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A Systemic View of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: 21 Years Later

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Ask What Are the Underlying Patterns – Not Who Is to Blame

We are overwhelmed by brutal images of Hamas fighters slaughtering harmless Israelis and Israelis bombing innocent civilians in Gaza. We want to know who's to blame for these horrible acts. Many people declare that Hamas are beasts, while others berate Israelis as colonialists. While these intense emotional reactions are human and understandable, they too easily miss the underlying forces that have driven a conflict which has existed at least since Israel was formally established as a nation 75 years ago. **Time and time again, the obvious solution of attempting to dominate or eradicate the other side has not worked.** It functions instead like the famous Chinese finger puzzle that traps the fingers of its unsuspecting victims inside a woven bamboo tube.

If we want to help resolve such a conflict, we first have to step back from our tendencies to think in binary terms and identify the one guilty party. We need to ask not who is to blame but *why* this problem has persisted despite many people's best efforts to solve it. To resolve chronic, complex conflicts such as the one between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, **it is important to step back from the gut-wrenching present to uncover the root causes of the problem and reveal the potential for sustainable, breakthrough solutions.** The benefit of a systems approach is that provides perspective by focusing on the interdependencies between elements of an issue *over time* instead of on individual factors or actors at a point in time.

Background

My commitment to a systemic understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict grew out of living in Jerusalem during the first 15 months of the second Intifada. As is the case now, news reports were dominated by stories about who was to blame for the violence – not why the conflict persisted nor what a sustainable system-wide solution could be. Although we are Jewish, we had met with many Palestinian people over the years, been touched by their deep hospitality, and were inspired by many bridge-building efforts between both parties. Our original intention for being in Jerusalem had been to work with both Israelis and Palestinians, but the Intifada limited our ability to travel in the West Bank. Despite this constraint, we still managed to work with the Palestinian nonprofit Middle East Nonviolence and Democracy, and to establish chapters of the global Society for Organizational Learning in both Israel and the West Bank. My wife Marilyn had also lived in Jerusalem during the first Intifada and

directed a management development program for senior Palestinian health officials in Gaza during that time.

As a result of deepening my understanding of why the Israeli-Palestinian conflict persisted, I published an article in 2002, [“A Systemic View of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict”](#). When I returned to the U.S. I was approached by global peacebuilders who wanted to learn more about systems approaches to addressing deep conflicts. One result of our collaboration was a [second publication](#) that broadened the initial analysis of this specific identity-based conflict to illuminate similar dynamics in such places as Northern Ireland and Cyprus. Several of the systems diagrams from this more generalized analysis are in the Appendix at the end of this article.

The current war prompted me to reflect on what has not changed over the past 20 years with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, what has changed, and what can be done now to break the terrible pattern summarized by Thomas Friedman as “conflict, timeout, conflict, timeout ...”

What Has *Not* Changed About the Conflict

The system dynamics that drive chronic, complex problems such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are by almost by definition deep and not easy to shift. In the case of this conflict, the interdependent forces that have not changed since 2000 are:

- Both peoples have not been able agree on how to apportion land that each believes is their own
- The conflict over land has been amplified by a deeper fear that the other group threatens their fundamental right to exist
- Their existential fears are grounded in long histories of being oppressed or repressed by more powerful groups (e.g., Palestinians have never had a recognized state of their own, and Jews have been the victims of antisemitic violence for thousands of years)
- Within each group there are two broad subgroups, one which favors dominance or control (through violence if necessary) as the best way to validate its right to exist, and one which strives for peaceful co-existence as a more sustainable path
- The subgroups preaching dominance on both sides (e.g., Hamas through its extreme violence and Jewish supremacists through settlement expansion, violence, and dehumanizing treatment of Palestinians) tend to prevail because over time their tactics intensify the fear and hatred that further undermine trust, escalate violence, and make the alternative of peaceful co-existence even harder to achieve
- These subgroups also, in the words of master therapist Terrence Real, “oppress from the victim position”, i.e., weaponize the oppression they have experienced as a way to deny or justify their own aggressive behaviors

What *Has* Changed About the Conflict

The relative peace in the region since the end of the second Intifada has obscured a build-up of additional forces and pressures that have amplified these core dynamics and made this war so devastating for both Jews and Palestinians.

On the one hand, Israel did many things that gave its people a false sense of security. It created a wall between itself and parts of the West Bank to deter bombings within the country

and an Iron Dome to protect itself against rockets from outside its borders. It removed its military and settlers from Gaza while agreeing with Hamas to allow many Gazans to travel to Israel daily to earn a living. It normalized relations with more Arab countries including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco. It secured extensive revenues and new trading partners by using its extensive abilities to innovate in many fields. Perhaps most critically, it accomplished all these things while expanding Jewish settlements in the West Bank with seeming impunity.

However, as Friedman cogently explains, many destabilizing forces also grew during the same period that increased the strength of Hamas and weakened Israel. These forces, which have now exploded into what he calls "[the six-front war](#)", are the:

- Strengthening of Hamas' military capital at the expense of Gaza's civilian population
- Growth of other Islamic Jihadist groups in addition to Hamas who are committed to destroying Israel and Western civilization with Iranian backing
- Expansion of social media with its ability to further divide people and distort reality
- Belief held by the international progressive community that Israel is a colonial power – a largely false belief fostered by antisemitism and ignorance of Jewish settlements in the area (beginning in the West Bank) since at least 1200 B.C.
- Assaults by Jewish settlers on Palestinian property, livelihoods, and dignity. These assaults have historically been tolerated by Israel (and the U.S.), particularly in the West Bank. They are now more widespread and lethal due to a formal policy of the current Israeli government to annex the West Bank and Israeli panic in reaction to seeing its apparent invulnerability punctured.
- Further weakening of a fragile domestic unity within Israel – not only between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs, but also religious and secular Jews, and Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews – as a result of Netanyahu's 'divide and rule' strategy for retaining power

What Is Required Now

A systemic view of the conflict both challenges and enables us to work in support of the whole system rather than in favor of one party or the other. This means doing whatever is possible to support a sustainable peace that honors the rights of Jews and Palestinians to an equitable distribution of land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River and grants self-determination, dignity, and security to both peoples. More specifically, here are four things you can do:

1. **Take a stand – not a side.** This means taking a *stand* for a set of values rather than a *side* for one party versus another. It is a stand for human life, decency, dignity, and the health of the whole system as best we can understand it. It is a stand for peaceful co-existence over demonization, dehumanization, and domination. Peace activist [Moriel Rothman-Zeicher](#) reminds us, "There is no other. Everyone who cares about Israeli Jewish lives — not the brutal apartheid state, the regime, the concept, but my life, my family's, my child's — should be in favor of complete freedom for every single Palestinian. It is not altruism — there is no other: it is for all of us." He goes further to ask us to distinguish the people on both sides of the conflict from their formal

leadership and policies, i.e., Hamas does not represent the interests of most Palestinians nor does Prime Minister Netanyahu represent the values of many Israelis.

2. **Promote security – not revenge.** Revenge plays into the hands of those who seek domination and fan escalating fires of fear, hatred and violence. Despite all the ostensible shifts in power between the two peoples over the past 20 years, neither side has achieved sustainable security or validation for its fundamental right to exist. In a view held by many in the Israeli military, Israel will never be safe until it achieves some form of peaceful co-existence with the Palestinian people. Moreover, supporting Palestinian sovereignty is not, as Rothman-Zecher says, a matter of altruism, but of essential human connectedness and moral gravity. Both sides will continue to suffer as long as each creates suffering for the other.
3. **Support Jewish-Palestinian bridge-building organizations.** Despite decades of aggression and mistrust, many people in the region still honor each others' essential humanity and have collaborated around joint projects of shared interest. [Two recent studies](#) find that a) Jewish Israelis and Palestinians inside and outside consistently underestimate the other group's hope for peace, and b) most Jewish Israelis and most Palestinians want to live peacefully in some form of co-existence when there is security and safety for all the people. For example, Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding organizations you might want to support include the [New Israel Fund](#); [Standing Together, Israel](#); [Combatants for Peace, Israel/Palestine](#); [The Parents Circle–Families Forum, Israel/Palestine](#); [Jerusalem Peacemakers CC](#); [SVF\(Social Venture Fund\) Israel Emergency Fund](#); and [Ajeec-Nisped](#).
4. **Lobby for a political solution that produces an institutional basis for peaceful co-existence between Jews and Palestinians.** While a “two state” solution might have become harder to achieve, the essence of a political framework that guarantees sovereignty and security for both Jews and Palestinians still exists and must be implemented. In order to realize this solution, Israel and the international community must first act to weaken Hamas while doing everything possible to protect Gaza's citizens and minimize the risk of creating yet more Arab extremists; [one plan](#) to this end was recently proposed by the country's former prime minister Naftali Bennett. Second, Israelis with backing from the U.S. and other countries must establish a new Israeli government that supports a moral and political resolution to the conflict founded on mutual recognition and respect for both Jews and Palestinians. A solution that includes adequate guarantees for security on both sides is the only way for both peoples to achieve a sustainable peace. Such a solution is also the best way to weaken the long-term legitimacy of Hamas in the eyes of Palestinians, many other Arab countries, and the world at large. We hope that recent events propel Israel to transform vicious cycles of fear, anger, and violence into this more sustainable way forward.

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Figure 2: Conflicting Goals

Initial conflicting goals of subgroups lead to increased support over time for eliminating the other

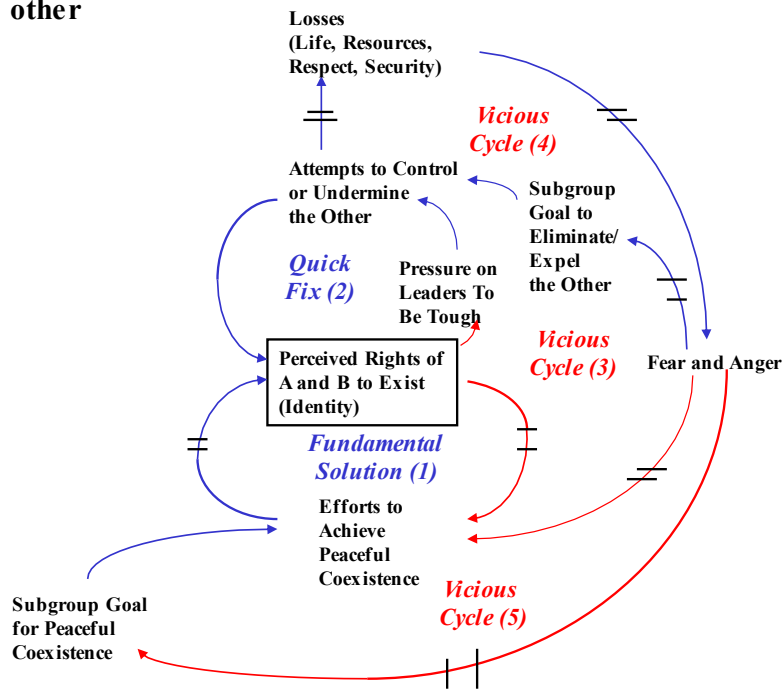


Figure 3: Escalation

These problems are compounded because both sides become caught in an endless race for both domination and victimization

