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## The Deadly Israeli-Palestinian Struggle for Significance: Can Psychology Help?

*By Arie W. Kruglanski and Joel Singer*

### SYNOPSIS

*The ongoing Gaza war between Israel and Hamas is but the latest round in the tragic, and increasingly horrific struggle between Israelis and Palestinians that has been ongoing at least since the birth of the Jewish state in 1948, and actually from the earliest waves of Jewish immigration to Palestine (1881-1903) onward. What forces drive this seemingly interminable and intractable conflict? A socio-psychological perspective on the conflict's history and nature is crucial to understanding its dynamics and guiding its ultimate resolution.*

### COMMENTARY

#### The Stakes

Typically, the Israeli-Palestinian entanglement is perceived as “realistic” conflict over a scarce resource, the territory of Palestine. We submit, however, that land here is but a proxy, a means to an ultimate psychological end, the feelings of significance and mattering over which Israelis and Palestinians are locked in a deadly struggle.

Land is a fungible commodity interchangeable with cash; in fact, it was sold in large quantities by Palestinian Arabs to Jewish immigrants to Palestine in the first half of the 20th century. But sovereignty over territory carries a much deeper and symbolic value as a means to significance, which cannot be replaced by material [means](#). Understanding this holds the key to any attempt at resolving the conflict, and envisioning the circumstances in which it might be possible to attain this elusive end.

#### The History

The nationalist spirit that then swept the international order in early 20th century

beckoned to both European Jews, who fled to Palestine, and local Palestinian Arabs, that for different reasons, felt downtrodden and humiliated.

Like other Arabs, the Palestinians were under colonial dominion, first by the Ottoman Empire that ruled Palestine for some 400 years, then by Great Britain that took over Palestine at the end of the First World War. When new Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Jordan were being carved out of the collapsing Ottoman Empire, the Palestinian Arabs too sought to obtain a country of their own.

At the same time, for a variety of reasons, virulent antisemitism in Europe reached new heights. Publications such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which first appeared in 1905 in Russia, generated theories of an international Jewish conspiracy. These fomented waves of massacres of Jews across all Eastern Europe and in Russia in particular. Feeling unwanted anywhere, the Jews concluded that they must have a state of their own in their ancestral land of Israel – now called Palestine.

Arab and Jewish forms of nationalism emerged, promising an unshackling from bonds that deprived these beleaguered peoples of significance and dignity. The trouble was that the apparent way out of their misery brought them into a deadly conflict with each other, the brutal aftershocks of which have been reverberating till the present time.

### **The Aggression**

In the early years of Jewish immigration to Palestine, relations between the newcomers, and Palestinian Arabs who populated the area for hundreds of years was peaceful if not cordial. But soon it dawned on the Palestinians that the growing Jewish presence threatens their own supremacy over the land, hence potentially jeopardising their yearning for collective significance that dominion over the realm would have offered.

Psychological research reveals that a primordial means of attaining significance and the sense of social worth is through [aggression](#). The response by Palestinian Arabs to the increasing threat to their significance posed by the Jewish immigrants was by unleashing aggression against them.

Retributive violence by the Jews followed and the two communities engaged in a bloody struggle through the years. The conflict was “put on hold” during the Second World War, only to resume in full force with the formal establishment of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948. This was a great victory for Zionism.

Palestinian reaction was, of course, different. They summarily rejected the UN partition resolution that called for dividing the land of Palestine between the two peoples and opted again for a violent path to honour. This time, rather than engaging directly with the Israelis, the Palestinians relied on their powerful proxies, the Arab states of Egypt, The Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia, who, in support of their Palestinian brethren, attacked the fledgling Jewish state as soon as it was born.

Nonetheless, against all odds, Israel emerged victorious from this war, marking another boost of major proportions to the Israeli sense of significance. The Arabs were

again humiliated. Palestinians were displaced from their homes during the 1948 war and turned into refugees. Their trauma called for revenge, fomenting periodic eruptions of violence and several Israeli-Arab wars over the years.

In 1967, an alliance of Egypt, Jordan, Syria was about to attack Israel, when Israel launched a preemptive war that ended quickly (in six days) with Israel occupying the Sinai Peninsula, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. The 1973 October war, a surprise attack launched by Egypt and Syria against Israel, also ended with Israel's victory.

Unable to rely on proxies, various Palestinian terrorist organisations sprung up, including the secular Fatah, the Marxist-Leninist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and the religious Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Violent popular uprisings took place, the first Intifada (1987-1993), and the second Intifada (2000-2005).

### **The Peace Process**

Alongside violence, however, there also have been attempts at reaching a negotiated solution to the conflict, the most significant of which were the 1993-1995 Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinians represented by the PLO. From the psychological perspective, two principles illuminate the conditions under which talking rather than fighting might have a chance: *substitution* and *affirmation*.

### **The Psychology**

The principle of [\*substitution\*](#) states that whenever one means to a goal seems ineffective, another means is considered and tried. In 1974, PLO leader Yasser Arafat ended his historic speech to the UN General Assembly, by saying: "I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand".

In Oslo, Arafat made a solemn commitment to Israel, "to renounce the use of terrorism and other acts of violence.... prevent violations and discipline violators". Nonetheless, he kept "the gun", just in case the "olive branch" failed to deliver. Both he and his successors continued to use violence and talks intermittently for gains in the dispute.

Consistent with the substitution logic, the Palestinians seemed readier for negotiations when terrorism and violence proved futile and resumed their militancy once the negotiations failed. For instance, once the first Intifada was suppressed in 1992-1993, the Palestinians commenced intense talks with Israeli representatives, which led to the Oslo Accords. And when implementation of the Accords stagnated, the second Intifada erupted.

The principle of *affirmation* suggests that, in order to negotiate rather than fight, a party needs to feel sufficiently empowered. When abjectly humiliated, the honourable and primordial response is to fight. To ensure cooperation, both parties must feel respected and reaffirmed. That is the logic behind Winston Churchill's astute maxim "in victory—magnanimity": rather than feeling gleeful and engaging in *schadenfreude* toward a defeated adversary, it is more judicious to show respect and uplift their spirit.

In the context of Middle East peacemaking, it was only after Egypt – through its successful surprise attack on Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War – reaffirmed its honour and significance (tarnished by the 1967 defeat), that President Anwar El-Sadat was ready to pay a historic visit to Jerusalem that resulted in the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, holding to this day.

In this agreement, Egypt finally recognised and normalised its relations with Israel, including exchanging ambassadors. In return, Israel fully withdrew from the Sinai, something it had refused to do earlier. So, while Egypt was willing to make more concessions after it had restored its honour through its success on the battlefield, Israel was prepared to make more concessions after it understood the limits to its military power and the need to adjust downward its attitude born of its past military exploits, both in line with the principles of affirmation and substitution discussed above.

Similar forces were in play in the Palestinian-Israeli context in Oslo in 1993. It was only when the Palestinians reaffirmed their power to inflict serious damage on Israel through the first Intifada, did they feel sufficiently vindicated and ready to negotiate with Israel on the basis of the two-state solution, rather than aiming to liquidate Israel completely.

At the same time, while Israel managed to suppress the Intifada, it was unable to stop it. Here too, Israel understood the limits of its power and it, therefore, became progressively convinced that the only way to get out of the bind was to start talking with the PLO, which Israel had previously considered a terrorist organisation with whom any contacts implying recognition, were prohibited on moral grounds.

### **Peace and Significance**

The psychological dynamic of affirmation and substitution offers a ray of hope even at this moment in time when the Gaza war is raging and the prospects of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict may seem at their dimmest. Yet, if the Israelis would feel sufficiently reaffirmed by a victory over Hamas (should it happen) but also sufficiently convinced that violence against the adversary exacts too dear a price, and if the Palestinians would feel sufficiently reaffirmed by the humiliation dealt Israel on 7 October, and sufficiently discouraged from aggression by the devastation they have suffered – maybe conditions would be set for this deadly struggle between the two communities to end or at least subside significantly.

By adopting a “winner takes all” attitude, extremists on both sides are squandering opportunities for significance through peace: Dignity that comes from achievements in economic, artistic, or scientific spheres and from sparing future generations the horrors and travails of endless war. From the significance perspective, peace is the answer. All that continued violence can deliver is chagrin, ignominy and pain.

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