



The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Territorial or Existential?

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The Challenges of Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Dispute: An Impossible Peace?

by Bren Carlill

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309 pages

Many books written about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict attempt to explain why the parties have not been able to achieve the desired peace. Australian scholar Bren Carlill also tries to decipher this conundrum in his new book, introducing a dichotomous model that distinguishes between two conceptions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: territorial and existential.

Carlill's book is divided into five parts. The first part presents the theoretical model proposed by the author, which distinguishes between the territorialist conception and the existentialist conception of the conflict. The second part introduces the history of the conflict

up to 1993—the year in which the Oslo Accords were signed between the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The third part discusses the Oslo Accords and the peace process; the fourth deals with the post-Oslo era; and the fifth part discusses alternatives to the Oslo process model.

When charting the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict chronologically, Carlill uses a model that distinguishes between the territorialist conception of the conflict, which sees the conflict as a dispute over territory, and the existentialist conception, which identifies it as a zero-sum game between the two sides. In other words, “territorialists” are those who contend that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be resolved through a territorial compromise, as opposed to the “existentialists,” who believe that there is no peaceful solution to the conflict and that peace will come only when one side is destroyed.

Through the prism of this distinction, Carlill establishes his main argument, namely, that the proposed dichotomy helps explain why some believe Israeli-Palestinian peace is possible and why others argue it is unattainable. Carlill analyzes the Oslo Accords with the help of the territorialist-existentialist dichotomy, arguing that the proponents of the peace process on the Israeli side were those who held a territorialist approach to the conflict and believed the Palestinians shared this approach. In addition, Carlill contends that the opponents on the Israeli side were divided into those who held an existentialist approach to the conflict on the one hand, and those who espoused the territorialist approach on the other, believing that the Palestinians still held an existentialist approach to the conflict. In any case, the author asserts that the chances of peace will increase only when those who hold an existentialist view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are no longer influential, and a majority of the two populations will support a territorial compromise and be willing to take punitive action against those who support the existentialist approach.

Carlill analyzes the ramifications of the second intifada in similar fashion, arguing that in its wake the Israeli public believed that the Palestinians retain existentialist perceptions about the conflict. He also examines the unilateral option with the help of the dichotomy between the territorialist and existentialist approaches. Thus, Carlill argues that a unilateral Israeli withdrawal will not lead to Israeli-Palestinian peace, as on the one hand, it will be interpreted as a result of violence led by the existentialists on the Palestinian side, and on the other hand, will undermine the Palestinian territorialists because the withdrawal will be interpreted as a victory for the existentialists, who in turn will continue the armed struggle against Israel with the aim of liberating all of Palestine.

This is an interesting theoretical model that undoubtedly helps to simplify the complex issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, it is difficult to reduce the complexity of this intractable conflict, which in practice involves organizations and individuals embracing both territorialist and existentialist approaches simultaneously. For example, while the Palestinians upheld a territorialist approach to the conflict by supporting the idea of two states, the demand of many to realize the “right of return” to Israel itself, and thereby destroy the essence of the Jewish state in the long run, stems, according to Carlill’s model, from an existentialist approach to the conflict.

In addition, despite the many details and range of sources in the book, including the widespread use of public opinion polls conducted among the Israeli and Palestinian populations and the comprehensive presentation in the book of the conflict’s core issues, it is possible—and desirable—to further expand the historical overview of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that appears in the first chapters, in order to establish a wider analytical base. Indeed, Carlill does not elaborate on important historical events that affected the parties to the conflict, such as the Balfour

Declaration of 1917, an event of historical significance to both sides, and the massacre in Hebron in 1929—an event still seared in the collective memory of Jewish society in Israel.

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Moreover, the book relies on basic assumptions, some of which are easily refuted. One is the recurrent claim that the Fatah organization has undergone a conceptual transformation (from a perspective of the conflict with Israel through the existentialist lens to the territorialist lens), and therefore the organization is no longer interested in destroying Israel. In practice, it seems that many will disagree with the author’s contention, raising the arguments of the 1974 PLO stages plan; Arafat’s Hudaybiyyah speech in South Africa; the absence of an official version of the Palestinian National Charter that does not include the clauses the Palestinians committed to delete; the Oslo Accords as a Trojan horse, as they were once called by senior PLO official Faisal Husseini; rejections by Arafat and Abu Mazen of proposals by Barak and Olmert, respectively; indoctrination and incitement in the Palestinian education system and media; and the Palestinian insistence on the continued existence of UNRWA. In this context, those who claim that Fatah did not abandon its goal of liberating Palestine from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea may argue that the agreements with Israel are merely a temporary tactic, as part of an overall strategy aimed at destroying the Jewish state and establishing a Palestinian state on its ruins.

Another controversial argument by the author is that in order to reach an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, three conditions

are needed: Israeli leadership that does not depend on a coalition supported by the settlement population; a patient Palestinian public; and massive financial support of the Palestinian Authority by the international community (p. 49). In fact, Carlill's claim is not difficult to refute. Regarding the first condition, both during the Camp David summit in the summer of 2000 and during the Taba talks in early 2001, the negotiators on the Israeli side were not members of the "settlements' coalition" but the leaders of the center-left bloc (Labor, Meretz, and Center Party), who advocated the two-state solution and the establishment of a Palestinian state over most of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Even then, the Palestinian leadership led by Arafat did not accept the proposals made by then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak—a fact that clearly proves that even an Israeli leadership that is not dependent on the settlement population cannot guarantee an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. As for the second and third conditions, the painful reality has shown that even when the Palestinian public is "patient" and even when the Palestinian Authority receives enormous financial support from the international community, as before the outbreak of the second intifada and in its wake, until the rise of Trump, it is not peace that ensued, but Palestinian violence and terrorism.

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Another argument made by Carlill is that regarding their opposition to the establishment of a Jewish state in the Mandatory Land of Israel, the Palestinians adhered to the national and not the religious aspect: "Most Palestinians framed their goals in terms of national, not religious, objectives. So did the leaders of the Arab world, upon which the Palestinians largely relied to prevent Israel's establishment. Thus, among pre-1948 Palestinians, national-existentialists

were dominant" (p. 70). Yet this claim is also easily challenged. Many will rightly claim that the Palestinians have adhered to religious no less than to national opposition. In practice, the Palestinian Arab leadership during the British Mandate, led by Mufti Haj Amin al-Husseini, saw the Jews as people aiming to take over Muslim Waqf lands. Moreover, the Mufti, like Yasir Arafat in the Oslo process (the Hudaybiyyah speech at a mosque in Johannesburg in May 1994 and incitement following the opening of the Western Wall tunnel) and during the second intifada, also emphasized that the Jews were coming to take over al-Aqsa Mosque and thus used this argument to incite and call for killing Jews. In this context, the book invites more detail about the violent riots perpetrated by Arabs in 1920 and 1929, when the religious component was central to the Arabs' decision to use murderous violence against their Jewish neighbors in cities in Mandatory Palestine. At most it could be argued that there was a fusion of the nationalist and religious motif, rather than determining that the religious aspect was less dominant than the nationalist one.

Along with Carlill's controversial claims about Fatah being a partner in peace with Israel is the justified criticism of Westerners who see the nature of conflicts only from a territorial-national angle while ignoring the religious component of the conflict (p. 58). He even emphasizes that "until Western observers, in particular, are fully cognisant of the existence and goals of the Palestinian existentialists, and thus do everything possible to weaken the existentialists' legitimacy relative to Palestinian territorialists, Israeli-Palestinian peace is unlikely" (p. 51).

Carlill concludes his book by arguing that the status quo will remain for the foreseeable future, and that neither side of the conflict, whether territorialist or existentialist, has the genuine ability and desire to negotiate peace or force change. He contends that "failed territorialist attempts to change the status quo reduce public confidence in their own side's territorialists, and

increase the perception that the other side's leadership is existentialist" (p. 268).

Carlill's book is an important work designed to simplify the understanding of one of the most difficult conflicts across the globe. Even if one does not agree with all the claims in the book, the author's attempts to make the Israeli-Palestinian conflict accessible to readers are welcome, both with the help of the dichotomy between the territorialist and the existentialist approaches, and with a view to the future and

scenarios toward a possible reconciliation, or unfortunately, ongoing management of the conflict.

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