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## Societal Conflict Defies Peace Diplomacy: Evidence from the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

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### Abstract

*This paper synthesizes interrelated postulations from the systemic conflict and intergroup conflict theorizations to glean the societal conflict conceptual framework. The paper employs this conceptual framework to appraise the validity of the societal characterization of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict during the peace diplomacy era. Accordingly, the analysis uses the 'structured, focused comparison' qualitative method to investigate attitudinal and behavioral aspects of intercommunal violence within the Palestinian-Israeli context. The observed cumulative evidence indicates that the unresolved conflict has been exhibiting the conceptual properties of societal conflict throughout more than 25 years since the introduction of the Middle East peace process in 1991. Overall, the study explores the social, psychological, and political aspects of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, accentuates the societal underpinnings of intercommunal violence, and provides basis for perceiving the limited success of peace diplomacy.*

**Keywords:** Systemic Conflict; Intergroup Conflict; Palestinian-Israeli Conflict; Societal conflict; Intercommunal violence

### 1. Introduction

The Arab-Israeli conflict incorporates historical, strategic, ideological, and social dimensions. Accordingly, this conflict appears as a confrontation between Arab nationalism and Zionism (Ghali, 2008), and involves religious dissonance between Islam and Judaism. At a cognitive level, Arabs and Israelis believe that tangible and nontangible factors such as military strength, Leadership, God's will, and the economy determine the outcome of the conflict (Inbar & Yuchtman-Yaar, 1985). The Arab-Israeli conflict also involves numerous issues of dispute, including the creation of a viable Palestinian state, the normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel, the future of the holy city of Jerusalem, and the rights of Palestinian refugees. Additional issues involve violence and deteriorating living conditions in the Occupied Territories, the security of Israel, and the expansion of Jewish settlements in territories captured in 1967.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict appears as a zero-sum game in which each side gains at the expense of the other (Stav, 2001). The conflict has exacted tremendous economic cost, and estimates show that peacefully solving the conflict would benefit both sides considerably (Anthony et al, 2015). The Middle East peace process began in 1991 to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Peace diplomacy is an elaborate enterprise that involves significant roles by the U.S. government (Migdalovitz, 2010). Peace diplomacy has lingered for over 27 years, but has not resolved major issues of dispute.

The research problem of this paper concerns exploring the persistence of the societal nature of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Accordingly, this paper attempts to achieve the following research objectives:

1. Delineating the societal conflict conceptual framework through synthesizing the systemic conflict and intergroup conflict theorizations;
2. Using the societal conflict conceptual framework to interpret major empirical cases of intercommunal violence between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

## 2. Methodology

Concepts facilitate conducting longitudinal and temporal comparisons (Sartori, 1984). This study explores the Palestinian-Israeli conflict within the societal conflict conceptual perspective, and assesses the relevance of this conceptualization over 25 years of peace diplomacy. The study hypothesizes that the societal conflict conceptualization remains applicable to describing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as it had been before the commencement of the peace process in 1991.

The analysis follows the 'disciplined' variant of case studies (Eckstein, 1975), in which theoretical conceptualization guides the qualitative interpretation of empirical events. The study uses the 'structured, focused comparison' method (George & McKeown, 1985) to collect and analyze relevant data. This method is 'structured' because it emphasizes theory in the process of producing cumulative knowledge through systematically investigating a small number of cases. This method is 'focused' because it only considers aspects of each case pertinent to the theoretical postulations of the study.

Accordingly, the analysis identifies five empirical cases of Palestinian-Israeli intercommunal violence, and asks the following two questions with respect each of the five cases: What are the attitudinal and behavioral aspects the context of the case involves? How do these attitudinal and behavioral aspects correspond with the conceptual characteristics of societal conflict? The analysis interprets answers to these questions to assess the congruence of events in each case with the societal conflict conceptualization.

## 3. Societal Conflict Conceptual Framework

Anatol Rapoport's theorization of adversarial relations presents the notion of 'Us against Them', and classifies ways of perceiving the opponent into three categories. The first is systemic and denotes 'fights', in which the objective is to eliminate the 'enemy'. The second is strategic and represents 'games' where the emphasis is on analyzing the situation in order to outwit the 'rival', while attitudes towards the other side remain either neutral or friendly. The third involves 'debates', in which the intention is to convince the debating opponent rather than remove or outsmart him (Rapoport, 1960, 1974).

The description of systemic conflict relates to the conceptualization of intergroup conflict. From social psychology standpoint, individuals define themselves and are defined by others as members of a group, share common emotional involvement, and achieve a degree of consensus about the evaluation of their group membership. Individuals acquire a sense of self-worth and identity from group membership, and compare between their own group and other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). A common assumption among theories of the psychological mechanisms of intergroup conflicts is that humans adapt their attitudes and behaviors to markers of group membership (Böhm, Rusch, & Baron, 2018).

Each society in intergroup conflict functions as a distinctive social entity in rivalry with the other society, and individuals in each society empathize with their fellow society members. Although some evidence suggests that social cohesion within the group does not always positively correlate with tension with other hostile group (Rabbie, 1993), mutual animosity in intergroup conflict generally maintains intra-group cohesion and incites hatred against the other society. Intergroup conflicts range between tractable and intractable types, and the latter concern goals that the two societies perceive indispensable for their existence, and therefore conflict tends to persist (Bar-Tal, 2001).

The two conceptual perspectives of systemic conflict and intergroup conflict capture the underlying attitudinal and behavioral components of conflict between whole societies. This type of conflict involves negative interdependence between two identities to the extent that asserting the identity of one group requires negating the identity of the other, and each group perceives the other as the source of its own negative identity elements (Kelman, 1999). Social identity influences the formation and evolution of intergroup conflict, and religion is the most salient dimension along which conflict emerges (Seul, 1999). Since religion has profound implications for individuals and the society, religious beliefs and structures strongly shape the dynamics of hostility and aggression.

Rapoport's theorization of 'Us against Them' captures the hostility-aggression relations in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and posits that reciprocal antagonism escalates the conflict to societal levels that go beyond governmental institutions. Conflict in this perspective appears as intercommunal and existential, in which one society perceives the other as a fundamental threat to its existence (Kelman, 2005). The psychological and behavioral aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict fit the 'fight-enemy-aggression' categorization. Israel has refuted Palestinian nationhood and at best reduced the Palestinians to mere Arabs. Similarly, Arab states initially negated the right of Israel to exist and Muslim and Arab masses continue to reject normalizing relations with Israel. Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian maximalist stances advocate the destruction of the state of Israel, and Israel is mindful of the importance of securing its existence amidst hostile Arab and Muslim sentiments.

Furthermore, the Arabs and the Israelis experience what Rapoport calls the 'internalization of conflict', in which notions of conflict are inculcated in individuals, culturally transmitted through social groups, and collectively internalized within the Arab and Israeli societies. Accordingly, conflict between Arab states and Israel comprises conflict predispositions at individual, group, and societal levels, and integrates conflict with the political, economic, and social spheres of human life. The result is the creation of sustainable structures of conflict, reinforced by social groups and transmitted through successive generations.

Culture is an essential dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Culture plays a crucial role in pooling together history and belief to the effect of cultivating antagonistic political ideology. As Ghada Karmi explains, the clash between the Palestinians and the Israelis reflects the more comprehensive conflict between Arab and Jewish *Weltanschauung*.

*[O]n the Israeli/Jewish side, there is a long legacy of anti-Semitic experience and the effects of the Holocaust which have engendered feelings of victimization, insecurity and suspicion. Such attitudes have led to aggression, denial of the other side's legitimacy and unrealistic demands for reassurance. On the Palestinian side there is a basic grievance against Israel's expropriation of their land and their consequent dispossession. This has led to an unrelenting demand for Israel to acknowledge its responsibility in this matter and to make amends (Karmi, 1999:106).*

This complex conflict, therefore, involves societal beliefs that serve as a psychological infrastructure that not only helps people cope with the special demands the intractable conflict places on them, but also contributes to perpetuating it. There are eight such societal beliefs: the justness of one's own goals, security, the adversary's delegitimization, positive self-image, own victimization, patriotism, unity, and one's own wish for peace (Bar-Tal, 1998).

Emotions of fear, hatred, hope, and security shape individuals' responses to conflict contexts. These emotions can assume group-based and collective relevance, and create the emotional climate and collective emotional orientation through which group and society members interpret conflictive and peaceful events. Therefore, negative conflict context produces an emotional climate that induces negative collective beliefs and emotions that lead to defensive or aggressive behavior (Bar-Tal, Halperin, & de Rivera, 2007). The existence of collective emotions switches focus from personal psychology to social psychology, and consequently justifies elevating the level of analysis of conflictive emotions from the individual to the societal level.

The Palestinians are victims of a long process of systematic dehumanization, and this process is now at its peak because Israelis consider both living and dead Palestinians inhuman (Levy, 2015). If the theoretical description of internalized conflict is correct, perhaps an equally belligerent Arab culture in relation to Israel can help explain the sympathy Palestinian militancy receives from Arab and Muslim publics and the tendency of the majority of the Arab and Muslim people not to

consider Palestinian violent activities against Israel as acts of terrorism.

The preceding discussion shows that society members, both individuals and groups, are immediately relevant to the concepts of systemic conflict and intergroup conflict. The connection between the society and aspects of conflict and violence is structural, cultural, psychological, and behavioral. Therefore, it is possible to specify the following main conceptual components of the societal conflict framework:

- Underlying 'Us against Them' social conflict context, and 'fight-enemy-aggression' antagonistic relationship;
- Mutual sentiments of hatred and distrust between whole societies, fueled by internalized animosity sustained by social identity and conflict structures;
- Conflict dispositions encompass the individual, group, and societal levels, assimilated by the social and political spheres;
- Reciprocal application of physical violence against rival society, perpetrated by governmental and communal agents in pursuit of uncompromising stances.

#### 4. Empirical Cases of the Palestinian-Israeli Societal Conflict

The societal conflict conceptualization informs the analysis of five events of intercommunal violence that correspond to various time intervals, four of which took place during the peace diplomacy era. Chronologically ordered, these are the First Intifada (1987), the Hebron Massacre (1994), the Second Intifada (2000), the Intifada of the Individuals (2015), and the U.S. Decision on Jerusalem (2018). Overall, the conceptually driven analyses show that the societal character of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has not faded out during the peace diplomacy era.

##### 4.1 The First Intifada

The First Intifada (Uprising) which erupted in December 1987 manifests the societal characterization of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. After two decades of Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories in the aftermath of the 1967 war, the uprising erupted in the West Bank and Gaza as a widespread popular struggle. Indications of increased levels of interethnic violence in the Territories during the preceding year signaled that a crisis was developing (Ben-Yehuda & Sandler, 2002:143). The First Intifada reflected Palestinians' perception of Israeli disagreement over the occupation as an opportunity to develop a strategy of insurgency (Alimi, 2007).

The societal nature of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict set two killing events as the immediate impetus for the Intifada. An Israeli individual was stabbed to death in Gaza and, on the next day, a traffic accident between a civilian car and an Israeli military vehicle in the *Jabalya* refugee camp killed four Palestinian residents. Against the background of mutual distrust and animosity, the two incidents created a context for believing that the four Palestinians were killed in retaliation for the death of the Jewish settler, and the Palestinians therefore immediately revolted against Israel in the occupied areas.<sup>1</sup>

The Islamic Jihad movement mobilized Palestinian masses to dissent against Israeli occupation, much along the militant activism of the Iranian Islamic Revolution in the late 1970s. The Iranian Revolution showed that an effectively mobilized population could topple a powerful repressive political regime, even if the revolting people are unarmed and the ousted regime is supported by the United States (Robinson, 2004:124-5). Hamas, another movement with Islamic orientation, soon began directing the daily activities of the uprising.

The Palestinians employed a mixture of civil disobedience and sub-conventional force. The Israeli government initially considered the situation as a typical security problem, but realized the serious proportions of the uprising when the latter called for a political campaign against the very existence of the state of Israel. Between the eruption of the Intifada and the conclusion of Oslo One

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<sup>1</sup> Narrative of events retrieved from: <[http://www.palestinefacts.org/pf\\_1967to\\_1991\\_intifada\\_1987.php](http://www.palestinefacts.org/pf_1967to_1991_intifada_1987.php)>.

Accord on September 13, 1993, 1,100 Palestinians and 58 Israelis were killed in the Occupied Territories, and 17 Palestinians and 53 Israelis were killed within the Green Line.<sup>2</sup>

Three observations are relevant for interpreting the First Intifada. First, the uprising involved the prolonged activism of large segments of the Palestinian society, including Palestinians of minor age known in mass media as 'Children of Stones' (Mansour, 1990). Second, the Intifada included the expressively Islamic religious tenets of the two Palestinian groups that provoked and mobilized the popular insurgency. Third, the Intifada advocated the denial of the right of the state of Israel to exist. Considered together, these observations clearly suggest that the Intifada was quintessence of the societal characterization of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

#### 4.2 The Hebron Massacre

Less than six months after signing the Declaration of Principles between Israel and the Palestinians, a disturbing expression of the animosity between Jewish settlers and the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories served as a bitter reminder of the societal nature of the conflict. On February 25, 1994, Dr. Baruch Goldstein walked into *al-Haram al-Ibrahimi* (Tomb of the Patriarchs) mosque and went on a killing rampage. Reference here is to the Hebron massacre, in which the perpetrator — a Jewish settler affiliated with the extremist Israeli organization *Kach* — killed 29 and wounded 125 Muslim worshippers.<sup>3</sup>

The massacre took place on Friday in the month of Ramadan. Therefore, it is difficult to exaggerate the religious implications of the event since the victims were performing a major Islamic religious duty, on a holy day in Islamic faith, in the holiest month in the Islamic calendar. Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim masses were deeply outraged because of the human and religious implications of the event. In the ensuing Palestinian riots, 25 Palestinians and 5 Israelis were killed. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) imposed a two-month curfew on the city, and the Israeli government introduced regulations to separate the city's 500 Jews from the Palestinian population (Miller, 2014).

Since both Muslims and Jews revere the Tomb of the Patriarchs, the site is a subject of the dichotomy between 'usurpation' and 'sharing' on how the two sides approach disputed sacred places. The day on which the massacre took place coincided with the festival holiday of *Purim* in the Jewish calendar, and the evening before the perpetrator was sitting with his children and other settler families in nearby Kiryat Arba reading the book of Esther. The holiday of *Purim* is supposed to be a day of celebration, but Goldstein may have been moved by a command in Esther, stating that "the Jews smote all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering, and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them (Esther 9:5)". He went to the Tomb of the Patriarchs early the next morning to honor what he believed was a scriptural command from across the millennia (Paine, 1994:8).

Then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin renounced the attacker in harsh words, but the Palestinians were convinced that all Israelis were responsible for his acts because they had continually tolerated adversarial attitudes toward Arabs. The massacre brought to the Palestinians memories of the cruelty of Rabin's call in 1988 for crushing the First Intifada with "force, might, and beatings" (Ibrahim, 1994). The massacre caused diplomatic talks with Israel to go through a lengthy hiatus. It was not before the Rabin Government agreed to install measures to curb Jewish settlers' violence and release around two thousand Palestinian detainees that the Palestinian Authority agreed to resume diplomatic negotiations with Israel.

The massacre was significant because it represented a profound religious sacrilege that fits the societal description of the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The incident involved the essential ingredients of 'Us against Them' conflict environment, as well as the effects

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics concerning fatalities in the First Intifada up until the signing of Oslo One Peace Accord are obtained from B'Tselem records, <[http://www.btselem.org/statistics/first\\_intifada\\_tables](http://www.btselem.org/statistics/first_intifada_tables)>.

<sup>3</sup> Different versions of the motivations behind the incidence and the number of casualties exist. This version is from <[http://www.palestinefacts.org/prf\\_1991\\_now\\_israel\\_hebron\\_shooting\\_1994.php](http://www.palestinefacts.org/prf_1991_now_israel_hebron_shooting_1994.php)>.

of individual's conflictive emotional involvement and adjustment to hostile group psychological cues. The massacre showed that signing Oslo One Accord did not provide assurances that the two sides were about to abandon the 'fight-enemy-aggression' mode of interaction anytime soon.

### 4.3 The Second Intifada

The Second Intifada (*al-Aqsa Uprising*) erupted on September 28, 2000, ignited by Ariel Sharon's (then opposition leader) visit to *al-Haram al-Sharif* site, against the background of the collapse of the Camp David Summit in 2000 and the Palestinians' frustration over the failure of negotiations to deliver a Palestinian state (BBC News, 2004). Jews know the site as Temple Mount and have religious claims to it, but in view of the religious significance of the site in the Islamic faith, the visit appeared as an infuriating desecration of a religious shrine. Muslims' intense emotional reaction to Sharon's visit to *al-Aqsa Mosque* instantly translated into widespread popular Palestinian outburst in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Reciprocal violence ensued and the Israeli government deployed military force to repress the Uprising. Palestinian militants organized a series of deadly suicide bomb attacks against targets in various Israeli cities, including Tel Aviv. The extensive use of this ethically problematic tactic was matched by a similarly controversial Israeli policy of targeted killings of Palestinian militant leaders. The Israeli government adopted this technique to fight Palestinian militancy shortly after Ariel Sharon had become Prime Minister of Israel on February 6, 2001. The policy became a subject of ethical assessment and international condemnation. Compared with previous applications of targeted killings, the large number of militant and civilian Palestinians killed during the second Intifada and the use of helicopters and warplanes as vehicles for the implementation of the policy were unprecedented (David, 2002).

The intensity of violence and wide range of victims during the Second Intifada corresponded to animosity and aggression within 'Us against Them' perspective. Fatalities in the Territories and Israel resulted from Israeli military incursions into Palestinian cities and camps, the use of missile attacks in targeted killings in residential areas, and suicide bomb attacks in Israeli public places. Both Israeli security forces and Israeli civilians killed Palestinians, and Palestinians killed Israeli civilians and security personnel. Israeli security forces and Palestinian militants inflicted violence on Palestinian and Israeli children and foreign citizens.<sup>4</sup>

Explanations of the outbreak of the Second Intifada include the competition between 'old' and 'young' guards within the nationalist camp in Palestinian domestic politics (Shikaki, 2002), and the confrontation between Palestinians' expectations over ending the occupation and the Israeli government's perceived interest in continuing its control over the Territories (Pressman, 2003). Compared with the First Uprising of 1987, *al-Aqsa Uprising* involved the existence of Palestinian structures akin to governmental institution and, to a lesser extent, different modes of violent engagements between rioting Palestinians and Israeli forces (Hammami & Tamari, 2001).

Two economic considerations help explain the increased levels of violence during the Second Intifada. Reduced Palestinian trade with Israel in the second half of the 1990s and restrictions on Palestinian's employment inside Israel at the beginning of the Intifada contributed to increasing the willingness of the Palestinians in the Territories to participate violently in the conflict. Additionally, while Palestinians' employment in the private sector had only weakly restrained their willingness to participate in the conflict, employment in the public sector did not restrain Palestinians from participating in the violence (Cali & Miaari, 2015).

The *al-Aqsa Uprising* involved significant societal conflict aspects. First, religion is a crucial social component of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Sharon's visit to *al-Haram al-Sharif* provoked a major dispute in the conflict because Muslims considered it religiously irreverent and politically adverse. Second, the combination of Palestinian suicide attacks and Israeli targeted killings involved the indiscriminate killing of large numbers of civilians. The effectiveness of using either

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<sup>4</sup> For detailed statistics, see <<http://www.btselem.org/statistics>>.



tactic in reducing the number of fatalities on one's side and achieving political objectives (Jaeger & Paserman, 2007) and the predictability of violence committed by the Palestinians and the Israelis (Jaeger & Paserman, 2008) are debatable matters. Evidently, the determined and systematic application of these highly violent and ethically controversial modes of inflicting fatalities marginalizes the value of civilian human lives. Willingness to accept the risk of causing extensive civilian casualties on the other side appears to fit the societal conceptualization of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The Second Intifada erupted nine years after the peace process had begun, thus indicating the continued relevance of the societal character of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The fact that the Israelis and the Palestinians had used widespread and indiscriminate violence further validates the applicability of the societal nature of the conflict during the peace diplomacy era.

#### 4.4 *The Intifada of the Individuals*

Also called the Knife Intifada, the Intifada of the Individuals has links to the disputed rights to worship at the holy Temple Mount compound. Days after Israel had captured the site in the aftermath of the six-day war in 1967, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan handed back keys to the *al-Aqsa* mosque to the *Waqf* (Islamic Trust). Consequently, a status quo developed according to which Jews have the right to tour the Temple Mount but not pray on it, Israeli forces provide security, and the *Waqf* administers the compound. In recent years, groups committed to changing the standing arrangement have strongly advocated granting Jews prayer rights similar to those granted to Muslims. The head of the *Waqf*, however, believes that only Muslims have the right to pray at the *al-Aqsa* mosque (Baker, 2015).

Hardline Jewish activists' demands for greater access to the Temple Mount, coupled with right-wing politicians' calls for rights of Jews to pray at the site have intensified concerns among the Palestinians that violating the status quo would result in dividing the Temple Mount. Security situation deteriorated significantly in July 2014 when a wave of intercommunal attacks perpetrated by Palestinians and Israelis erupted in Jerusalem and the West Bank. Many of the attackers had been influenced by postings of attacks on Facebook and Twitter, and Israel's sophisticated counterterrorism measures appeared unable to confront the attackers' objective of scaring civilian Israelis (Wedeman, 2015).

The Intifada of the Individuals refers to numerous knife stabbings Arab Israeli individuals carried out against Israelis from September 2015 until spring 2016 in Jerusalem and within the Green Line. Violence also involved attacks by Jewish Israelis and use of force by the Israeli Defense Forces against actual and suspected Palestinian attackers. While the majority of the attacks were stabbings and attempted stabbings, additional forms of violence involved vehicular ramming, shooting, Molotov grenades, and stone throwing.

On the Israeli side, 38 deaths and 558 injuries were recorded, and on the Palestinian side casualties stood at 235 deaths, 3,917 injuries, and 11,611 cases of smoke inhalations (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). The average age of Palestinians killed during the Stabbing Intifada was 23, and the most frequent ages of deaths were 19 and 20 years old. Sixty minor (under the age of 18) Palestinians were killed, including 11 children under the age of 14 and 49 children between the ages of 15 and 17 years old. Overall, 179 of the total Palestinian casualties were born around or after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. By way of comparison, the average age of Israelis killed during the wave of attacks was 37, and the only minor Israeli victim was 13 years old (Benoist, 2017).

The Stabbing Intifada seems to have historical resonance with the anti-Jewish riots that erupted in September 1928 and resulted in the summer of the following year in killing 133 Jews by Arab rioters and 116 Arabs by British forces. Violence in both occurrences was incited by Palestinians' deep desire to protect the Temple Mount from perceived Jews' attempts to change the status quo of Muslim control of the holy site. In both events, Palestinian leaders actively advocated the notion that the Israeli government was seeking to establish permanent presence atop the Mount, and Muslim Palestinians rejected that Jews were indigenous to the land they believe to be exclusively their own (Goldberg, 2015).

Young Palestinian attackers did not have previous records of links to terrorism, lacked both infrastructure and leadership, and used primitive weapons. However, the frequency of attacks and inadequacy of Israeli military measures of raids and arrests to thwart violence undermined the Israelis' sense of security they painfully rebuilt after the Second Intifada (Harel, 2015). The attackers were contemptuous of all sources of authority, including their parents, the Palestinian Authority, established terrorist organizations, and Israel, and their discourse focused on basic human rights and ending the occupation (Ben David, 2016).

Cynical attitudes about peace were prevalent among the Palestinians and the Israelis. A joint Israeli-Palestinian poll in June 2015 showed that the Palestinian and Israeli people perceived one another as a threat to their very existence, 56% and 43% respectively. The survey demonstrated that support for the two-state solution has decreased from 62% one year earlier to 51% among Israelis, and from 54% to 51% among Palestinians. Asked about their readiness to support mutual recognition after all issues of conflict are resolved and as part of final status agreements, only 44% of the Israelis and Palestinians expressed support, and 45% of the Israelis and 54% of the Palestinians opposed (Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung, 2015).

Additionally, political, economic, social, and environmental challenges attend the creation of a viable Palestinian state (Palestinian State Study Team, 2007), and the two-state solution involves conflictive issues that render it impossible (Zussman, 2018). Also, Israel seems to lack incentive to concede land through negotiation as opposed to espousing interest in building its reputation of toughness on territorial concession to deter similar claims by neighboring Arab countries, foremost of which is Syria (Walter, 2003). The two-state formula, therefore, can hardly alleviate the Palestinian's frustration with their bleak political future.

The attackers did not have clear affiliation with Palestinian organizations, but acted as lone wolves out of frustration over the continued occupation of the Territories (Ahmed, 2015). Most of the attacks were perpetrated by young Palestinian men and women who had sparse life opportunities, saw little hope in the future, and were inclined to dehumanize the Israelis because they had limited interaction with them. Accordingly, violence appeared intercommunal as the Israelis collectively viewed the Palestinians as dangerous and the Palestinians collectively viewed the Israelis as oppressive (Dean, 2015).

#### 4.5 *The U.S. Decision on Jerusalem*

Jerusalem has profound significance for Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, and several powers had historically controlled the city until Israel captured the Old City in the aftermath of the 1967 war. In defiance to the United Nations resolutions, Israel adopted a law on July 30, 1980 proclaiming Jerusalem its eternal capital (Cattan, 1981). On December 6, 2017, President Donald Trump formally recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and announced relocating the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv (Landler, 2017).

Trump's decision departed from the practice of Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama of using the presidential waiver to avoid transferring the embassy, challenged the international community's stance on Jerusalem as a subject of final status peace negotiations, and possibly signaled the end of peace diplomacy between the Palestinians and the Israelis (Liebermann, 2017). By deciding to move the embassy to Jerusalem, President Trump has fulfilled his controversial campaign promise and endorsed Israel's routine declaration of the Holy City as its "united and eternal" capital. He could have avoided smashing a long-standing consensus over the status of Jerusalem by heeding Arab leaders' cautionary calls or recognizing the city as the capital of both Israel and Palestine, but he chose not (Black, 2017).

President Trump's announcement angered the Palestinians. President Mahmoud Abbas insisted that Jerusalem was the "eternal capital of the state of Palestine", described the decision as a declaration of war against the Palestinian people, and threatened to work on "launching an Intifada in the face of the Zionist enemy" (BBC, 2017). Leader of militant Hamas Ismael Haniyeh warned that the "Zionist policy supported by the U.S. cannot be confronted unless we ignite a new Intifada" (The Globe Post, 2017). By threatening to call for a popular uprising, both Abbas and Haniyeh have alluded to the collective struggle against Zionism. Apparently, the Palestinians have



framed the issue within the societal conflict perspective and, therefore, threatened the incitement of societal violence in the dispute over Jerusalem.

President Trump's decision came thirty years after the outbreak of the First Intifada, and preventing events from escalating to violent protestations reminiscent of the levels of violence during the first days of that Intifada depended on how the Palestinian Authority would decide to proceed (Issacharoff, 2017). Immediately after the announcement, the Palestinians took to the streets in several cities in the Territories, and 17 people sustained light injuries in clashes with Israeli troops (McKernan, 2017). Less than three weeks after, 12 Palestinians died during the ensuing low-level violence between protesters and Israeli soldiers (The Guardian, 2017).

While the Israelis celebrate the establishment of the State of Israel on May 14, the Palestinians mark the occasion as *al-Nakba* (catastrophe) day on May 15 every year. Therefore, the U.S. decision to open the new embassy in Jerusalem on May 14, 2018 to coincide with the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Israel dismayed the Palestinians (Tarnopolsky, 2018). In response, Hamas launched 'The Great March of Return' to incite civilian riots along the Gaza borders with Israel on every Friday during the period from March 30 to May 15, 2018.

Israel considered the protests on its borders as 'masked terrorism', and eight weeks of violent clashes between Palestinian rioters and Israeli snipers resulted in killing 100 and wounding 8,700 Gazans (Frantzman, 2018), of which around 58 deaths and 2,700 injuries took place on the day of opening the new U.S. embassy (Halbfinger, Kershner, Walsh, 2018). Mass demonstrations have continued unabated. As of June 7, 2018, ten weeks into 'The Great March of Return', the number of Palestinian casualties reached 131 deaths and 13,900 injuries (OCHA, 2018a). As of September 6, 179 Palestinians and 1 Israeli were killed, and 19,014 Palestinian and 37 Israeli were injured (OCHA, 2018b).

The proposition of two autonomous states to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has existed for decades, with West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. President Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, however, devastates this proposition by giving the Israelis false hope and adding to the Palestinians' anguish (Barenboim, 2017). The decision to recognize Jerusalem as capital of Israel and move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem preempts the future Palestinian state, threatens to award Israel all of Jerusalem, and conforms to Israel's attempts to extend its civilian sovereignty to the West Bank in preparation for annexing it (Cook, 2018). The Palestinians continue to find themselves a stateless society after seventy years of the establishment of the state of Israel, and their desperation about their circumstances has made clashing with Israeli soldiers and walking through live ammunitions a viable option (Toles, 2018). Largely, the U.S. decision on Jerusalem upsets the Palestinians' potential for establishing their own state and, therefore, threatens to make their statelessness permanent.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has outlined the societal conflict conceptualization of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict using two interrelated theorizations. First, systemic conflict involves 'fight-enemy-aggression' relationships within 'Us against Them' contexts that promote internalized animosity and use of physical violence. Second, intergroup conflict implies mutual conflict dispositions at the individual and collective levels, nurtured through shared emotional involvements and individuals' psychological adaptation to markers of group membership.

The societal conflict framework captures the social essence of the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and using it to investigate major episodes of intercommunal violence demonstrates the analytical merits of employing theoretical conceptualization to guide qualitative enquiry. Specifically, the societal conflict conceptual framework placed empirical conflictive interactions between the Palestinian and Israeli societies within a relevant theoretical context, and facilitated disciplined analysis of otherwise disparate sets of facts and events. Additionally, the 'structured, focused comparison' method this paper used has endeavored to produce cumulative knowledge through systematically estimating the level of congruence between theoretical postulations and observed empirical evidence in a small number of case studies.

The conceptually-driven analysis of the lingering Palestinian-Israeli conflict informed the endeavor to interpret attitudinal and behavioral information pertaining to five major events of intercommunal violence. In doing so, the analysis considered the psychological, social, and political aspects of the conflict. Through accumulating corroborating evidence across cases of intercommunal Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the analysis has shown the continued validity of the societal conflict character during the peace diplomacy era. The conceptualization of societal conflict seems to find validation throughout two-and-a-half decades of peace diplomacy. Accordingly, in spite of more than 25 years of peace diplomacy, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict retains the attitudinal and behavioral qualities conjunctly suggested by the systemic conflict and intergroup conflict theorizations.

The Middle East peace diplomacy has been a major enterprise that contracted the active participation of major international and regional powers and commanded extensive political, diplomatic, and economic resources. However, diplomacy cannot meaningfully address this conflict without adequately understanding its theoretical underpinnings; hence, the importance of placing the conflict within the relevant societal context. The option of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through military confrontations is neither possible nor desirable. Diplomacy is the only viable option to arrive at a workable settlement of the conflict. Since all major issues of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict remain unresolved against a background of troubled peace diplomacy, inquiry into the societal essence of the conflict occasions considering the implications of the limited success of diplomacy and invites creative thinking to surmount the obstructive nature of the conflict.

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