

Reactions to the “Israel Under the Shadow of Conflict” workshop

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Attending a workshop in Jerusalem, right at the intersection of many areas of politics, ethnicity, nationalism, and culture, was an extremely useful confrontation of international relations theory, and an American perception of the conflicts in Israel, with facts on the ground. One can see the interplay of different theories of international relations, international security, and domestic politics. From my point of view as a scholar of international conflict and security studies, and someone who is interested in the intersection of domestic and international politics, many of my reactions can be grouped into four areas.

The conflict clearly reveals the importance of domestic politics. IR theory has always started with the realist model suggesting that states (or state-like entities) pursue national power. Neo-realism modified this assertion to suggest that states may be happy to pursue security (which is slightly different) and not always power advancement. We certainly see Israelis, Arabs, and Palestinians concerned with security, both at the national level, and as individuals. But of course, just as we have intellectually known that realism/neo-realism is only a first cut at international politics, we see in Israel that domestic politics is nearly as important as those power or security concerns. It was fascinating to hear about just how close particular negotiations have come to reaching agreement on mutually acceptable solutions at different points. National security issues vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli interstate conflict have been largely overcome, or at least appear to many actors to be manageable. However, settlement with local actors – generally speaking, the West Bank and Gaza Palestinian authorities – is much more difficult, and the link to domestic politics is that Israeli and Palestinian public opinion (in general) and the political turnover in Israel’s leadership (in particular) have prevented solutions on a two-state solutions with security guarantees and identified borders from moving forward. It appears that although negotiators were very close to a deal at certain points in time, political distractions or change of leadership prevented solutions from being accepted. The theory of two-level games is obviously very relevant here, and the activity of veto players is also evident at various turns of negotiations.

A second revelation from touring in terms of international security was to see how physically close the parties are. In terms of an earlier phase of conflict, with military forces engaged in conventional warfare and military invasion a reality in wars from 1948 to 1973, it is obvious once being on the ground how the physical size and configuration of Israel and the Jerusalem corridor contributed to real security fears. Artillery could control major access routes to Jerusalem from beyond the green line, could threaten Israel from the Golan Heights, and while mass armies could be well-detected, defense in depth was not really an option. One can easily see how the security dilemma could play out given the territory and distances at play. It was also fascinating to hear how worries about different aspects of the “Arab-Israeli” conflict has changed. National security issues (at least vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli interstate conflict) have been largely overcome, or have lost their primacy. Israel is confident of its ability to defend against conventional military attack, and has defensible external borders. So even though the area is small, that part of the conflict is more under control than the outside perception might be.

A third reaction to touring around Jerusalem, into the West Bank, and through the Golan Heights is that the way Israeli cities and towns are situated relative to Palestinian areas is really quite different in

foreign perception than in reality. An outside/U.S. view is that the Israelis and Palestinians live quite separately. This leads to a reaction that it should not be so hard to partition territory, separate the parties, and establish separate security and control. But the spaces in the United States are much bigger than in Israel, and the reality is that everyone is much closer than one would know from the outside. Cities are not miles apart, but yards apart. From particular vantage points, multiple Palestinian villages may be seen interspersed with Israeli settlements. A straight line border cannot separate the parties to the conflict with a large buffer; the extremely elaborate, detailed, and “snaky” borders on maps attest to that. However, it is also clear that although it is difficult, partitioning and borders are possible. They are not neat, or clean, but it appears that there are multiple occasions (particularly about a decade ago) when particular maps came very close to mutual acceptance. That potential border and its relationship to “facts on the ground” brings to bear another part bargaining theory concerned with time, time pressure, outside options, and beliefs about the future. Multiple parties are focused on the facts on the ground. But those facts change over time, are manipulable, and have indeed been consciously, publicly, and strategically manipulated. The settlement project, the Jerusalem triangle, strategies of preventing the encirclement of Jerusalem by Palestinian villages, have all been elements of Israeli foreign policy that put Israel in a better bargaining position (and of course a better security position) over time. But there are competing narratives about the future. Beliefs about whether Israeli settlements will expand or be removed, and beliefs about what happens if or when the Arab/Palestinian population of Israel passes 50%, are two of the competing elements of an uncertain future that give different players on each side reasons to push for immediate settlement, or hold out for a better position. IR theory suggests that shared beliefs about the future or the results of future conflict should help reach an agreement now. Here, there is disagreement about what the future holds. Indeed, from the perspective of some Israeli leaders, delay in settlement and a continuation of the status quo (occupation and expansion of settlements) is actually not all bad, and allows a stronger Israeli position in the future. Given the asymmetry of power between Israel and the Palestinians, it is unclear what it would take to reach a “hurting stalemate” of enough magnitude to shift the parties to a belief that settlement now is better than a potential settlement later.

Finally, touring the region yielded a much more nuanced perspective on the Palestinian problem than (naturally) one would gain from the outside. Surprisingly (to me), the Palestinian problem seems to be almost invisible most of the time within Israel. People proceed through daily life with (in general) few overt reminders of this conflict. Because of the separation of Jerusalem from Palestinian areas, because of checkpoints, because of roads that only Israelis can drive on, Palestinians are visible sometimes as workers, but the conflict is not obvious. At the same, though, security worries (and hence the Palestinian conflict) are always present, and security is pervasive although not always obvious. From the perspective of a different point of origin, having armed soldiers around as part of daily life, and being accompanied by a security guard on tours, is potentially jarring even as it is ignored by everyone around. In terms of the separation of Palestinian and Israeli life and governance, the terms “colonial” and “occupation” do have relevance as descriptors (perhaps normatively as well, but certainly descriptively, and this gives an interesting lens through which the conflict can be viewed). The lack of Palestinian rights, the complicated legal system, the difficulty in (for example) obtaining work permits, the clear primacy of Israel, all lead to de facto segregation. This is, indeed, conscious. It also makes understanding Palestinian frustration easy. This is not to say that Israel has not made moves to allow the Palestinians to build connections under their control from area to area – they have. But when there

are roads in your backyard that you cannot access, when travel is difficult, when jobs are scarce, where cooperative work is made difficult, it makes sense that there is resentment. Theories of conflict inform us that such resentments are a source of future conflict. Thinking of how to tackle those resentments and improve the lives of ordinary people so that they do not turn to conflict, is the problem. Theories of domestic politics and nation-building again have relevance here, as without good governance, economic conditions are unlikely to improve for Palestinians, and without solid authority and control, the Israelis do not see a partner for peace. The same can be said from the Palestinian side – with governance of occupied territory that includes policies that hinder Palestinian progress, and without authority in the government of Israel to prevent new settlement and be a partner for peace on the Israeli side, settlement appears unlikely, although many small cooperative measures occur every day. There is a symmetry in frustration, security concern, and perceptions of the other side that is quite clear from an outsiders perspective.