Understanding the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict:
Lessons from an Unusual Classroom

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In 1992, two academics - one an Israeli from Jerusalem and the other a Palestinian from Bethlehem -- began team-teaching a course at the University of Maryland, College Park. The course's original title, "the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict," has evolved over the years into a more forward-looking and open-ended title, "Conflict Resolution: the Israeli/Palestinian Experiment." Based on their unusual and successful teaching experience, they have derived several lessons that readers will find illuminating, given the prevalence of one-sided and mutually antagonistic ways of approaching and understanding the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Over the years, always striving to represent mainstream and representative Israelis and Palestinians, we two have worked yearly as visiting faculty in the United States. Looking back at more than a dozen years of classroom experience, we have developed a fifteen-point approach to team-teaching about violent conflict situations. While presentation of an antagonistic black-and-white picture might sharpen readers' grasp of the differences that divide us, it does not highlight the common ground, an understanding of which we hope will move readers not only to understand the Israeli–Palestinian conflict but also to consider alternative solutions Briefly, our "rules of engagement" are as follows:

1. *Don't get locked into conventional zero/sum and deterministic interpretations of our conflict.* Our approach is to take a more imaginative and analytical view of the past, present, and future. While official narratives of the past are adversarial, solutions discussed at present often between governments and academics are pointing to win/win outcomes, including when dealing with finite resources such as land and water

2. *Periodization is a matter of choice.* A significant decision must be made when presenting our common history: Shall it be offered in the context of struggle between two national movements at loggerheads for the same piece of land, Palestine/*Eretz Israel,* or shall we opt for a retrospective on encounters between Arabs and Jews or between Islam and Judaism fourteen centuries ago? If we choose the first option, then conflict epitomizes our relationship. However, if we opt to teach our common
heritage and ignore the previous century, one can infer that the interaction throughout the ages in the Middle East and the Iberian Peninsula was a history of coexistence, even in asymmetrical situations in which Jews comprised a minority in the lands of Islam. Surely the Jewish community under Islam enjoyed better privileges and treatment than under Christendom. While courses like ours normally focus only on the era of conflict, we are prompted to salvage the longer historical trajectory to remind ourselves that confrontation is not a permanent feature in our relationship. Since we have had a record of coexistence in the past, a fashionable deterministic prediction that we cannot live in peace in the future is not substantiated when envisioning the long-term perspective. Hence, the main challenge lies in knowing how we can bring it forward without leaving a legacy of violence and denial for future generations.

3. *Historical events are a genuine part of the collective memory of both Arabs and Jews, and we should present both narratives as they are predominantly taught in Israeli and in Palestinian schools.* To understand with empathy the other's subjective perception of realities, it is important to be familiar with both sides of the story.

Looking back into our respective nation-building processes, the tendency is to glorify our own role and explain the conflict as an outcome of the adversary's misdeeds or bad conduct. Seeing the other's parallel history can be an important eye opening experience. We need to respect each other's narratives and, whenever we differ, to include both versions in our analysis. Once we have acknowledged our differences, we have a better hope of affirming our common ground and discovering a shared vision of the future.

4. *In presenting a respective of our own past, we must frame each of the two distinct narratives in their own staged approach.* When introducing the phases of our conflict, we address the prevailing historiography of each side and present it as such, even if the periods and events that marked the Palestinian and Jewish developments at times do not converge. For instance, the periodization of the making of the State of Israel was

Preceded by the imprint of six distinct migratory waves (*Aliyah,* in the singular), each with different origins, characteristics, and idiosyncrasies. After the "War of Liberation" in 1948, the "wars of Israel" (1948, 1956, 1967, 1982, 1991, 2006, 2008) with established Arab countries (even if triggered or affected by hostile behavior by Palestinians) are often recognized as turning points. From the other perspective,

the pre-1948 *Al Nakba* (The Catastrophe) is characterized as the transition of an overall Arab national movement toward a distinct Palestinian patriotism. By and large, from 1948 until the Oslo process, the movement was transformed from a leaderless people through its formative stages of armed strategy to the establishment of the PLO,

which was the culminating response to the failures of inter-Arab politics. The process of democratization and moderation can be seen through landmarks not only related to Israel but also in its quest for independence from Arab states' tutelage. Even if the causality of events presented in different sequences contradicts each other's official narratives, we contrive to present it with a sense of respect for each other's truth.

5. *As with many other parts of our teamwork we want to respect the terms for references used by both Palestinians and Jews.* One matter over which we have had lengthy deliberations and negotiations is how to name incidents, territories, and

wars. In the preparation of the syllabus we have made ad hoc decisions to use both sides' formulations. For example, we consider the 1948 war as both Israel's *Milhemet ha Atzma'ut* (War of Independence) and the Palestinians'*Al Nakba* . And we address a more current controversy as the Palestinians' categorical condemnation of the "Apartheid Wall" in the West Bank and Israel's official support of the "Security

Barrier." Sometimes we use parallel nomenclature, separated by a dash, as in "Israel–Palestine." In other cases, we have accepted the vocabulary in common usage by most of the world—for example, West Bank of the Jordan River, rather than the Jewish biblical names Judea and Samaria. We have chosen to relate to all these territories as "occupied," using the language of international institutions, rather than the Jewish settlers' reference to "liberated" lands or the official Israeli term "administered"

territories. On the other hand, we have related to the Jewish state as "Israel"—its official name as a recognized member of the United Nations (U.N.)—rather than "Occupied Palestine" or the "Zionist entity," terms expressing the reluctance

of many in the Arab world to recognize Israel's existence.

6. *We use the tools of social history so that the focus is not only on leadership and elites but also on social and political movements as they developed on the ground.* This

is not to say that leaders such as David Ben-Gurion, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, Menachem Begin, or Yasser Arafat have not played critical roles in determining crucial decisions about our two peoples, but we must recognize that this is a protracted, identity-driven, and ethnopolitical conflict with deep roots. Through the years of prolonged violence and fear, it is not so much a government-versus-government border dispute as a classic protracted communal people versus-people conflict. It is when focusing on our

own communities rather than talking only about governments and leaders that we are able to find- in both camps- individuals and civil society organizations that have reached a high level of agreement about concrete ways of resolving our conflict.PEACEMAKING AND PEACE KEEPING, OFTEN THE IDEAS PERMEATE [OSLO] IT MAY TAKE TIME. MUCH OF THE PARADIGM SHIFTS IS INSPIRED BY BOTTOM UP [FIRST INTIFADA, PNC 19TH, 1988, TWO STATE SOLUTION. OSLO MUTUAL RECOGNITION, ABANDONING ISRAEL THE 'JORDANIAN OPTION'.

7. *An important challenge in co-teaching and co-authoring is how to stress common stands and avoid confrontational discourse.* In many cases for the sake of simplification, the tendency often is to show a black and-white picture of confrontational positions, to audiences who learn more about what separates us than about our common ground. Such a version of history is justified when Israeli and Palestinian leaders have shown adversarial tendencies, as they often have, have failed to build trust, and have continued to point to the other's failures rather than to

look inward and address their own inadequacies. In the pictures that we present, we do not ignore the alternative historic narrative, but we also present the voices of moderation and compromise. Even when those voices represented minority views, their insights are sometimes vindicated, often decades later, when leadership endorses their views. For example, until 1977 Israel's Labor governments stressed the "Jordanian option," which viewed the Hashemite dynasty as partners and ignored the distinctive

voices of the Palestinians, even while important Israeli voices called for dialogue with the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, an approach that was duly formalized only with the Oslo Accords in 1993. By now even Likud's leader PM Netanyahu's has been calling for negotiations with the head of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. Likewise, Palestinians advocating a two-state solution were ostracized and often assassinated, only to be vindicated in 1998 when the Palestinian National Council convened in Algiers and adopted such a policy. Likewise, the vociferous opposition of the Likud leadership—led then by General Ariel Sharon—to the suggested pullout from Gaza and Jericho (in the east and center of the West Bank) in the Oslo process in 1993. However, this idea became compatible with the 2005 unilateral disengagement plan of by then PM Sharon, which included Gaza and

THREE settlements in "Samaria" (in the north of the West Bank).

8. *Understanding the asymmetries between us is an essential element of judgment.* Ugly atrocities, missed opportunities, and leadership mishaps have occurred on both sides, but we must avoid promoting a false parallelism. We must stress the difference in status between the Palestinians (the weaker party, living as an occupied people)

and the Israelis (the stronger party, which occupies large parts of Palestinian territory). Although the case is in many ways an example of top-dog Israelis versus underdog Palestinians, we also must be aware of the perceptions of many Jews who see the

conflict as little "David" (Israel) facing threatening "Goliath" (the Arab and Muslim worlds).

9. *In sharing our contending stories, the point is not to score debating points, or to argue with selective facts about who came first or who is acting or reacting, or to determine who has more rights.* In reality, we often face a conflict of right versus right. Judging from the stubbornness of both nations to remain on the land in spite of adverse circumstances, it can be agreed that both nations have enough claims and rights.

We sense, and rather should emphasize, a common destiny: our nations are "doomed" to live together. And if there is a nuclear threat from Iran, we are also "doomed" to die together. Hence making peace with its neighbor may be for Israel a meaningful additional security guarantee to pre-empt a strike from Teheran "in solidarity with the Palestinian people".

10. In a conflict situation, the natural tendency is to highlight the positive features of each society's history. However, *we do not need to balance the pluses or equally share the blame all through the process, as long as the picture we present recognizes change over time.* For instance, it is clear to us that in the years that preceded Israel's 1948 independence, the Zionist leadership was mostly supportive of moderate options and difficult compromises with the Palestinians, whose leadership was overwhelmingly rejectionist to all plans of reconciliation. At the same time, the peace forces in Jewish society, though insignificant, were more proactive than those well-intentioned individuals within the Arab community. In fact, an opposite trend can be discerned after 1967, when Palestinian official institutions increasingly and dramatically changed their policies toward the acceptance of "the other" while fanaticism based on religious and expansionist premises developed intensively within Israeli society, and political leadership. As Yeoshafat Harkabi mentioned in his landmark *Fateful Decisions,* in the first fifty years it has been the Zionists who knew to differentiate between grand design and reality, opting as a small minority in Palestine for incremental and moderate policies. However, when the relative strength of Israel over its Arab neighbors became self-evident, it was the weakening Palestinian side that was giving away its vision of a state from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea. Hence, since historic failure for achieving peace fluctuates over the years, we cannot share responsibility for it equally at all times.

11. *When the contradictory claims to tangible and intangible needs are expressed, the issue of a real conflict of rights calls for innovative ideas of conflict transformation..*

We consider this to be not just a slogan but rather a doable approach that leads to alternatives to resolving the core issues (called the final or "permanent status" issues in the Oslo peace process), such as underground water aquifers or Jerusalem or generating new future scenarios. We have used with our students a consensus building framework that starts with simulating as Palestinians and Israelis in an adversarial stage and mutual recriminations, through a phase of reverse role playing and ends by joint functional team work brainstorming ideas suitable for the Old City in Jerusalem. PARADIGM SHIFT, SHARON, THE ARCHITECT OF THE SETTLEMENTS CHANGES HIS MIND "DEMOGRAPHY MORE IMPORTANT THAN TOPOGRAPHY

12. *While the dimensions of the larger Arab–Israeli or "Middle East" conflict have fluctuated over time, we both recognize in our narratives the centrality of the Israeli–Palestinian issue.* Over time, many additional layers have been added
(regional Arab involvement, the Cold War and even nuclear threats) the original and continuous strife of the protracted communal conflict of two peoples who consider the same land to be their own. As a result, addressing the core of the issue in depth is an essential way to minimize the added complications created by other state and non-state actors such as Hamas.

13. *While we recognize the importance of foreign powers in the conflict (nowadays, chiefly the United States), these outside powers have usually been unable to prevent war or impose peace.* The United States was at times able to stop armed struggle and channel such efforts into diplomacy. Yet both in the case of the 1977–1979
Begin–Sadat negotiations (Camp David I) and the 1993 Oslo peace process between Palestinians and Israelis, the main initiative was bilateral, and only later did the White House plays a key role. Hence, we stress than in additional of high level presidential diplomacy, the Quartet (USA, European Union, United Nations and Russia) envoys need not only to shuttle between government officials but invest soft power in peacebuilding bottom up in both societies.

14. *Putting our conflict in comparative perspective is necessary to understand that the uniqueness of its tenants is composed of similarities and differences*. Using lateral thinking and learning from the costly lessons and best practices for the transformation of other disputes into peaceful coexistence (such as Northern Ireland or South Africa), has an inherent value that also needs to be integrated.

15. U*nderstanding the historical circumstances that in the past brought about either cooperation or confrontation can be helpful in understanding the future shape that the relations between these two nations may take but a forward-looking approach is the best guarantee for resolution.* If we can agree and determine that confrontations between Arabs and Jews are a product of historical circumstances rather than a result of deterministic inherent contradictions between the two cultural systems, then we know that future relations can, to some degree, be controlled and managed by human decisions. Stressing our common heritage as Abrahamic religions is now more relevant than ever when the main obstacle for peace comes from fundamentalist Jewish settlers and political Islamists groups such as Jihad Al Islam or Hamas.

16. NEUTRALITY AND IMPARTIALITY

In short, team teaching and co-authoring provide students and readers with a better perspective not only on the history that sepaERrates us—mostly the ultimate responsibility of our leadership—but also the shared understanding of reality shaped by an epistemic community of academics and intellectuals that has evolved over years of working together. With modesty, this rather unique experience could be replicated by academics in many other ethnopolitical conflicts, hence contributing to highlight that with systematic and innovative thinking there is a way out.