Food for Thought: Five Ways to Think About (and Teach) the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

Since 2008, I have offered an upper-division course at Graceland University entitled, "History of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict." Graceland University is a small, liberal-arts institution, enrolling some 1000 students on the main campus in Lamoni, Iowa. The students who enroll are a mix of History majors and others curious to learn more about a topic they have heard about. A significant number of students are members of the church that sponsors Graceland University, the Community of Christ, and some of these students may bring certain religious presuppositions with them.

I describe the course in the syllabus as addressing "the relatively short, but nonetheless tragic and complex history of one of the world's most intractable conflicts." In doing so, I try to knock down, as quickly as possible, stereotypes and myths of an "ancient conflict," "Biblical conflict" or the idea that "they have been fighting there for hundreds/thousands of years." I am also trying to create an atmosphere in the class that will be respectful of all points of view, and recognize that no one side has a monopoly on truth or justice. The main text for the course, Charles D. Smith's *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*[1] also reinforces these important assumptions.

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1 Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents,* 8th ed. (Boston and New York: Bedford St. Martins, 2013)

As a way of making sense of a conflict that began when Zionist Jews began arriving in Ottoman-controlled Palestine in the late 19th century, five different models can be usefully applied as a way of understanding the events of the last approximately 135 years. These approaches are one, a model that sees the conflict as unique, two, a religious conflict model, three, a conflict between sovereign states, four, an ethnic or national conflict, and five, a settler-colonial conflict. Each of these models has some degree of usefulness, although, I would argue, some are more useful than others.

Model One: A Unique Conflict

The first model argues that the conflict is *sui generis*, and therefore cannot be grouped with, or compared to, any other conflict. As a historian who tries to stress comparative history in my World History survey, and all my other courses, this approach goes against my instincts. The premise of this model is as follows. The Zionist movement, based on two fundamental beliefs; that Jews are more than adherents to the religion of Judaism, but are a people, or, if you prefer, a nation, and following from the first belief, as a nation they are entitled to a country, or, if you prefer, a state, led to the creation of the State of Israel, against the wishes and efforts of the indigenous population of Palestine. As there is only one Jewish state/country in the world, there is nothing to compare with the State of Israel, or with the Zionist movement that created it.

Perhaps the best thing that can be said about this approach is that, if this is a unique conflict, then close study of the details is essential. But problems begin even before excluding a comparative approach. If the conflict began in the waning years of the Ottoman Empire, shouldn't we be concerned with the developments elsewhere in that empire? If the role of British imperialism looms large in this history, as surely it does, mustn't we be also concerned with imperial policy elsewhere, in the Middle East and beyond? In more recent times, this conflict intersected with Cold War rivalries between the United States and the Soviet Union. Does Cold War history not have something to tell us?

Finally, students can be challenged to consider if any historical event defies comparison. Such a class discussion can also raise the concept of "American Exceptionalism" and its critics. Should the history of the United States be studied in a vacuum, or does the history of the United States fit into the broader story of Atlantic history, the history of the Americas, settler-colonial history, the history of slavery and resistance in the Americas, and others?

Model Two: Religious Conflict

Perhaps the most believed, outside the academic community, and the most misleading, is the widespread misconception that the conflict is primarily a religious conflict. Such a view

presents the biggest obstacle to a clear understanding of the conflict's actual history and persistence. Students are not helped by exposure to the stereotypes and distortions typically found in commercial mass media.

Is there any validity to this model? Yes, but only in a small way. Among the many issues that sustain the conflict are disputes over land, the status of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 and 1967 wars, the rights of Jews worldwide to immigrate to Israel, and the status of settlements built in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. There is also the question of right and access to places deemed holy by at least one, if not all of the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the context of disputes over these holy places, we can identify religion as playing a small, but highly symbolic role.

Islam, which came after Judaism and Christianity, and which sees the Muslim faith as fulfilling previous divine messages sent to Jews and Christians, therefore deems holy to Muslims sacred spaces that are deemed holy to Jews and/or Christians. For example, the site in Hebron believed to hold the tomb of Abraham, or Ibrahim, is a sacred space for Muslims as well as for Jews. In Bethlehem, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, viewed as birthplace of Jesus, and the nearby Tomb of Rachel, also in Bethlehem, have significance for Muslims as well as Christians, and for the latter site, for all three monotheistic faiths.

Perhaps most problematic are places in Jerusalem where sacred sites of one faith abut

sacred sites of another. Jerusalem for Muslims is Al-Quds, the Holy Place, where the Quran says the Prophet Muhammad made a miraculous "Night Journey," and from where he ascended to Heaven. "The Noble Sanctuary" contains the golden-domed "Dome of the Rock" and the silver-domed Al-Aqsa Mosque. This space is known to Jewish adherents as the "Temple Mount" in reference to the Temple destroyed by the Roman Empire in 70 CE. The sole surviving piece of the Temple, the outer wall, known as the Western Wall, or Wailing Wall, which is the holiest site in Judaism, also has religious significance for Muslims, as it too is connected to the miraculous Night Journey.

This, however, is about how far the religious conflict model can take us. If the conflict is religious, then there should have been conflict for at least 2,000 years, when Christianity developed alongside Judaism, or since the 7th century CE, when Islam began. In fact there is little evidence of conflict before the 19th century, and religious communities lived side by side, for the most part, for centuries.[2]

Among most Israeli Jews, Judaism, following Zionist ideas of nationality and peoplehood, is less focused on religious practices and rituals (as it is in North America or elsewhere), and more focused on identification with the land and its purported history. About twenty percent of the Israeli Jewish population is religiously observant, and many Israeli Jews would describe themselves as secular, or even non-religious, in ways similar to contemporary

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2 See, for example, Smith, p. 43, fn 30.

trends in Western Europe. Religiously observant Jews have always been a presence, but have never been at the forefront of the Zionist movement, nor have they led any government of the State of Israel since 1948.

In fact, some religiously observant Jews were initially hostile, or at best indifferent, to the ideas of Zionism when that political movement first arose in Europe in the late 19th century. Some early Zionists insisted that the future Jewish state must be in Palestine, or, as they called it, "the Land of Israel," but other Zionists were willing to consider such sites as East Africa, Argentina, and Cyprus. Seeing these differences helps students to make critical distinctions between Judaism the religion, and Zionism, the modern political ideology and movement.

On the Palestinian side, the dangers of seeing the conflict through a religious lens are even more apparent. Palestinians are Christians as well as Muslims, descendants of the first Christian communities in the Middle East. In fact, the Middle East gave birth to many of the early churches, including the Greek Orthodox church in Constantinople (modern Istanbul), the Coptic Orthodox Church in Alexandria, Egypt, and the Syrian Orthodox Church in Antioch (modern Antakya). Today, and throughout the last hundred years, leading members of the Palestinian national movement have been Christian, and, together with their Muslim neighbors, have advocated for Palestinian national sovereignty.[3]

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3 For example, George Habash and Nayif Hawatmah of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (the leaders of two of the more radical guerilla organizations in the 1960s and 1970s), political activist Hanan Ashwari, writers Edward

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Finally, if not every adherent of Judaism is a Zionist, not every Zionist is a Jew. The concept of "Christian Zionism" is important to recognize, both historically and at present, among early supporters of the Zionist idea in the British government, and among political figures in the United States today. Broadly speaking we can use this term to describe Christians whose religious beliefs and historical understanding cause them to be sympathetic with the program of Zionism.

At this point, I like to give my class a thought experiment: Pretend that you know nothing about the US Civil War, and you are studying, or trying to make sense of the conflict, five hundred years from now. All you have for historical evidence are the lyrics to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," which I provide to the class. Was this a religious conflict? Further discussion can bring to light how defenders of slavery used quotations from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament to promote and defend the enslavement of human beings. What is going on? Combatants will use religious symbolism to mobilize supporters, and to intensify enemy images, but that does not mean that the conflict is, at base, a religious conflict.

Model Three: A Conflict between States ("Countries")

Said, Emile Habibi, and Anton Shamas, and human rights activist Raja Shahadah. It should be noted that some of these individuals, particularly Marxists, are not necessarily professing Christians.

A stronger case can be made for seeing the conflict primarily through the lens of conflict between sovereign states. A state-centered perspective would argue that the main conflict is primarily between Israel and the Arab countries, and, more recently, Israel and Iran. To those who would stress the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this perspective would point out that the Palestinians have never been in a position to militarily threaten Israel, unlike the armies of neighboring states.

The 1948 war was the first of four (or five, depending on how the count is made) regional wars that Israel fought. From its declaration as a state in 1948, until the signing of the 1979 peace treaty, Egypt was Israel's most powerful adversary, and removing Egypt after 1979 significantly changed the military power balance. The focus on state to state conflict would also highlight Israel's relations with Syria: continued occupation of the Golan Heights since 1967, military conflict in 1973 and 1982, as well as efforts to end the state of war between the two countries in the late 1990s. Attention should also focus on Israel's relations with Iran, not an Arab state, but a proclaimed adversary since the Iranian Revolution and the proclamation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979.

Palestinians have been dependent on neighboring Arab states for bases, for funding, and for diplomatic support. Indeed, the origins of the 1967 war involve the efforts of Palestinian guerilla movements to force a confrontation between the Arab states and Israel, and thus prevent

a normalization of relations that would leave them permanently in exile and stateless. By engaging in cross-border raids, and provoking predictable Israeli retaliation, those groups sought to shatter the status quo.

A focus on states can also highlight not only regional conflict but also international rivalries; from the role of Britain and France during and after World War I through the post-World War II period, to the US-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War, to the role today of the United States, as well as Russia, China, and the members of the European Union.

There are several important disadvantages to using this model. First and foremost, it denies the centrality of the core conflict between Zionist Jews and Palestinian Arabs, which predates the establishment of the State of Israel by at least half a century, and which continues to fester, even after Israel has signed peace treaties with two neighboring states, Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. Further, while neighboring states have had their own reasons for entering and remaining in conflict with Israel, at least on some level, their motives were informed by support for the Palestinians' efforts to achieve sovereignty in all or part of Palestine. Although there may be debate over the extent of genuine support for Palestinian national aspirations among neighboring Arab states, it is unlikely that they would remain so deeply involved for their own reasons, exclusively. Thus one is led to the fourth model, putting the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians back on center stage.

Model Four: An Ethnic or National Conflict

This approach may be summed up by the title of a classic introductory text, *One Land, Two Peoples: The Conflict over Palestine*.[4] The conflict is, in essence, a struggle between two peoples, or nations, for the same piece of land, which goes by different names, including Palestine, "the Land of Israel," or "the Holy Land." The terms nation, nationality, people or peoples, and ethnicities, are used more or less interchangeably.

Nations, unlike states or countries, defy easy definitions with regard to borders and boundaries. Nationality may often be defined by shared language and culture, at times, though not necessarily, by shared religious beliefs, and almost always by perceived shared historical memories. There are many examples of bi-national or multinational states, including Canada, Switzerland, Belgium, Sri Lanka, and Cyprus. The presence of multiple ethnicities or nationalities does not inherently lead to conflict, but may offer the potential for conflict.

In the Middle East, many states, particularly those with borders drawn by external colonial powers, include multiple nations within the same state, and single nations divided by multiple states. Iraq is a familiar example of a state created by British imperialism after World War I, which includes both Arabic speakers and Kurdish speakers. The Kurdish speakers, in turn,

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4 Deborah J. Gerner, *One Land, Two Peoples: The Conflict over Palestine,* 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994)

are divided between four states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, and the goal of the Kurdish national movement, going back even before World War I, has been the achievement of autonomy or independence in those territories.

There are many advantages to using the model of ethnic or national conflict. It emphasizes the core conflict, which predates the state to state conflict described in Model Three. It notes that the most difficult issues have been those between Israelis and Palestinians, not between Israelis and other Arabs in neighboring states.

Among the elements of the core are issues identified in the 1993 Oslo Accords that, at the time, were to be settled within five years. The final disposition of the occupied territories involves Palestinians in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, territories conquered by Israel in the 1967 war. The only occupied territory not part of historic Palestine is the Golan Heights, taken from Syria in the same war. So with the exception of the Golan Heights, all other occupied territory is an Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Jerusalem is another core Israeli-Palestinian issue. Within weeks of the 1967 war, Israel annexed East Jerusalem, which it occupied in that war, and declared that its future was non-negotiable. Palestinians expected, and continue to expect, that East Jerusalem will serve as the capital of a future independent Palestinian state. Further, East Jerusalem includes the "Old City" which contains many of the religious sites noted previously.

A further issue is the establishment and expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories.[5] Settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem began to be established almost immediately after the 1967 war, and have continued up to the present. Successive US governments have joined the international consensus that these settlements are illegal under international law. The construction and expansion of settlements also connects to issues of control of water, electricity, and land in these territories.

Finally, the status of Palestinians made refugees in the 1948 war, and their descendants, is another core issue; Palestinians might argue it is the core issue. The question of whether Palestinians have "the right of return" to the territory that became Israel after 1948, and if so, under what circumstances in and what numbers, must be settled in any final status agreement. Like settlements, territories, and the status of Jerusalem, the question of refugees is a core Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

The problem with this approach is that, for better or worse, it gives "equal time" to Israelis and Palestinians. By setting the two sides up as equivalents, it ignores the question of how each side arrived on the scene. At least by implication, it posits that both sides are there

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5 The American Friends Service Committee, citing the Israeli human rights organization "B'Tselem," cites a population, at the end of 2013, of 350,000 settlers in the West Bank, and an additional 200,000 to 300,000 settlers in East Jerusalem. American Friends Service Committee, "Israel's Settlement Policy in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, https://www.afsc.org/resource/israel%E2%80%99s-settlement-policy-occupied-palestinian-territory, accessed August 21, 2015.

now, both have rights to the land, and that it is time to move on and settle the conflict once and for all. However noble these sentiments may be, partisans on both sides do not ignore the history of the last 100 plus years. Further, whatever the arguments for the justice of Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel may be, the historical fact remains that most Israelis, or their fore bearers, arrived in what is now Israel within the last 100 years, whereas most Palestinians, or their fore bearers, had been living in Palestine for centuries, if not longer.

Model Five: A Settler-Colonial Conflict

At first glance, the settler-colonial model may seem to offer the most comprehensive tool for understanding the conflict. Settler colonialism describes a subset of colonialism, where the goal of the European settlers is geared less to rule and exploit the indigenous population, but rather to replace it, through violence and the legal machinery of the state. Another pattern in settler colonialism is the tendency of the settlers to distance themselves, over time, from the government in Europe, and to seek independence or autonomy. Success in gaining independence or autonomy leads to even harsher treatment of the indigenous population.

Examples of settler colonialism in the last 500 years are found in many parts of the world. The North American colonies that became the United States and Canada fit this pattern, as does Australia. In Africa, one can identify South Africa and colonial Southern Rhodesia

(independent Zimbabwe), as well as the French colony of Algeria and (perhaps less well known) the Italian colony of Libya. The presence of a settler colonial population, involved in a three-cornered struggle with the indigenous population and the European metropole, does not predict its eventual sustainability.

Gershon Shafir is a pioneer in the use of the settler-colonial model to understand the conflict in Palestine. His critically important work, *Land, Labor, and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914*[6] was recently the subject of a conference at UCLA, commemorating the 25th anniversary of the book's publication. An accessible introduction to Shafir's work and its influence on the historiography of both the conflict and settler-colonial studies appeared in a recent issue of the *Journal of Palestine Studies.*[7]

The settler-colonial model correctly notes that the founders of modern Israel were not from the Middle East, but rather from Europe, and settled in Palestine in the late 19th century and especially in the first half of the 20th century. By insisting on an emphasis on a three-cornered struggle, this model highlights the crucial role of British imperialism, without whose support the Zionist movement's aim to create a state would have likely been unrealized. British support for Zionism, which predated the 1917 Balfour Declaration, was essential in the 1920s and 1930s not only for immigration into Palestine, in the face of indigenous resistance, but also for shaping the

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6 Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
7 See Gabriel Piterberg, "Israeli Sociology's Young Hegelian: Gershon Shafir and the Settler-Colonial Framework," in *Journal of Palestine Studies* XLIV: 3 (Spring 2015) pp. 17-38.

economy to the benefit of the Zionist community. The settler-colonial model explains the

continuous drive to acquire land, and the dispossession of Palestinians from that land. And, like

other settler-colonists, the aim was less to rule the population; rather it was to replace them.

Finally, the alliance with British colonialism ended with changed circumstances. Thus, after

1939, the Zionist movement looked for new allies, and the former close ties between the British

government and the Zionist movement loosened.

This model explains best why the conflict is so rooted in the effort to obtain land and

establish settlements, not only before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, but in the

occupied territories since 1967. It also helps to highlight post-1948 alliances with imperial

powers; with France in the mid-1950s through mid-1960s, and with the United States since 1967.

Finally, and most crucially, the settler-colonial model sheds light on the intractability of the

conflict, its relatively short, intensely bitter history, and the difficulty of bringing about a

peaceful resolution to the conflict.

So have we found the perfect model? Not quite. The most important problem, or perhaps

complication, with this model lies in the fact that the colonial power (in the interwar period,

Great Britain) was for the most part not the country of origin of the Zionist settlers in Palestine;

rather the settlers came overwhelmingly from Eastern and Central Europe.

At first glance, this does not seem like a major problem. In the history of settler

colonialism, there are numerous examples of settlers coming from countries other than the colonial power, from German speakers in the British colonies of North America to the Spaniards, Italians, and Maltese in colonial French Algeria. Yet, the majority of settlers in British North America were from the British Isles, and the majority of settlers in colonial Algeria were from France. This then becomes a good moment to challenge the class to recall that the first model, dismissed as shallow and ahistorical, might need to be revisited, given this anomaly in the history of settler-colonialism.

Discussion of the pros and cons of the five models is helpful as students are introduced to the complexity of the conflict, and the paucity of simple answers and simple solutions. At the same time, students confront stereotypes and misconceptions that they may have brought to the classroom. Introducing the models early in the course helps to provide a framework throughout the semester. The amount of time devoted to a discussion of the models can be modified according to the instructor's preference, from as little as one class period to as much as two weeks (in my course, which meets three times a week in 50-minute periods, I usually take three class sessions, with frequent pauses for discussion and clarification.) Having worked through these models, students are better prepared for a series of six simulations,[8] which take place in class over the rest of the 14-week semester.

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8 Simulations, in which students have previously prepared essays, and in which they perform roles representing countries or personalities, include a discussion of when the conflict started, the role of Britain and France in creating the post-World War I borders, Palestine on the eve of World War II, the question of partition in 1947, causes of the 1967 war, and the emergence of the Palestinian national movement on the world stage.