The Failures of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process: Balance and Imbalance

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Abstract
The article presents a thesis about the reasons for the repeated failures to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Drawing on a contextualized analysis of Palestinian and other reflections on the implications of demographics, it suggests that a unique situation of strategic imbalance and balance is the main reason for the continued impasse. While the Palestinians are the weaker side in the conflict, the parity between the Jewish and Arab populations west of the Jordan River and a huge disparity between the Arab and Jewish populations in the broader Middle East, has led to a Palestinian belief that Israel’s strategic situation can only worsen and this consequently discourages the abandonment of dogmatic agendas. The article concludes with policy recommendations based on this analysis.

Keywords
The Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the Oslo Accords; the Palestinian Authority; Hamas; demographics in the Middle East.

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Introduction

Najib Razaq, the prime minister of Malaysia, in response to Donald Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, recently told the following to thousands of applauding Muslims who rallied outside a mosque in Putrajaya, the Malaysian seat of Government:

“There are 1.6 billion Muslims. There are only 13 million Jews. It does not make sense if 1.6 billion lose to the Jews. If we don’t unite, we will be looked down upon.”

Razaq did not specify what such a unity would look like, nor what Muslims across the world should do to reestablish Islamic sovereignty over Jerusalem, but his words did reveal a deeper truth about the reason why countless efforts to resolve the Israel-Palestinian conflict have met with failure.

Since the early 1990s American and other initiatives aimed at ending one of the most entrenched conflicts in the world have introduced variations of a similar formula to end the conflict. Championed as the only realistic path to achieve a lasting peace, security and prosperity for both Israelis and Palestinians, this formula calls for an Israeli withdrawal from the majority of the territories it occupied in 1967 and the establishment of a demilitarized Palestinian state with some form of sovereignty over East Jerusalem. In return, the Palestinian leadership will concede the “right of return” for some five million Palestinian refugees and Arab states, for their part, will normalize their relations with Israel.

The repeated failures of these initiatives have done little to encourage revisionist approaches that challenge and reinterpret the widely accepted historical narratives that explain why some of the world’s brightest politicians and negotiators have been unable to bring the parties to an agreement. Some of those individuals who were involved in peace-making efforts have lamented “missed opportunities” and point to occasions where the parties actually established a mutually recognized framework for resolution and

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agreed to compromise on most of the issues. Unfortunately, however, political circumstances or the lack of the necessary skills have prevented a final status agreement. This long accepted narrative is, however, blind to the repetitive character of the failures. Over a period of 25 years, different teams of negotiators operating under different political circumstances have ended up in similar deadlocks, which suggests that the problem is not one involving personalities or circumstances.

Another theory places the blame on “extremists on both sides.” In short, it suggests, that, on the one hand, the rise of Hamas, an Islamist movement that considers Palestine in its entirety to be a Muslim endowment (waqf) and openly declares its commitment to eliminate Israel, and, on the other hand, the rise of messianic views on the Israeli religious right, have made a compromise impossible. The argument is that people who believe that they speak in God’s name, act as His vessels and abide by His will are unlikely to make concessions. There are three flaws in this theory. First, the Muslim Brothers and their different offspring, including Hamas, do not preach an open-ended war against all non-Muslim “aggressors” who have occupied Muslim lands. If they did, they would also be calling for a holy war in Spain and Serbia. Second, Jewish messianic political views, while having gained wider appeal and influence within Israeli society at large, have remained on the political fringe in terms of the number of Knesset members who embrace such views. Even in the

2 An example of this is the argument that the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli Prime Minister, on November 4, 1995, was, largely - if not entirely - the reason for the failure of the Oslo Process. See the analysis of Israeli Middle Eastern Studies scholar, former ambassador to the United States and chief negotiator Itamar Rabinovich in an article by Aluf Ben, “Arafat is Guilty - But Only He Can Do It”, Haaretz English Edition, March 30, 2004. See also, the analysis of Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat in an opinion column in the Israeli media: “If Rabin Had Not Been Assassinated, There Would Have Already Been Peace,” Walla, October 17, 2002 (in Hebrew). Another example is the statement of Palestinian Authority president Mahmud Abbas, who said that, if Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert had stayed in power two more months, peace could have been achieved (Olmert’s corruption scandal led to his resignation in September 2008): “Abbas: Palestinians, Israel Were Two Months Away from Inking Peace Deal,” Haaretz English Edition, October 14, 2012. For a critical review of this argument: Elie Podeh, Chances for Peace: Missed Opportunities in the Arab-Israeli Conflict (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), p. 356.

3 For example, the notion that the “extremists on both sides” have frustrated the hopes of the “moderate majorities” has underpinned the peace plan proposed in 2016 by Israel’s dovish Labor party and opposition leader Isaac Hertzog. Isaac Hertzog, “Only Separation Can Lead to a Two State Solution,” New York Times, February 28, 2016.
20th (current) Knesset, arguably one the most hawkish in Israel’s history, less than 10 percent of the members openly identify with the view that for theological reasons Israeli governments must never concede any part of the lands occupied in 1967. Third, and most importantly, since 1993, it has not been the extremists who have repeatedly tried and failed to reach a final status agreement but centrist, center-left and center-right Israeli governments and the Palestinian mainstream national movement that have done this. Official and non-official negotiations have demonstrated that the maximum that Israel’s center-left is willing to give the Palestinians is far less than the minimum that the PLO is willing to accept.

One of the chief Israeli negotiators at the July 2000 Camp David Summit, where a final status agreement was still believed to be within reach, described why the talks collapsed. According to the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, the strategy of Ehud Barak’s dovish government was to trade most of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza for a Palestinian concession on the “right of return,” and to have the status of Jerusalem resolved as an independent issue. To their great shock, the Israeli negotiators learned that the Palestinians were insisting on the right of return in its fullest sense. A member of the Palestinian team, Hasan Asfur, argued in response that the above allegations were a fiction and that the Palestinians never intended to concede the “right of return” under any circumstances, nor would they ever concede it.4

Indeed, over the past 25 years, PLO leaders have either presented an ambiguous approach to the refugee problem or repeated Asfur’s dogmatism.5 No democratically elected Israeli government is likely to ever agree to this demand or even to a more moderate demand that nevertheless facilitates any massive return of Palestinians to Israel that would threaten its Jewish majority.

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5 The ambiguous approach is committed to a “just and agreed upon solution based on United Nations Resolution 194,” in line with the Arab League Peace Plan of 2002. The dogmatic position regards the “right of return” as an individual right of the refugees that their elected leaders cannot concede. Mahmud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, has articulated both views in recent years: Elhanan Miller, “Abbas Hardens His Stance on Palestinian ‘Right of Return,’” *The Jerusalem Post*, January 13, 2014.
The impasse reached in the peace efforts has given rise not only to despair but also to characterizations of both sides, respectively, as war-mongering, sentimental, deceptive, and delusional. Specifically, one of the most popular clichés used in contemporary Israeli politics relating to what is interpreted as unrealistic dogmatic Palestinian demands, particularly regarding the “right of return,” is that the Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. This statement, referencing a celebrated observation made by Abba Eban, a former Israeli foreign minister, reflects Israelis’ puzzlement over the fact that the clearly weaker side in the conflict has been presenting demands that hinder any prospect for achieving Palestinian national independence. The puzzlement is not necessarily related to specific points of view about historical justice, political legitimacy and human rights but rather reflects an expectation that the significantly weaker side, the Palestinians, would do well to be less dogmatic and settle for what they can achieve.

The essentialist perspective about Palestinian dogmatism and strategic blindness is, however, misleading since the balance of power between Israel and the Palestinians is more complicated than it appears to be. The dogmatism of the Palestinian mainstream is more rational than it appears, even if it is detrimental to their immediate national interests - and possibly also to their long-term interests.

The present essay presents the unique condition of balance and imbalance in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and argues that this condition is the main hindrance to resolution of the conflict. It also discusses the possible implications of this thesis for future negotiations.

**Balance and Imbalance in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

In broad terms there are two conditions that encourage either the resolution of violent conflicts between nations (i.e., reaching mutually agreed-upon settlements involving territorial or other disputes) or the continued existence of an unchallenged status-quo (i.e., a condition in which a conflict is not resolved but neither of the contesting parties applies violence or other significant measures to challenge the status-quo). One condition is the emergence of a sustained balance of strengths between the parties involved which
renders fighting, or the continuation thereof, futile. To the extent that neither party sees a realistic path that leads to changing the balance in its favor and both parties risk significant assets if the fighting continues, a situation of balance acknowledged as such can serve as a strong motivation for compromise. The conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 is one example of this. Another condition that encourages conflict resolution is a clear, evident, and demonstrated imbalance between the strengths of the parties involved in which the stronger side has the ability to impose its conditions on the weaker side while the latter chooses to surrender after it concludes that it is incapable of effectively opposing the stronger side. The surrender of Japan to the United States in 1945 following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is a classic example.

Key to making situations of balance and imbalance instrumental to conflict resolution is their recognition as such by at least one of the parties involved; thus, these situations, in and of themselves, do not guarantee an end to hostilities since politicians and generals are not always totally rational in their calculations. One reason why non-liberal regimes are more easily drawn into wars of aggression than liberal-democratic ones and why, throughout modern history, the latter have won almost all the wars they have fought against non-liberal states, is that liberal systems provide better guarantees for counter-action against capricious, ill-founded strategic assessments.

Another challenge is correctly assessing the balances of power involved. This is often a complicated endeavor since even a sophisticated and emotionally blind computer program is not capable of precisely evaluating all the factors that determine national power. While a country's military strength is based on measurable aspects such as the number and capabilities of jets, tanks and submarines, less tangible aspects, such as the acumen of generals and platoon commanders and the motivation of foot soldiers in a given context, are also important factors. While the effectiveness of the armed forces is the most crucial factor in any war, it is only one of several aspects that influence the course and outcome of a conflict. Industrial, financial, diplomatic, technological, demographic, and environmental resources and conditions are also
of foremost importance and relevance. To make calculations even more complicated, the different variables of power are interdependent and have the potential to develop during a conflict. For example, political developments in a third country that is not directly party to a conflict can lead to diplomatic and economic sanctions on one of the two conflicting parties which may, in turn, have an impact on the output of its military industry or the motivation of its soldiers. Similarly, technological abilities that are irrelevant in a certain weather condition may become crucial in another.\textsuperscript{6}

It is tempting to understand the current state of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a classic case of an irrational, emotional calculation of the balance of power that prevents one of the sides, i.e., the Palestinians, from taking a more rational and pragmatic course of action. Whereas, in the formative stages of the conflict, there were miscalculations of strengths and weaknesses that resulted in a Palestinian tragedy, today the disparity between the two sides is clear and undisputed. Israel’s military has 718,250 soldiers (including reserve soldiers), 2,620 tanks, and 652 fighter jets. It allegedly possesses, according to modest estimations, dozens of atomic bombs, and has developed a “second-strike” capability from the sea.\textsuperscript{7} The Palestinian authority in the West Bank commands a security apparatus that employs several thousand men mainly equipped with small arms and light weapons while the military wing of Hamas in Gaza comprises several thousand militiamen and its main strategic weapon is its arsenal of self-produced and smuggled rockets.\textsuperscript{8} Economically, whereas the per capita GDP in Israel is $34,800, in the West Bank and Gaza it is $4,300.\textsuperscript{9}


Diplomatically, the legitimacy of Israel and its prosperity (although not necessarily all its policies) are strongly endorsed by the world’s greatest power, the United States, and on a bipartisan level no less. It also enjoys the strong and committed support of Germany, Europe’s greatest economic and political power. The support of both these countries has historical and cultural roots and will not easily dissipate. In addition to this Israel has developed stronger relations in recent years with the rising powers China and India. The Palestinians, on the other hand, do not enjoy similar support from any major power for either their West Bank or Gaza regimes. Hopes the Palestinians might have had for an effective unified Arab intervention on their behalf that dominated the first three decades of Israel’s existence have all but vanished. The clear and evident implication of these facts is that for now, and for the foreseeable future, the Palestinians do not have any realistic chance of eliminating Israel through armed conflict or of imposing conditions that will change the Jewish character of the state.

There is, however, one aspect of strength – and one only – that renders Palestinian dogmatism rational and that is population. The demographics of the conflict have two strategic implications: (a) they imply that, despite Israel’s strengths, a full-scale violent escalation, though it may end in a decisive Israeli victory, will not be in Israel’s national interest; and (b) they provide a rational basis for making the case that in the future the balance of power will shift in favor of the Palestinians.

Demographics and their Impact on Palestinian Dogmatism
At the turn of the 20th century there were 16 million Jews in the world, a number not significantly smaller than the number of inhabitants in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent and significantly larger than that of the Arab population in Palestine. At that time Zionist ambitions as introduced in the Basel Program represented the potential for a demographic transformation that would make the Arabs of Palestine a negligible minority. The prospect of a Zionist takeover of Palestine that would submit its inhabitants to Jewish domination was already recognized in 1898 by Rashid Rida, the editor of al-Manar – the mouthpiece of the modernist-apologetic movement – and a future
mentor of Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brothers; but even Rida did not specifically envision massive waves of Jewish migration to Palestine.10

While the November 2nd 1917 Balfour Declaration encountered determined Palestinian and Arab condemnation, resistance to the Zionist project during the 1920s was relatively moderate. Still, this passivity did not reflect utter blindness. During the years in which the British mandate authorities fully supported Zionism, only a fraction of the Jewish people migrated to their ancestral homeland. This was the case even though the gates of the United States were effectively closed to further Jewish migration in 1924.11 In 1927 specifically, 2,000 more Jews left Palestine than entered it and this raised doubts among leading Zionists about the future of their project.12 Tragically, from a Zionist perspective, it became clear that Herzl’s vision of an organized, massive exodus of Jews to the Land of Israel was not likely to materialize.

The Arab revolt that began in 1936 was stimulated by a number of developments, including the general rise of anti-imperialist and nationalist sentiments in the broader Arab world. It was, however, primarily a response to massive waves of Jewish migration (the fourth and fifth Aliyot) that increased the number of Jews in Palestine through the mid-1930s to almost half a million, which made the dream of creating a state for the Jewish people feasible.13 While England quelled the revolt militarily, the looming world war against the Nazis led to a decisive achievement for the Arab side. In May 1939, an English policy paper drastically limited Jewish migration to 75,000 over a period of five years thus averting the prospect of millions of European Jewish refugees immigrating, who could have transformed the Arab population into a minority. This Arab achievement constituted a twofold tragedy for Jews. At the moment in history when a shelter for persecuted Jews was needed

more than ever, it did not exist; at the moment in history when it seemed possible to establish a clear Jewish majority in Palestine, its establishment was thwarted.

In the war that broke out on November 30, 1947, following the approval of the Partition Plan at the United Nations General Assembly, the balance of power, according to all measurable parameters including, most evidently, demographics, appeared to favor the Arab side. First, a community of 600,000 Jews was facing a Palestinian population that was double its size and then, following the British withdrawal from Palestine in May 1948, it had to face the much better equipped armies of seven Arab nations that had a combined population of some 40 million people, including Egypt, with a population of 20 million.14 This demographic imbalance was not only cited by international observers as being a decisive factor that would assure the Arabs an easy victory in the war but even led to an American retraction of support for Jewish independence.15 Simply put the conventional wisdom was that the better equipped party whose population was more than 60 times larger was not the party likely to lose a war. While the results of the 1948 war prove just how complicated it is to calculate what constitutes national power, it cannot be argued that the Arab miscalculations about the prospects of their achieving an easy victory were rooted in completely unfounded or naïve analyses.

The results of the next major Arab-Israeli war, in 1967, provide yet another demonstration that a disparity in populations does not necessarily determine the outcomes of conflicts. While the Six Day War, which ended in a stunning Israeli military victory, more than tripled the territory controlled by Israel, it also had an ironically negative strategic effect. From a Zionist perspective, regardless of who was responsible for this development, one of the major benefits of the 1948 War was that the proportion of the Palestinian population in the territories that the Zionists ultimately ruled was

14 Ami Ayalon, “Demography, Politics and Tradition in Mubarak’s Egypt,” in Ami Ayalon and Gadi Gilbar (eds.), *Demography and Politics in the Arab States* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Institute, Tel Aviv University and HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, 1995), p. 30 (In Hebrew).
15 For example, the evaluation of Harry Truman’s Defense Minister James Forrester, as quoted by Truman’s advisor Clark Clifford. Interview in *Pillar of Fire*, Episode 7: “A Nation Reborn,” minute 15:40.
merely 25 percent of the Jewish population\textsuperscript{16} and, within three years following several waves of Jewish immigration, this declined to around ten percent. This may not have been the case if the Arab side had accepted the United Nations Partition Plan which foresaw the establishment of a Jewish state with, at least initially, an Arab population that was almost equal in size.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1967, however, the proportions dramatically changed since now an Israeli population of 2.8 million citizens (some 400,000 of whom were Palestinians) were directly controlling a population of 1.1 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. By 1980, despite the immigration of 150,000 Jews from the Soviet Union through the 1970s, the population disparity remained stable, with 1.4 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza compared to almost 3.9 million Israelis (some 600,000 of whom were Palestinians). By 1985, there were some 1.57 million Palestinians west of the Jordan River compared to 4.3 million Israelis (of whom some 750,000 were Palestinians).\textsuperscript{18}

While the difference in the proportions between the Arab and Jewish populations west of the Jordan River did not radically change after two decades of Israeli occupation, in the mid-1980s Palestinian leaders, frustrated by the futility of armed and diplomatic campaigns and recognizing that Israeli control of the West Bank and Gaza had remained effectively unchallenged, adopted the approach that Palestinian population growth could be a key for weakening and even defeating Israel. They, however, remained unclear as to precisely how demographics would lead to strategic change. For example in 1987, shortly before the First Intifada began, Yasser Arafat, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), declared Palestinian women to be “biological bombs” that would


\textsuperscript{17} Morris, \textit{Righteous Victims}, p. 184.

detonate and destroy Israeli society from within because, by 2000, “the number of Palestinians will exceed that of Jews in Israel.”

The view that Israeli control over the West Bank and Gaza was a strategic risk for Israel because of the potential for a greater population parity problem inspired, and was inspired by, similar evaluations made by Arab, American and, most importantly, also by Israeli leaders. By the mid-1980s the Israeli center-left had adopted the argument that permanent Israeli control over all of the West Bank and Gaza was creating a “demographic threat,” as the focal point of its strategic concerns. They argued that this would ultimately force Israel to choose between the two evils of either giving Palestinians full civil rights and losing the Jewish character of the State or of denying them such rights and not only damaging Israel’s democratic character but, subsequently, its international legitimacy as well.

The Declaration of Principles (“Oslo Accords”) signed between a left-leaning Israeli government and the PLO in September 1993 provided a path for Israel to escape the implications of the demographics while conceding little in return. It envisaged the establishment of an autonomous and quasi-elected Palestinian Authority in the densely populated Palestinian areas of the West Bank and Gaza without establishing an independent Palestinian state, without forcing Israel to concede to the removal of any of the settlements and East Jerusalem, and without acknowledging the Palestinians’ “right of


20 For example, Egyptian Foreign Minister ʿIsmat ʿAbd al-Majid noted demographics as the reason why Israel would not be able to maintain its control over the West Bank and Gaza: “Majid Ended His Visit in Israel in a Meeting with Palestinian Personalities,” *Haaretz*, July 16, 1987, p. 9 (In Hebrew).

21 For example, comments by George Schultz, the then-American Secretary of State: “Time Bomb,” *Haaretz*, July 16, 1987, p. 9 (In Hebrew).

22 Platform of the Ma’arach (The Labor-party led parliamentary list) for the 1988 elections (12th Knesset), pp. 7-8; and see also, for example, the words of the Labor leader at the time, Shimon Peres: “‘Territory’ means a land that we belong to and it belongs to us. Land that is settled by others cannot be considered as ‘territory’... I am in favor of concessions – I am conceding the scenario of an Arab majority in Eretz-Israel,” Amos Ben-Vered, “Peres: ‘I Am Conceding the Scenario of an Arab Majority in Eretz-Israel,’” *Haaretz* (July 16, 1987), p. 3 (In Hebrew).
return.” In signing it, however, the Palestinians did not in any way concede the demographic lever and the agreement stipulated that this Israeli “escape route” was a temporary situation since within five years Israel and the Palestinians would negotiate and settle the core issues of the conflict and reach a final status agreement.\(^{23}\) Thus, the Oslo process left the door open for Palestinians to continue to make demands that they believed would effectively eliminate Israel’s existence as the national home of the Jewish people while providing the Palestinian national movement with more efficient diplomatic and violent means to advance those demands. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of its signature on the Accords, the Palestinian leadership clarified that it did not regard the Accords to represent a crucial step towards lasting peace but rather saw them as a means to advance toward the ultimate defeat of Zionism.\(^{24}\)

As the peace process faltered, it became clear that, despite massive waves of Jewish migration from the former Soviet republics and Ethiopia throughout the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the territory west of the Jordan River was indeed moving rapidly towards demographic parity between the Jews and the Arabs. By 2000 there were 3.1 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza compared to 6.4 million Israelis (of whom more than a million were Palestinians) and by 2010, there were 3.9 million Palestinians in the territories, compared to 7.7 million Israelis (of whom almost 1.5 million were Palestinians).\(^{25}\) While the reliability of some of the data about the number of Palestinians actually residing west of the Jordan river has been questioned in academic scholarship, even the


\(^{24}\) For example, in his May 1994 Johannesburg speech, Yasser Arafat compared the Oslo Accords to the Hudaybiyya treaty of 628, a 10-year ceasefire between the Prophet Muhammad and the Quraysh tribe of Mecca, broken two years after it was signed and resulting in a Muslim occupation of Mecca. Ofira Seliktar, *Doomed to Failure? The Politics and Intelligence of the Oslo Peace process* (California: Praeger Security International, 2009), p. 55; see also PalMediaWatch, “Arafat Publicly Denounces and Rejects the Oslo Accords in Speech in Johannesburg” YouTube, September 19, 2010, accessed January 3, 2018: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ToXdm6mGS2U (Accessed on March 10, 2018).

alternative demographics do not challenge the basic equation of two almost equal ethnic groups in what once was mandatory Palestine.\textsuperscript{26} Meanwhile, the demographic disparity between the number of Jews and Arabs in the region has also grown immensely. In 1967, there were 112 million Arabs in the World compared to some 13 million Jews of whom less than 2.5 million were Israeli-Jews. By 2015, the world’s Arab population had grown to some 400 million compared to some 16 million Jews of whom slightly more than six million were living in Israel.\textsuperscript{27}

If the strategic lesson learned from 1948 and 1967, which is also a general rule in international relations, is that population does not necessarily determine the fate of conflicts, how then does the existing parity between Jewish and Arab populations west of the Jordan River and the great disparity between the number of Arabs and the number of Jews in the Middle East in general provide a rational basis for Palestinian dogmatism? Why are the Palestinians so convinced that Israel has more to lose than they do if peace efforts fail?

First, the present demographic situation encourages the Palestinians to believe that a deterioration in the security situation that would lead to a renewal of direct and full Israeli control over the West Bank and Gaza would once again force Israel to have to make the strategic choice between the “two evils” it managed to escape from in 1993 by signing the Declaration of Principles. Furthermore, direct control over millions of defiant Palestinians would stretch the limits of Israel’s human resources.

Since the failure of the 2000 Camp David talks, the conventional wisdom that has been advanced by the more moderate among Palestinian leaders is that if Israel were to take direct and full control over the West Bank and Gaza once again, international and internal pressures would force it to accept the emergence of one democratic state west of the Jordan that would have to provide full and equal rights to all its citizens, and would ultimately have a clear

\textsuperscript{26} For example, Bennet Zimmerman, Roberta Seid, and Michael L. Wise, “Voodoo Demographics,” \textit{Azure}, No. 2 (Summer 2006), pp. 61-78.

Arab majority and an Arab-led government. Accordingly, Israel, by actualizing its military and other strengths, would in fact seal its fate. This view was, for example, expressed by Faisal al-Husseini, a Palestinian negotiator and the Minister for Jerusalem Affairs who, in 2001 shortly before he died, said:

“I worry about today. But the Israelis should worry about the future. Today the majority of Palestinians are ready to give up 80 percent of their lands in Palestine in return for Israel’s recognition of their full rights in the remaining 20 percent. In ten-years time, there will be a demographic parity between the two peoples in Israel and the occupied territories. In 30 years, Palestinians will be the majority. And then they may want both their rights and their lands - in West Jerusalem, Haifa, Acre and Jaffa.”

Former Palestinian negotiator Hanan Ashrawi stated in 2013:

“If the situation carries on this way, at the end we’ll be a majority, but we’re giving the Israelis a chance to understand the Palestinians could have their own democratic country that would neighbor Israel.”

And Ahmad Tibi, a member of the Israeli Knesset and a former advisor of Yasser Arafat, went as far as declaring that an end to the two-state solution will lead to a one state solution and to his election as prime minister.

The notion that Israel faces only two options – a two-state solution or an end to its existence as a Jewish state – has been held since the collapse of the Camp David talks in 2000 as an undeniable truth also

by moderate Arab leaders, by Israeli politicians, by pro-Israeli European leaders, such as Angela Merkel, and by American leaders, including President Barak Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry.

The implications of this equation from a Palestinian standpoint are often lost. If, as moderate Palestinians and world leaders see it, Israel’s choice is between a two-state solution and elimination then the Palestinians can impose their terms for a two-state solution and have no reason to rush until Israel accepts these terms.

In 2010 Mahmud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, cautioned that if peace negotiations fail, he

“will tell the Americans and the Israelis (to) come and put an end to all this. I can’t continue like this. We have an occupation and we don’t. No, keep it all and release me (from my responsibility).”

What Abbas was implying was that whereas normally in wars a complete loss of independence signifies the ultimate defeat, Israel needs to fear a collapse of Palestinian self-rule more than the Palestinians. Indeed, Israeli policies have demonstrated that, regardless of the nature and extent of Palestinian provocation, Israel should accept that it is in its own national interests to, at almost any cost, avoid a permanent return to the situation of direct Israeli rule over any densely populated Palestinian areas. During Operation Protective Edge in Gaza in the summer of 2014, Israel’s transparently obvious strategic goal was for the operation to end with Hamas (a weak enemy that openly calls for Israel’s elimination and whose territory could be, unquestionably, taken over by Israeli

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31 For example, an interview with former UN Secretary General Boutrus Ghali: Volkhard Windfuhr, "Israel Has a Habit of Closing Its Eyes to Hard Facts," Der Spiegel, January 5, 2009 (in English).
36 AP, "Abbas Threatens to Dissolve PA, Let Israel Take Over West Bank," Haaretz (December 4, 2010).
forces within weeks) still in power and in full control of Gaza. The reasons given were not only Israel’s concern about the number of human casualties involved in re-occupying and controlling Gaza but also the financial cost involved in its responsibilities for maintaining such control, and the diplomatic implications.

There is another, albeit not as evident, calculation that is a rational explanation for Palestinian dogmatism based on population. The plans for any unified Arab military action that might be carried out against Israel, which was something that dominated the conflict in the first three decades after Israel’s establishment, have all but disappeared from both the contemporary Palestinian and general Arab political discourse. Currently, the tremendous disparity that has developed between the number of Jews and Arabs in the Middle East has not been helping the Palestinian side. For a number of reasons, including internal social and political upheavals, not a single Arab state is in a position, or is even motivated, to commit to anything but rhetoric and financial support for the Palestinian struggle. Even if this were not the case there is no Arab state that currently comes even close to balancing Israel’s many strategic strengths. Thus, when the Muslims Brothers came to power in Egypt in 2012, they made it clear that, despite their view that Israel and the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty were equally illegitimate and despite their principle commitment to eliminate Jewish sovereignty from the region, they would not wage war or annul the peace treaty because Egypt was not strong enough to prevail.

38 In June 2011, the Muslim Brothers movement founded the Freedom and Justice Party as its political arm. Replicating the platform drafted four years previously, its platform stated that the party is committed “to upholding international treaties and agreements calling for cooperation between the people for the benefit of mankind.” In the same document, a caveat was included that paved the way for the cancellation of the peace treaty with Israel: “The agreements and the treaties between the countries have to be accepted by the people, which cannot happen unless these agreements and treaties are based on justice, serve the interests of both parties [that signed them], and are implemented meticulously and honestly. International law allows the parties to reexamine these agreements and treaties in light of these conditions, a procedure that is recognized in international relations. Therefore, the party perceives a need to reexamine many agreements in various fields that were ratified under the previous regime,” IslamOnline.net, Barnamej Hizb al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin, pp. 8, 22. The General Guide of the movement, Muhammad Badi’ determined that peace with Israel is not in accord with
Still, a long-term change that would render the overall regional demographic disparity meaningful is not impossible. More than a hundred years after the conflict started, most people in the Arab world have not accepted the reality of Israel’s existence, and to the extent that some of them do, they only do so on practical grounds. While a decline in the military, diplomatic and technological imbalance between Israel and its Arab neighbors in the future is unlikely, it is, in theory, possible that at some point in the future it will occur. It is unlikely, but still possible, that one or more Arab states will acquire nuclear capabilities. It is unlikely, but possible, that the United States would reconsider its alliance with Israel. Stranger things have happened in American politics. It is also unlikely, but possible, that greater Arab unity and commitment to the Palestinian cause would emerge once again. The only imbalance in the Arab-Israeli conflict that cannot, even in theory, change, is the demographic one. Even if the process of the ingathering of the exiles is completed and even if Israeli Jews triple the average number of children per family, the Arab population surrounding Israel will still be overwhelmingly bigger than the population of Jewish Israelis. While this disparity is of no importance in a situation where Israel is decidedly stronger in other aspects, in a situation where other components of strength are more balanced this may become meaningful. Consequently, the Palestinians can hope that the day will come when more than 400 million Arabs will be able to crush the less than 10 million Israeli Jews, as common-sense seems to dictate, and, in this sense, too, the Palestinians’ belief that time has potential to benefit their side is rational.

the decrees of Islam, called for Egypt to prepare for military threats from Israel and to show perseverance and restraint, and clarified that the defense of Islam against conspiracies hatched under the pretense of a “false peace” is justification enough to go to war. Simultaneously, he claimed that even if the peace agreement is annulled, “it does not necessarily mean a declaration of war” on Israel, Muhammad Badi, “Faridat al-Salam fi al-Islam,” last accessed April 8, 2010, www.ikhwanonline.com/article?ArtId=63089SecID=210

39 Astonishingly, in a pan-Arab survey on the Arab Peace Initiative published in April 2007, sixty-seven percent of Moroccans, fifty-four percent of Kuwaitis, seventy-four percent of Palestinians, seventy-six percent of Jordanians, and seventy-four percent of Algerians responded that the Arab world should not recognize Israel as a Jewish state in the Middle East even if the Palestinians recognized it as such. The poll was conducted by "Mashru’ Miqyas al-Ray al-‘Amm al-‘Arabi” among a sample of 1,431 Jordanians, 1,270 Palestinians, 1,300 Algerians, 1,277 Moroccans and 750 Kuwaitis; See: al-Majalla, No. 1,416 (July 4, 2007), p. 26.
Conclusion and Policy Proposals
To sum up: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict involves an exceptional situation in the balance of power. In all but one crucial aspect Israel is the stronger side. In terms of military might, scientific and technological development and diplomatic alliances, Israel has become steadily stronger since the conflict began. On the other hand, population parity (western to the Jordan river) and disparity (in the Middle East at large) are neutralizing the Israelis’ ability to actualize this superiority and this provides a measure of credibility to the Palestinian beliefs that any change that takes place in the status-quo will not be in Israel’s interest and that, with time, Israel could be significantly weakened.

What are the policy implications of this analysis? Repeated failures in peace-making should, first and foremost, be demystified. The reason Israel and the Palestinians have not reached peace is not that the Palestinians are completely blind to their own best interests, are delusional, lack negotiation skills or because of particular political circumstances. Rather, the failure to achieve peace is rooted in a rational, even if unfortunate, Palestinian calculation that convinces them that while they are the weaker side in the conflict their position will be strengthened in the future – and even the more moderate among them believe this. This possibly explains why the bloodiest outbursts of violence during the past two decades have taken place when peace initiatives have appeared to have had a feasible chance of materializing while there has been relative calm during periods of stalemate.

If a complicated condition of balance and imbalance is the main obstacle to peace, then a change needs to be made to this condition in order to facilitate a breakthrough. To discredit the validity of the aforementioned calculation which argues that Israel’s national interests would be harmed by the results of any full-scale violent escalation they might engage in, the United States and other world powers should adopt a policy that makes it clear to the Palestinians that any case of renewed hostilities resulting from Palestinian dogmatism will not benefit Palestinian diplomatic goals, even if it leads to an Israeli re-occupation of Palestinian lands. The Palestinian
leadership needs to be convinced that the strategic goal of seeing the end of Israel as the national home of the Jews is unrealistic and that the time has come for it to be convinced to adopt a realistic agenda.

To minimize the psychological effect caused by the demographic disparity Israel should be offered a counterbalancing integration into NATO and the European Union, alliances that represent hundreds of millions of people. While becoming a full member in these Western alliances would not, in itself, serve as a guarantee for Israel’s security, it would discourage belief in demographically grounded perceptions of Israel as an enemy that is vulnerable because of its relatively small population. While this plan may seem far-fetched, so was the idea that the United States would move its embassy to Jerusalem without asking for Israeli concessions in return or that its decision to do so would not ignite massive protests in the West Bank.

If these steps did undermine Palestinian dogmatism, the international community would then be better positioned to effectively and intensely pressure the Israeli government to make far-reaching concessions and accept a viable and meaningful form of Palestinian independence. In the meantime, and regardless of what others do, Israel should avoid policies that irrevocably tarnish the prospects for any future resolution of the conflict.

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