



The Domestic Institutional Factors in Palestine-Israeli Conflicts

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Abstract. Past researchers have viewed the conflicts between Palestinians and Israelis from cultural, economic, and historical perspectives. This article emphasizes domestic institutional factors such as the lack of an effective election in Palestine as well as a fragmented political landscape and strengthened small parties in Israel. Neither side is incentivized to incline toward a peace process, and both side is willing to see a continuation of the current cycle of conflict.

Keywords: Palestine, Israel, Institutional Factors, Public Opinion

1 Introduction

The recent war between Hamas and Israel has drawn attention internationally. As the international community condemn the atrocities committed during the bloody conflict, researches on the causes of this long-lasting struggle are brought under discussion [7]. Among researches in Palestine-Israel conflicts, three perspectives are emphasized: cultural, economic, and historical.

The cultural aspect of Israel-Palestine conflict is widely discussed, and religion plays a central role in all cultural considerations. Some scholars proposed that the infiltration of religious ideologies and motives is becoming the driving force behind the conflict, as demonstrated by Litvak (1998). The “Islamization” of the conflict by Hamas, or the belief that the purpose of conflict is to consolidate religious superiority,

therefore influences not only the conflict itself but also changes possible solutions to it [3].

This religiousness sheds light on the terrorist organization Hamas, which recently came under the international spotlight after launching a series of attacks on Israel. Kanellopoulos (2023) conducted a thorough investigation of Hamas. He found that Hamas' political blueprint, based on its religious commitments, is to establish an Islamic state that includes the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel. Its central belief that the Islamic law of Sharia should serve as the principle of governance is the core motivation behind its efforts to build an Islamic state [2].

In addition to a cultural perspective, the economic dynamic of the conflict is attracting scholarly attention as well. Naqib (2003) investigated the conflict from an economic stance. He found that the Palestinian economy was suffering from a lack of autonomy: by holding administrative rights over the majority of Gaza and West Bank, Israel significantly limits economic growth and development in Palestinian territories. Heavy taxation, untimely administration and restrictions on technology acquisition significantly hinders Palestinian developments. This, in turn, contributed to the intensity and incessantness of conflict between Palestine and Israel [6].

To understand the long-lasting nature of Israel-Palestine conflict, it is often helpful to refer to the origin of disputes. Brown(2019) raised concerns about the historical progression of events that led to escalating conflicts between the two sides. According to Brown (2019), it is the Palestinian view of the Jews as colonists and their failure of recognizing the legitimacy of a Jewish state that laid the foundation for subsequent conflicts. According to Brown(2019), “ the Jews already recognized the Palestinians’ right to self-determination in 1937, whereas the Palestinians did not recognize the same for the Jews.” This one-sided rejection from Palestinians to Jews resonates with subsequent denials of Resolution 181 by the United Nations which “determined that two states should be established in Palestine, one Jewish and one Arab”(Brown, 2019). Additionally, although sometimes Israel leaders “ retreated from the recognition of Palestinians’ right to self-determination”, they did the opposite in the Oslo Agreements [1].

Current research focuses on the economic, social, and historical factors in the Israel-Palestine conflicts, but a shift in perspective toward the institutional factors among the two nations could provide a supplementary description of the issue and foster a better understanding of the issue.

2 **Palestine Domestic Politics**

Palestine’s public opinion appears to be sharply divided over multiple issues, especially those related to the peace process and reconciliation. This is most vividly reflected in the question “Which Political Party Do You Support?”. Hamas and Fatah consistently obtain the highest portion of votes, yet the two parties have wildly different governing philosophies. Moreover, another significant portion of the respondents claim that they do not support any political party. This portion of Palestinians often sway their opinion and do not commit to any political standpoint, which further aggravates divisions in public opinion.

As the situation evolves in Gaza and West Bank, it is often instructive to observe and analyse the correlations between events and public opinion. We will use public opinion polls conducted by Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research.

Table 1. Palestinians’ Political Preferences.

Date	Percentage of Fatah Support	Percentage of Hamas Support
27-29 July 2000	36.5	10.3
5-9 July 2001	29.1	16
15-19 May 2002	31.7	15.5
19-22 June 2003	25.6	22.2
14-17 Mar 2004	26.6	20.3
10-12 Mar 2005	35.5	25.1
15 Feb 2006	42.1	38.6
6-8 Sep 2007	35.6	20.7

28-30 Aug 2008	30.8	20.4
10-12 Dec 2009	32.9	20.8

Source: Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research

As shown in Table 1, the political landscape of Palestine is clearly defined: Hamas and Fatah are the two main rival parties. But the level of support the two parties receive does not remain consistent over time. Hamas' support, after Camp David Summit, increases over time as the Second Intifada continues until it ends in 2005.

During this extended interval, there are three critical periods in which the support for Hamas dramatically increased. The first one, from July 2000 to July 2001, saw an emerging dissatisfaction toward the Palestinian government (83% believe that corruption exists in PA institution) and an increase in support for armed attacks against Israel (from 52% in July 2000 to 58% in July 2001). The second, from November 2002 to June 2003, happened after a reoccupation of some Palestinian territories and involved the Aqaba Summit, led to an increased preference for ceasefire but also acceptance for Hamas to reject such ceasefire. The growing dissatisfaction toward Abu Mazin, Palestine's prime minister at the time, might also be a contributing factor. The last period between December 2004 and March 2005 saw a soar of nearly 9 percent in Hamas support; given the ending of the Second Intifada as an Israeli withdrawal and a Palestinian "victory", the armed Hamas was awarded for its "achievements".

Some key facts can be deduced from this period. First, Hamas is evidently leveraging its violent activities in its political campaign. The Second Intifada's ending, with a complete Israeli withdrawal, was largely credited to Hamas; this contributed to a huge boost in its popularity. Unsurprisingly, Hamas did not start the Intifada out of pure passion for the Palestinian cause but largely utilized the armed conflicts with Israel to acquire support for itself.

Hamas applied this strategy based on two important motivations. On one hand, Palestinians' support for Fatah was typically higher than that for Hamas. Even at February 2006, when Hamas seized victory the Second Palestinian legislative elections, the support for Fatah was still about 3 percentage points higher than that for Hamas. To grasp more public support and consolidate its political status, Hamas had to continuously engage in armed confrontations to remind Palestinians of its efforts and sacrifices. This can be most obviously seen in the Public Opinion Poll conducted

by PSR in December 2023, when “support for Hamas has more than tripled in the West Bank compared to three months ago”. Such significant amount of increase in support provides a strong incentive for Hamas to resort to violence.

Nevertheless, the surge of Hamas’ public support did not guarantee a peaceful and democratic political process. In the aftermath of the 2006 election, the power transition between the two parties was characterized by chaos, instability, and conflicts. Fatah not only declared that it would not participate in a government led by Hamas but also engaged in a series of confrontations aimed at uprooting Hamas’ dominance. Ultimately, despite the formation of a short-lived national unity government on February 8, 2007, Hamas took over Gaza Strip through military means and set up the cornerstone for escalating tension and division between the two parties since then. This clearly indicates that in Palestine, a democratic government system exists in name only. Such turbulent dynamic in Palestinian domestic politics gives rise to a unique interplay between Palestinian government and its people.

The internal division among Palestinians is caused, in part, by the lack of an effective democratic system. The United Kingdom, for example, lists Hamas’s military wing as terrorist, and the European Union goes a step further to classify the whole of Hamas as terrorist. These external recognition of Hamas as a terrorist group and Fatah as a legitimate regime prevents Hamas to stay effective once it gains power through a democratic election. Since Hamas and the opinion it represents are not properly acknowledged, It is difficult for Palestinians to reach an internal consensus regarding political stances.

Consequently, neither Fatah nor Hamas are incentivized to be responsible for Palestinians’ well-being, and neither are willing to compromise each other for grasping power. Thus Hamas, as a radical group, cannot be normalized or institutionalized even if the public is in its favor. This discourages Hamas from integrating itself into an orderly political atmosphere and becoming a modern party, resulting it to resort to extremism and violence.

This mechanism is especially detrimental for developments in the peace process. As neither party can stably hold itself in power, neither can make long-term promises to ensure peace in the region. This is evident after the Camp David Summit in 2000. Although Yasser Araft, the head of Fatah, made some negotiations with Ehud Barak regarding a permanent status in Gaza, the former refused the latter’s proposal regarding a 95% retreat from Gaza. This culminated in a series of riots and street fightings supported by radical groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which operated

tangent to Fatah, the legitimate representation of Palestine. The existence of inconsistency between actions of different Palestinian political sectors disrupts the negotiation pattern and inflicts instability in the region, hindering the peace processes.

3 Israeli Domestic Politics

Similar to Palestine, Israeli public opinion is heavily fragmented. However, Israel's political landscape is not dominated by two biggest parties like Fatah and Hamas in Palestine. Rather, there are numerous small parties that form the Knesset, or the parliament.

Since Israel adopts a system involving proportional representation in its parliament, each party, no matter its size, can obtain seats in the Knesset as long as it has a sufficient amount of voters. This is favorable for smaller parties because they tend to have comparatively fewer voters compared to like Likud and Labor. Therefore the proportional representation system effectively promotes the fragmentation of power among Israeli parties as small parties' stances welfare carry weight as well as the large ones.

In Table 2, the distribution of seats in four recent elections for major Israeli parties are presented.

Table 2. Table 2 Distribution of Seats in Israeli Knesset in Four Recent Elections.

	Sept. 2019	Mar. 2020	Mar.2021	Nov.2022
Blue and White	33	36	8	0
Likud	32	33	30	32
Joint List	13	15	6	0
Shas	9	9	9	11
Yisrael	8	7	7	0

Beiteinu	7	7	7	7
UTJ	7	6	7	0
Yamina	6	7	0	0
Labor Gesher	5	0	0	0
Democratic	0	0	6	0
Union	0	0	4	0
Meretz	0	0	6	0
United Arab	0	0	6	14
List	0	0	7	0
New Hope	0	0	17	24
RZP				
Labor Party				
Yesh Atid				

Source: International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)

As depicted in the table, although parties like Likud and Blue and White can obtain a relatively large number of seats in some elections, the rest of seats is more uniformly distributed across the parties. This is the result of a trend of fragmentation which began in the 1980s.

This fragmentation brings about two consequences. First, because each party has relatively small proportion of seats in the cabinet, coalitions are often needed to establish a clear majority. This prevents the development of stable, large parties in power and makes it almost impossible for any party to remain in power over a

sustained period of time, which discourages effort made to achieve progress in the peace process over the long run. Moreover, the dispersion of public support among numerous small parties makes the coalitions heavily sensitive for changes in public opinion. Consequently, winning short-term public support becomes the utmost priority for Israeli coalition cabinets. This provides further incentive for the political leaders of Israel to focus on short-term gains instead of long-term investments when in power because the immediate outcome of the latter are uncertain and potentially harmful. For example, when Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat attempted but failed to make a long-term agreement on Camp David Summit, the Second Intifada spurred subsequently because it “contributed to the perception on both sides that the parties were headed down a military path.” [4] The aftermaths of Camp David shows when consensus cannot be established by negotiations, war and conflict will follow between Israel and Palestine. While this is the case, it remains highly risky for political leaders in Israel to make negotiations with their counterparts in Palestinians, and the former would rather implement immediate sanctions or initiate straightforward conflicts.

Another consequence of fragmentation is the strengthening of religious parties. Indeed, what’s notable about Table 2 is that religious parties like Shas and United Torah Judaism consistently win some seats in the Knesset. As traditional large parties like Likud and Labor are weakened from fragmentation, they need to form coalition with smaller but pivotal religious parties in order to amplify their influence in the cabinet. As Robert O Freedman claims, the major parties cannot “afford to pass up the votes of religious and traditional voters, who do not necessarily vote for religious parties but who still want the state to have a religious character” [5]. Shas, for example, formed coalition with both Likud and Labor. Although Shas also cooperated with the left-wing Labor, its right-wing political stance, which emphasizes the religiousness of and ethnicity in a community, coincides more with Likud’s Zionist ideals. Religious parties like Shas and United Torah Judaism have “amassed significant power and seen their strength grow steadily” ever since late 1980s [5]. This explains why Table 2 shows the consistency of religious parties like Shas and UTJ.

Shas provides a representative example of religious parties in Israel. They are distinct from other parties because they embrace a set of different values; namely, they emphasize the superiority of Jews and the Jewish religion, while also upholding the values of Zionism. It is for these reasons that Israeli religious parties were more involved into foreign policy than domestic issues. The National Religious Party, or

NRP, for example, had always advocated for the utmost preservation of Israeli lands and was firmly against the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The level of adherence to and emphasis on foreign policy was to the extent that internal divisions among NRP members caused some of its leaders, including Rabbi Levi and Efraim Eitam, to disband from it and form new parties. The NRP, like other religious parties like United Torah Judaism and Shas, quit the government after the Camp David Summit in which “the division of Jerusalem was being discussed” [5].

These properties of Israeli religious parties further hinder the progress of the peace process. As major Israeli parties need these smaller religious parties to back up their governance and form coalition in the Knesset, they need to adhere to certain principles upheld by the religious parties. Apparently, these religious principles emphasize the security of Israeli land and people, as well as the superiority of Jewish religion over others. In the conflict with Palestine, which has different beliefs and cultural identity, such religious attitudes are highly combative and disrupts peace between the two sides [8].

4 Conclusion

The long-lasting conflict between Israel and Palestine cannot be attributed to a single cause; rather, the intertwined dynamic of the two nations are fueled by their unique political and social landscape. Palestine, with divided public opinion, an ineffective system of election and an irresponsible government that utilizes war as a part of its political campaign, suffers from recurring violence and conflicts. Israel, with a fragmented political attitude, a dissipation of power among numerous small parties, and some leveraging religious parties, emphasizes strong short-term measures rather than prolonged actions. Neither side is incentivized to incline toward a peace process, and both side is willing to see a continuation of the current cycle of conflict.

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