

Pathologies of Recurrent Arab-Israeli Conflict

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What explains recurrent conflict involving Israel and its neighbors, domestic and international? While decades of conflict have led many to dismay, a paradoxical insight may be that it is factors limiting the intensity of overt violence that contribute to the duration of various Arab-Israeli disputes. The relationship between dispute duration and intensity is extremely well established in the literature on international relations. Big contests tend to be shorter than many (not all) smaller disputes. The generation of conflict as a flow helps to explain why this should be the case. The fact that Arab-Israeli conflict can be sustained, at least in its latent form, may help to explain why resolution has proven so intractable. Supporting this perspective, in fact, is the very brief nature of intense, episodic warfare, which could not be sustained by either side, given the enormous demands on logistics and limited military capabilities, and large loss of life and treasure.

International relations in general finds long-term, recurrent conflict difficult to explain in coherent theoretical terms. Wars are informative processes. There are several possible factors explaining the durability of Arab-Israeli conflict. I outline a few briefly here:

1. The enforcement problem: Getting neighbors to commit successfully requires that one's neighbors are able to enforce agreements with their own populations and key political constituencies. This requires some combination of authority (power) and legitimacy. However, the same factors that enhance a neighbor's ability to commit

also make it possible for an adversary to negotiate more successfully. Weakness in an adversary ensures a better deal, but at the same time weakness also makes self-enforcement of a deal more tentative and tenuous.

We see this intrinsic tradeoff in Israeli policy: On the one hand, Israel wants partners in the peace process. On the other hand, it (reasonably) does not want to have to make concessions. If a neighbor cannot enforce the agreement domestically, no agreement is going to prove durable and desirable to Israel. This issue is most important in dealing with the Palestinian Authority, but applies elsewhere as well.

2. Limited aims: A related issue has to do with the nature of Israeli objectives. If Israel were an imperial power with “unlimited aims,” victory in 1967 and ’73 would have led to more important territorial gains, possibly even Damascus, Cairo, Amman and elsewhere. As it happens, Israeli territorial gains have mostly been in places with smaller indigenous populations (or in areas of small geographic scope but major symbolic value, such as Jerusalem). Israel does not have demographic imperial ambitions. Unlike traditional powers, it has little interest in controlling indigenous populations. It has in fact pulled its military punches to avoid having to govern large numbers of Arabs in places where governance would be expensive and unpopular.

However, this means that military victory has not led to political stability. The winning side (Israel) achieves its limited aims. While this weakens adversaries (1 above), it also leaves adversaries in power and ready to fight another day. Put another way, rivalry follows from the fact that the winner does *not* practice total war. Losers, for their part, can have unlimited aims, but each intermittent cessation

is a chance to recover, reequip, develop new tactics or strategies and perhaps prevail in the next round of active conflict.

Note that the theoretical rationale for enduring rivalry, problematic on other grounds, requires both a winner who is restrained and a loser who is not. It is also necessary that the loser believes that it can do better in the future and that the winner prefers fighting in the future (possibly on unfavorable terms) to exploiting the full fruits of victory today. This boils down to the reasons for limited aims.

3. Dynamics promoting mutual optimism for war: Canonical theories of warfare in international relations emphasize the need for combatants to have different expectations in order for costly contests to occur. On the surface this is problematic in a rivalry framework. Why doesn't the loser learn quickly that it is not going to win (especially given the costly nature of conflict)? In fact, they do. It is striking in the Arab-Israeli conflicts that the active phase tends to be very brief. Both sides are learning in fighting—very quickly. But this learning is not sustained. Conflict recurs.

A number of factors encourage adversaries in various Arab-Israeli conflicts to develop and sustain different expectations of success, at least until fighting occurs. While fighting can teach each side the “true” balance of power, intervals of “peace” allow one and possibly both sides to re-set these expectations. In order to again believe that victory is just around the corner, the loser must develop a new way of warfare. This is especially possible in the modern world for two reasons. First, technological innovation creates new military realities more quickly than in the past. A loser can believe that new technologies will advantage them over an adversary.

Egypt, for example, could plausibly imagine that anti-aircraft (SAMS) and anti-tank (sagger) artillery would allow it to prevail against Israel in 1973 in part *because of* the advantage in armor and airpower that Israel demonstrated in the 1967 conflict.

Second, a related issue has to do with the number of military options open to states and non-state actors. Technology and the application of strategy means that there are many more ways to act and react militarily today than in the past. While non-military options are also increasing, the number and permutations of ways to win through force require a much longer time to work through. Ultimately, peace may occur only when the losing side can confirm for itself that there is no strategy, tactics or equipment that will work better in the next war than prevailed in the last.

4. Dynamics promoting mutual optimism in the absence of war: A related set of dynamics exists causing Israel and its adversarial neighbors each to be optimistic about the future for prevailing on certain issues, such as territory, in the absence of any compromise or concessions. Arab demographics mean that eventually Jewish Israelis will be a minority in Israel. Actions have been taken, such as tightening the definition of citizenship, etc. that slow the effects of these processes. But Arabs can imagine that demographics will deliver them from their current predicament.

Israeli Jews, for their part, have with government assistance changed the “ground truth” of conflict. Land is being occupied through habitation and Arabs are being displaced. In time, the physical occupation of disputed territories can make a reality that addresses disputes over territory/property through *de facto* change.

Part of the paradox in this circumstance is that mutual optimism can lead to peace, at least temporarily. If both sides think they will prevail in time, they can be more patient in their treatment of conditions in the present. Israelis can believe that ground truth will eventually resolve the security problems they face, while Arabs for their part can believe that the weight of numbers will in time lead them to prevail.

Conflict risks becoming intensified when one or both sides are pessimistic, forcing time pressure and a commitment problem where either side believes it must act or face a more disadvantageous position in the future. Much like the closing of the American frontier helped to ignite the U.S. civil war, realization that settlements or Arab population growth are not going to succeed may at some point trigger a much more intense phase in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

5. War in the information age: The “big” problem for Israel is that active phases of warfare can no longer achieve most of its national objectives, while latent phases are costly in human lives and public treasure. Much of the impetus for a solution to the Palestinian problem and for relations with neighboring Arab states stems from the huge drain on the Israeli public sector posed by maintaining its national security.

These concerns are likely to be profoundly impacted in coming decades by the rise of automated combat systems. Since these systems both limit exposure to casualties and reliance on human labor, they make it possible for wealthy nations to contemplate a more-or-less permanent war footing. The rise of “costless war” will be particularly potent in the Israeli context, where endemic security concerns have always coincided with a sensitivity to friendly casualties. These systems will tend to

make resolution of the various Arab-Israeli conflicts less acute, further exacerbating other tendencies to prolong disputes in the region. Wider application of automated combat systems will also tend to encourage consideration of a broadening of policy goals. It may even be possible that Israel or other sophisticated nations will back away from the limited aims that they have had for military force in modern times.