

“Why is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict so intractable?”

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Introduction

Israelis and Palestinians have been unable to come to terms and resolve their decades-long differences. This paper will discuss the ability of Israel to maintain the balance of power from a realist, pluralist and post-colonial perspective. Ultimately this position of power prevents the resolution of the Palestinian issue and keeps the Palestinian people subjugated by this top-down control depriving them of their agency for self-determination.

Failure and disunity of Arab states

According to Morgenthau (1948), realism in international politics is characterized by the pursuit of power by rational state actors based on the laws of nature. The post-WWII Middle East State System drawn by the European colonialists was maintained and reinforced by Arab leaders. Asad and Owen (1983, p21) state the importance of Arab regimes in 'preventing the growing sense of Arab solidarity from expressing itself in a single ideological programme, let alone in a single political movement'. The rivalry between the Arab states weakened the Palestinian cause. Owendale (1984, p170) shows that 'Nasser had done nothing concrete to help the Palestinians regain their lost lands' (...) focusing on making Cairo the capital of the Arab world' and reveals that during the January 1964 Cairo Summit, Nasser stated that the 'liberation of Palestine was not an immediate issue'.

Mearsheimer (2006, p73) argues that offensive realism makes 'good strategic sense for states to gain as much power as possible and, if the circumstances are right, to pursue hegemony'. During Nasser's rule, Egypt was the most powerful Arab country in the region searching to impose its hegemony over other Arab states and Israel. However, Nasser failed to dominate the Arab World, culminating in the Six Day War defeat, solely managing to secure his control over Egypt. The powerlessness of the Arab states in defeating Israel is a result of their inability to impose any 'fait accomplis' and create a genuine united deterrent against Israel (Laurens, 2007, p700). For instance, Laurens demonstrates that one third of the United Arab Republic's army was fighting in the Yemeni Civil War. Egypt's hegemonic policy faced resistance by Arab 'status quo states' (Mearsheimer, 2006), whereby their survival surpassed Arab unity and the colonization of Palestine. Thus, the Arab Cold War and weakness of Egypt favoured Israel.

The inability of Arab states to unify reinforces a neo-realist (Waltz, 1979) understanding of the Middle East State System marked by an anarchical order whereby Arab states strived to survive against the Egyptian hegemon. State actors 'look for opportunities to shift the balance of power in their favour' (Mearsheimer, 2006, p74). Egypt and the other Arab states were never able to tilt the balance of power in their favour, whereas

Israel's military superiority was fully understood in Washington and a certainty for De Gaulle (Laurens, 2007). This went hand in hand with the significant European and American military assistance Israel was receiving (including the nuclear deterrent). In realism power requires material capabilities and resources, such as military equipment and nuclear warheads, thus 'the balance of power is mainly a function of the tangible military assets that states possess' (Mearsheimer, 2006, p72). The Palestinians had no military capability and hoped that Arab states would liberate Palestine. Consequently, the creation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in 1964 resulted from the failure of Arab powers to successfully support the Palestinians. Indeed, right from the onset, the Palestinians were at a disadvantage as the 'First Arab-Israeli War, however, did not unify the Arab world' (Ovendale, 1984, p130). Furthermore, the Camp David agreement between Egypt and Israel marks a turning point whereby Egypt is out of the equation and fully accepts the status of Israel. The main competitor of Israel became one of its main regional allies to the detriment of the Palestinian cause, as per today's Egyptian siege/blockade of Gaza.

US domestic policy

Israel's ability to pursue its expansionist policy would not be possible without Western support, especially from the world's superpower. During WWII, the Zionist movement shifted its priority towards encouraging the creation of a Jewish state to the US due to British reluctance, making it the 'the main centre of Zionism' (Fieldhouse, 2006, p203). Most importantly, Israel became tied to US electoral dynamics. Ovendale (1984) shows that there were 2.5 million Jews in New York City, 1 million of which resided in Brooklyn alone, including proximate areas such as New England, Pennsylvania, and Illinois in 1945. Truman and his party acknowledged the importance of the Jewish electorate for the New York City mayoral elections of November 6, 1945 as well as for the 1948 presidential elections, owing to New York City's key 7 electorate votes (p112). The Jewish population of the US was deemed to be a significant electorate for the success of the Democrats and Truman.

Pluralism 'acknowledges a plurality of forces shaping international relations besides states' (Hinnebusch, 2003, p10), by focusing on the role of sub-state domestic actors in determining a state's behaviour. Mearsheimer and Walt (2006, p41), show that 'interest groups can shape policy in many different ways: lobbying elected representatives and members of the Executive Branch, making campaign contributions, voting in elections, moulding public opinion'. For instance, they reveal that funding by Jewish supporters account for 60% of Democratic presidential candidates' funding; in academia, Columbia university was accused of anti-Semitism and intimidation towards pro-Israeli Jewish students by the David Project lobby without foundation in 2014; members of Congress called upon AIPAC 'to draft speeches, work on legislation, advise on tactics, perform research, collect co-sponsors and marshal votes' (p43). Pluralism poses the question of actual power and ownership of resources throughout society. Therefore, the ownership of economic and political resources of the American-Jewish lobby determines power by influencing pro-Israeli policy and favouring Israel's expansionist agenda.

Truman's electoral strategy shaped the US' relationship with Israel until today and its 'domestic politics determined the fate of the Middle East' and the Israeli-Conflict (Ovendale, 1984, p106). Under the Reagan administration there were 19 resolutions

vetoed by the US, 7 under Clinton's, 7 under Bush I's administration and 7 under Bush II (Chomsky, 2006, p189). Additionally, more than 140 billion dollars have been poured into Israel since its creation by the US (Said, 2002, p231), surpassing the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Western Europe.

A Post-colonial issue – 100 years of continuous colonization

Post-colonialism 'signifies the entire historical period after the beginnings of colonialism' (Seth, 2013, p1). According to Fieldhouse (2006, p219), the European 'zionist invasion' nursed by the British in the 1920s dramatically transformed the character, demographic and ethnic composition of Palestine, without any consent of the local population. This post-colonial continuity was ensured by the United States with the UN partitioning of Palestine and US' support for Israel. As an extension of European colonialism, Israeli policy continues this process of colonization. The Jerusalem Post (2014) showed that Israel significantly increased its settlement expansion in the West Bank and East Jerusalem after the Oslo process; East Jerusalem is estimated to have between 300 and 350 000 settlers, close 800,000 if we include the West Bank. These figures account for an almost threefold increase since 1993. The persistence of colonization in Palestine is congruent with post-colonial theory, whereby, hegemonic boundaries are maintained, 'creating unequal relations of power based on binary opposition such as us and them, first world and third world, white and black, coloniser and colonised' (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996, p3).

Israeli hegemony appears during the Oslo process. Chomsky (2006) shows how the accords created a neo-colonial dependency through Israeli 'settlement and cantonization of the occupied territories', with the division of the West Bank into three areas giving Israel significant security control. It led to a further fragmentation of the West Bank while disregarding core issues such as Jerusalem, the right of return, Jewish settlements, and the borders of the Palestinian entity, although Palestinian's recognized Israel and would content themselves with 22% of historical Palestine. An Oxfam report (2013) showed that 'Israel controls 80 percent of Palestinian water resources'.

Failure of Palestinian leadership

As Israel's expansionism seems undeterred, one ought to question the role of the Palestinian leadership. According to Aburish (1997, p148), the Palestinian leadership lacks 'credibility of a true democratic process and the necessary elements for legitimacy'. Collusion with the occupier has been a trend of the official Palestinian leadership, revealing a neo-patrimonial relationship. Aburish (1997) shows how the Mufti of Jerusalem cooperated with the British until the 1936 Palestinian rebellion, which forced him to tone down his pro-British stance, before his subsequent escape to Germany. For instance, in 1922 he rejected a proposal for the creation of an elected assembly of representatives, which would have weakened his position and that of his family, while having close ties with the British High Commissioners (Aburish, 1997). Indeed, Aburish emphasizes that the Mufti's collusion with the British faced opposition by Palestinian intellectuals and personalities, such as the Istiqlal party, and led to protests of workers and peasants, which threatened his, and his family's position. British colonialism relied on local chiefs within a largely feudal society, thus weakening the Palestinians.

Additionally, Aburish (1997) argues that the distance between the Palestinian establishments and the Palestinian people continued under the PLO leadership. He shows that Arab leaders and conservative Palestinian businessmen backed Arafat's appointment in 1969 to the leadership of the PLO, whereas the Palestinian National Council members had no electoral popular legitimacy. Additionally, Said (1993) argues that the Oslo agreement was a rushed unpopular endeavour and a renunciation by the Palestinian establishment: Arafat backtracked on the 'PLO Charter; of violence and terrorism; of all relevant UN resolutions, except 242 and 338, which do not have one word in them about the Palestinians, their rights or aspirations. By implication, the PLO set aside numerous other UN resolutions (which, with Israel and the US, it is now apparently undertaking to modify or rescind) that, since 1948, have given Palestinians refugee rights, including either compensation or repatriation'. Kamrava's (2005, p245) demonstrates that the Oslo process enhanced Arafat's centralization of power: 'the Palestinian police force was some eighteen thousand strong and Arafat's bodyguards alone were said to number approximately 125'.

Mitchell (1998, p.x) argues how the West introduced new methods of population control through the 'partitioning of space, isolation of individuals, and their systemic yet unseen surveillance'. Command and control systems put in place during the colonial era, and a feature of Israeli colonialism, are reflected in the Palestinian Authority's behaviour. This securitization of the Palestinian Authority goes hand in hand with its collusion with the Israeli authorities to the detriment of a united struggle for the liberation of Palestine. Said (2002, p.xxvii) shows that in 1999 a petition signed by prominent Gaza and West Bank Palestinian figures including representatives of the Legislative Council condemning 'the Authority's corruption and abuse of its own citizens', resulted in many arrests ordered by Arafat. He adds that there have been condemnations by human rights groups and Palestinians on the 'lawlessness, corruption, and sheer brutality of PA security men' (p235). Fanon (1963, p36), argues that the encounter between the coloniser and the colonised 'was marked by violence and their existence together—that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler'. The Palestinian protests that began in September 2015 have been directly targeting the PA, while severely being repressed by the latter. The Oslo process enhanced the security and economic collusion of the Palestinian establishment in order to 'give legitimacy to its own efforts at establishing a statelike institution' (Kamrava, 2005, p227).

Conclusion

To conclude, the realist perspective of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict highlights Israel's hold on power. This has allowed the pursuit of Israel's colonization policy, with the support of pluralist non-state actors/lobbies. Together with the weakness of Arab states and the collusion and repression of the Palestinian leadership, this scenario has hijacked the voice of the Palestinian people.

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