the sphere of normality.

The Palestinian Time:

The Palestinians national narrative sought to reject Zionist timing and its translation into space but did not manage very much. Although the Palestinian national Declaration defined Jews as non-people, it never had the power to become a history. Palestinian national narrative had to consider the demographic facts that were created after 1948 and was never able to suspend Jewish temporal conception of Palestine. However, with the introduction of the Islamic discourse into the national narrative since the rise of Hamas a new Palestinian time formula was introduced. It is argued that the Land of Palestine is Waqf, and its status cannot be changed even if the facts on the ground have changed. This new basic conception of time is not based on the modern right of self determination, but on an eternal right that cannot be suspended over time. This conception of time suspends Zionist time and uproots Jewish right from Palestine.

One major problem with such narratives and conceptions of time is that they are total and mutually exclusive. Both sides have based their identity and moral existence on these narratives and therefore, any change in them is viewed to destabilize their whole identity and delegitimize their mere existence and attachment to the place.

Although we witness slight change in both narratives in the last two decades there is much work to be done in order to promote serious negotiations between the two sides.

2-Morality and Power: The interplay between morality and power is very central in every human relation – see Plato in the Republic – and especially in conflict situations. This interplay is especially important when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Zionist movement and later the state of Israel has always claimed that Jewish claim over Palestine is just and moral. Israeli political discourse has been always based on the claim that the main reason for the Israeli triumph in wars is the just cause that Israelis fight for and the moral methods used to achieve the just cause. The Protestant ethics are utilized to promote Israeli discourse regarding the relationship between success and morality. The Israeli discourse has accused the Arabs in general and in later stages the Palestinians to be unjust and immoral. The methods used by the Palestinians, even when they are very primitive such as stones, are always immoral, whereas Israeli morality does not allow for the use of measures unacceptable by Israeli conscience or ethics. The death of children or innocent people is always depicted as "an unfortunate mistake". Israel has always spoken of its unique value of the "purity of arms". In the last few years the Israeli military has invented several expressions in order to stick to the morality of the Israeli cause and fighting methods: targeted killing, surgical operation, flattening, etc. Following Yaron Ezrahi from the Hebrew university I call this pattern of thinking the "Rubber bullet syndrome".

The best well known metaphor used to illustrate this syndrome is the David and Goliath story from the bible. According to this understanding Israel is always the underdog and is the side whose security is at stake.

The Palestinians have also formulated their cause on conceptions of justice and morality. Their loss of their homeland has been formulated as an unjust act that justifies the **reversing of history**. The refugee problem and the demand that they have the right to return to their original homes has been a basic Palestinian claim based on the convention of justice. The Palestinian opposition to any form of housing the refugees in the countries in which they live is one example of the attempts to freeze history.

Furthermore, whereas the myth of David and Goliath was first utilized by the Jewish side it became a strong Palestinian argument justifying the struggle against Israeli occupation. The inability of the Israeli army to efficiently fight the Intifada and the killing of hundreds of innocent civilians was utilized to feed the Palestinian discourse of justice and morality.

Even when suicide bombings were utilized in Israeli civilian sights it was framed as a just retaliation to Israeli measures in the Palestinian areas.

These measures as well as the rise of Hamas to power in the Palestinian Authority have become efficient Israeli tools to reconfigure the formula of power and justice. As I have already said the "no partner" formula has been a very strong justifying tool used by the Israeli government to avoid negotiations. On the other hand, it was used

to promote Israeli policies on the ground in the occupied territories. The expansion of settlements, the building of high ways for settlers, the detention of Palestinian political activists, the assassination of Palestinian leaders; all these measures continued under the banner "we are not to blame, there is no Palestinian partner".

3-Presence and Existence: Israelis and Palestinians, albeit in different way, establish an existential relationship with what each of them conceives as homeland.

The Israeli Zionist narrative and the Israeli strategy have been grounded on a complex relationship between presence and existence. When justifying the establishment of the state of Israel despite the almost total physical absence of Jews from Palestine for hundred of years, Zionist thinkers have referred to sentimental and religious attachment to the land as sufficient conditions to legitimate their claim over it. For that purpose the centrality of the physical presence of the Palestinians over the land for hundreds of years was minimized. The claim made was, since the Palestinians are not a people, since they have not established a culture of their own and since they are not modern and did not develop the land their right over it is not justifiable.

After 1948 Israeli strategy has shifted. The physical presence over the land became not only the major guarantee for the existence of the state and the Jewish population, but also the basic criteria to justify rights over a place. Therefore, Israel adopted the settlement policy. Since the occupation of 1967 Israel viewed settlement policies in two ways. The first has viewed settlement policies as a translation of the historical and cultural bond between the Jewish people and the land. The second has viewed

settlement policies in security terms or as a translation of state sovereignty over its territories. The two meanings went together. Some Israelis have justified the settlement policies by utilizing the concept of "Lebensraum", strategically and culturally.

Although Ezhak Rabin differentiated in 1994 between security settlements and political settlements and although Israel was willing to speak about evacuating some settlements, the dominant conception of an inherent interrelationship between presence and existence did not change.

The Palestinians were not able to protect their physical presence in many places as a result of the fact that the Israelis have the power to enforce their conceptions and determine the facts on the ground. Therefore, they have developed a sentimental connection to places that in their view justify the reversal of history.

One last comment in this regard: Until recently the Israeli political and military elite was not willing to consider the disastrous ramifications of the connection made between presence and existence. However, only in the last few years it became clear that the conditioning of existence by presence not only enabled fracturing Palestinian society in order to better control it, but also endangered the character of the state as Jewish state.

The Palestinian had to pay the price of the first Israeli formula and have to pay the price of the new formula. The unilateral Israeli policies are part of the Israeli attempts to correct its own mistakes without paying the price for them. The separation Wall as well as the pull out policy is the best manifestation of the Israeli attempts to overcome

the threats for the Jewish state. This understanding of sovereignty has much price, which has to be paid by the weak side of the conflict.

4- Inferiority Complex and Strategies of Struggle: Israelis and Palestinians have established a complex relationship between their national strategies and the means and tactics to achieve them. The weakness of the Jewish people in Europe has brought the Zionist movement and the state of Israel to adopt a strategy of forceful unilateral measures creating facts. Israeli military doctrine is based on the use of excessive use of force, even when facing civilians.

On the other hand, the surprise of the Palestinians in the 1948 war and their defeat in 1967 have led to a philosophy of revenge as a strategy of deterrence even when the cost in innocent civilian lives is tremendous.

The mutual killing taking place since the mid-1990, especially the suicide bombings and the policy of “targeted killing”, demonstrate the biblical philosophy of “teeth for teeth and an eye for an eye” that both sides have adopted.

This philosophy demonstrates that both sides behave more as clans than as states or state in the making.

This leads me to the next point.

5- State and Sovereignty: Israel has been a state since 1948 but still behaves as a movement. In the concepts of Roger Brubaker it is a nationalizing state that is never

sure and satisfied with its situation and therefore seeks to expand all the time. On the other hand, the Palestinians have been forced to act as if they were a state but without being sovereign. The gap between these two levels has led to the lack of monopoly over the means of violence in the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinians were squeezed between their commitment to act like a state and their lack of power to force Israel to withdraw from their territories. This contradictory situation has led to patterns of Palestinian behavior that fed the conflict and provided justifications for some of the Israeli policies in the OPT.

What is to be done?

Recognition and Reconciliation: In realistic terms Israelis and Palestinians have managed to mutually interrupt the normality of common life in their civil societies. Both sides misrecognize certain aspects of the other's existence as well as misrecognize their responsibility for what happens to them. Each of the parties attributes all responsibility to the other. Israelis misrecognize their coloniality and its implications on the normality of Palestinian peoplehood. Palestinians retaliate with their efforts to destabilize Jewish efforts to normalize their national presence in modern history.

Therefore genuine mutual recognition becomes a precondition for any future transformation of the conflict.

When it comes to delineating what is meant by recognition as a process and in order to turn it into an operational model that could help in transforming the conflict recognition has to entail several steps.

- 1) The two sides acknowledge the existence of each other.
- 2) The two sides grant each other a status as autonomous subjects. This step is about accepting the mere existence of the other. It does not entail accepting the other as legitimate yet.
- 3) The two sides acknowledge the legitimacy of the self-perception of each other. This step means viewing the other as legitimate without having to accept her/his grievances.
- 4) The two sides accept the legitimacy each other's grievances. The other is recognized as legitimate and s/he is conceived as honest about her/his suffering. This step is about empathizing with the other without viewing oneself as responsible for the suffering s/he has experienced.
- 5) The two sides take responsibility for denying each other's legitimate status and causing it injuries. This does not mean accepting all claims raised by the other group and does not mean having to answer all needs raised by it. In order for such a step to take place the two sides have to be ready to change not only their strategic position, but also those components in their identities that caused the denial and the grievances.
- 6) The two sides change their behavior and take action to accommodate the other group's needs.

You maybe asking how this should happen:

In order for such a process to take place, especially deconstructing the 5 points I raised earlier and promote mutual recognition there is a need for third party intervention. Only the intervention of impartial and strong third party can empower the sides of conflict to trust each other and change whatever necessary to promote serious negotiations between them.