



Conflict Resolution and Peace in the Middle East

Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

The unresolved international conflicts over the years clearly indicate that current policies and practices in world politics failed in bringing peace to every part of the world. The failure of peace efforts in the Middle East was a major disappointment for the entire world, but its impact was mostly felt by the Palestinian and the Israeli people. This study depicts the prevailing process shaped mainly on the problematic relations between Israel and Palestine. After analyzing the dead ends in the peace negotiations, the challenges and prospects are presented by reviewing the literature and multiculturalism theory. The study proposes that reconstruction of the conditions that makes cooperation possible and effective between conflicted parties is necessary to evaluate the distortions that impede the dialogue and cause terrorism.

Keywords: Middle East, Conflict Resolution, Multiculturalism, Peace, Human Rights and Freedoms

Introduction

Consisted of many countries with different religions and cultures, Middle East has always been the cradle to the conflicts throughout the history. Debates about building peace in the Middle East have been going on for decades. As clearly known, Arab-Israeli conflict consists of many controversial issues. Analyzing these issues necessitates focusing on the consequences rather than details of the process. Researchers studying on conflict resolution tend to overlook the interactions that led to the conflict. They mainly focused on leaders' decisions, state actions, and sporadic events rather than the structural, cultural and social dynamics of the conflict. Therefore, studies on the Middle East have failed to develop effective comprehensive proposals that will restore the problematic relations in the region.

In the last few years, more researchers have focused on analyzing the effects of conflicts in the Middle East on both regional and global peace. These approaches have provided a detailed understanding about the structures, processes, and context beyond the long-lasting conflict in the Middle East. Recent peacemaking efforts depending on existing literature are mainly centered on dialogue and education among youth, women, and civil society groups (Agha et al., 200; Kaye, 2007). However, simple propositions are not enough to solve chronic problems.

The question that poses here is: What should be the philosophy and dynamics of world policies in order to reach sustainable peace in the Middle East? This question leads us to develop new approaches which are as precise and useful as those in mathematics and physics, and they can guide international relations and predictions. Precise and simple approaches can provide powerful inspirations to solve core international conflicts. Peace is extremely difficult to

construct in large segments, but not so hard on a small scale. Therefore, the first step towards peace must be the acceptance of 'pure' communication with the 'other'.

This study depicts the prevailing process shaped mainly on the problematic relations between Israel and Palestine. After analyzing the dead ends in the peace negotiations, the challenges and prospects are presented by reviewing the literature and multiculturalism theory. Different approaches do not necessarily mean to discover totally new ideas. The age of the world is enough to reach every idea, and civilizations built on science and experiences provided too many insights about individual and social life. Developing new approaches, maybe, just means to generate new descriptions for similar cases. As Sandole stated, "different mappings of the same thing mean different realities" (Sandole, 1993: 3).

The Course of the Conflict after the Six-Day War

The conflicts in the Middle East intensified with Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip—two areas that are mainly populated by Palestinians at the end of the Six-Day War in 1967. Jewish extremists desired to build modern Israel over the land covering Gaza and West Bank. For this purpose, Israel allocated many places in those areas to Jewish settlers. It was believed that the victory in the war of 1967 was the beginning of messianic era. Thus, Israel has consistently increased its repressive occupation policies since then. The expansion of the Jewish settlements by Israel deliberately generated extensive violations of Palestinian rights (Zertal and Eldar, 2004). Palestinians living in the occupied territories started a collective insurgency against Israel's policies. The Jewish settlements have been encouraged, while Palestinians have been forced by violent methods to leave from their lands.

Many regional and world leaders involved in the conflict resolution process to find a solution to the conflict following the initial clashes between the two communities. These attempts resulted with the Oslo Agreements, which ceased the violence for a while at the end of 2000. The long-lasting conflict between Israel and Palestine was temporarily solved at Oslo with the impact of domestic, regional and international enforcements. They had to recognize each other and accept the norms and principles offered by international mediators. The three most crucial norms were cited in the UN Resolutions 242 and 338: The recognition of mutual rights and identities, the establishment of a just social, political and economic system, and a system, and the land to be determined via historic reconciliation and negotiations. However, Israel did not withdraw from the occupied territories. Contrarily, Israel has extended Jewish settlements in the land of Palestine. Israel want to force Palestinian side to admit a one-state solution through settlement policies, checkpoints in Palestinian land and harassment activities (Jadou, 2009). These dominant and coercive policies breed radicalism and violence in Palestinian community against Israel. Palestinian radical groups resort to violence in order to get rid of Israeli intervention policies. These interactions, in turn, lead more conflict and pain for both sides.

The 2000 Camp David Summit reignited the polarization between the two sides. Each side blamed the other for the failure in peace negotiations. The deteriorated relations and the desire of international recognition lead Palestinians to start the Second Intifada. The clashes resulted with the death of 3200 Palestinians and one thousand Israelis negatively affected peace perceptions (Shor, 2008). In a survey conducted after the second Intifada, over 70% of Israeli Jews described

Arabs in Israel as a security threat (Rouhana & Sultany, 2003). The results of another survey conducted in 2005 have revealed the degree of hatred: over 75% of Jewish respondents stated that they do not want to live with Arabs in the same building (Smooha, 2010). The negative attitudes of Israeli people toward Palestinians resulted with a couple of legislations banning Arab parties from participating in 2003 and 2009 parliamentary elections (Waxman, 2012). Especially the restriction policies toward the use of holy places by Palestinians closed the doors to the search for peace in the Middle East.

As a result of Israel's suppressive excluding policies, Palestinians have become more radical in their social and political orientation and focused on explaining Israeli violations around the world. These efforts have recently resulted with the hoisting of the Palestinian flag by the UN. The discourse of the conflict in the Middle East simply details the *framework* of Habermas' theory of "communicative action" that emphasizes autonomy and participation within the practice of everyday communication (Habermas, 1984: 226). He indicates that "social pathologies can be understood as forms of manifestation of systematically distorted communication". The philosophy of communicative action is to evaluate the distortions that might impede the communication between conflicted parties and cause terrorism. The growing imbalance in every category in social, political, and economic life breaks the dialogue between Israel and Palestine and leads the weak side to use violence. The remedy for this problematic issue is a "pure and unconditional" tolerance which may lead the acceptance of the other with its differences (Borradori, 2003). This may constitute an important progress towards the peaceful environment. The promise of practical cooperation through the policies of multiculturalism is the brightest hope for building sustainable peace in the Middle East.

Propositions of Multiculturalism

Global interactions make most of the countries in the world be open to diversity of peoples. When a society is consisted of people from diverse cultures, governing common life becomes much more sensitive issue to sustain peace and security. As Robert Putnam emphasized that in multicultural societies, "trust (even of one's own race) is lower, altruism and community cooperation rarer, friends fewer" (cited in Baber, 2012: 12). Therefore, certain rules which are sensitive to cultural values and traditional diversities have to be settled so that social interactions develop in a peaceful environment. In order to find answers for these concerns, multiculturalism theory has been developed by social scientists.

Multiculturalism is a term referring to the recognition of equal rights for all citizens in a community consisted of diverse cultures. It is a philosophy of tolerating group differences and recognizing of identities through "group differentiated rights" (Kymlicka, 1995). Culture enables individual autonomy and self-respect which allow individuals to feel themselves as equal members of the society. People are born in a specific culture that they do not have any chance to choose. Therefore, they should not be held responsible because of their cultural values and traditions (Anderson, 1999; Kymlicka, 2001; Scheffler, 2003).

Different perceptions on multiculturalism lead to debates on its challenges and benefits. The most dangerous factor that may threaten a multicultural social system is that a culture sees itself superior to others (Parekh, 2000). Events that cause massive destruction throughout history, such

as colonialism, slavery, the Holocaust and violent communist activities clearly show that self-righteousness only lead to terrible violence in which both parties lost. In the philosophy of multiculturalism, governments have to remain objective towards peculiarities of identities, cultures, and religion (Parekh, 1997). Social solidarity would be strong, only if governments make and implement legislations to recognize and valorize cultural differences.

In multicultural societies, dominant groups usually try to be politically and economically advantaged over to other groups. States have to set rules that prohibit discrimination and provide equal opportunities to all people from diverse cultures. Constitutional and legal values serve as a catalyst for peaceful cross-cultural interactions in competitive socio-politic and economic life (Parekh, 2000). Recognition of identities, respect for cultural, ethnic and religious differences, and equal opportunities in social and political life are required for a secure society in harmony.

The multicultural nature of the Middle East was not quickly formed, and it will not be quickly changed. The traits of Hittites, Hebrews, Assyrians, Babylonians, Medes, Persians, Greeks, the Romans, Byzantines, Persians, Arabs, Turks and many other civilizations can be seen in the culture of the Middle East. The area is also significant because it is the cradle for the three major monotheistic religions: Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Social interactions involve the exchange of approval and various types of values shaped through diverse cultures, religions, and ethnicities. Traditions, customs, emotions, and various forms of value-oriented actions have brought out the concept of "other" (Merton, 1968; Weber, 1978).

“Othering” is a tool by which national identities are constituted. "Us" and "Others" are constructed images among individuals or groups who are included or excluded from one's own society (Anderson, 1983). Even though multiculturalism increases individuals' civic attachment and sense of co-existence, the negative perception of multiculturalism by certain politicians and right-wing parties may encourage the sense of exclusion (Bloemread, 2011). The state authorities should be aware of that economic development, democratization and cultural formations are the key points in the state-society relations. Policies of multiculturalism facilitate mutual gain and contribute to the sense of co-existence. If multicultural policies are supported by the authorities, greater civic and political cohesion might appear and prevent the feelings of exclusion.

Prospects for Conflict Resolution

The emergence of conflict is inevitable in consequence of social, economic and political interactions. As clearly indicated in sociological literature, conflict is necessary for social change and development. Conflicts may be perceived as threat for identity, culture, or national existence; or it can be viewed as a tool which indicates problematic issues in the society. If we truly understand the nature of the conflict, we can find new opportunities to build more peaceful social life.

As early as the beginning of the 1900s, world leaders and activists have tried to find a solution to the conflict between the Israel and Palestine. None of the attempts succeeded in building peace in the Middle East. The sustainable peace depends on the fulfillment of the basic needs for security, development and recognition (Zunes, 1994). Hence, certain areas of interest should be strictly

identified, and other areas can be used all members of the society. Attempts to live in peace in a multicultural society must go beyond peacebuilding efforts, and become a humanist movement addressing all the violations people faced with in the society. Officials should be precise in their goals to set up peace in the Middle East. Conflicted parties should be convinced that to reach victory over the other increases grievances and stirs up new conflicts (Falk, 1994). Victories based on the other side's sorrows instill hostility, not long-term peaceful relationships. A long term peace process involves a sincere and excessive effort to convert adversaries into friends. Likely suggestions in peace negotiations, therefore, must include mutual gains for both sides.

Attracting public attention to economic issues and peaceful social life is an important option to efface deep-rooted hostility (Stanley et al., 1994). As seen in the establishment process of European Union, free trade in goods and services may provide a peaceful social environment in the Middle East. The events led to the collapse of the former Yugoslavia taught that "it is cheaper to negotiate in pain and frustration for five years, than to exchange bullets for five minutes." (cited in Shapiro, 2013: 184). For this purpose, it was posited that Palestinian economy should be driven by market forces and led by private sector supported by public institutions. A free market system in which goods, services and capital might be freely exchanged should be established. However, there is little hope for such a free market based Palestinian economy due to strict Israeli oppression. The wide income disparities between Israeli and Palestinian publics and the asymmetric pattern of employment preclude such a proposition.

After the end of Cold War, human rights and freedoms came into prominence in national and international arena. This rising trend has changed political motivations of nation states. As the primary concerns of nation states are acceptance and legitimacy, they have to comply with universally accepted human rights values (Finnemore, 1996; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). With the Policies based on fundamental human rights and freedoms, the wall in Berlin was brought down, the Velvet Revolution in Prague was generated, Milosevic from Belgrade was expelled, Shevardnadze in Tbilisi was dismissed, and democracy was brought to Kiev. Governments may first initiate human rights improvements merely as instrumental tactical concessions, aimed at relieving pressures from the international community (Risse et al., 1999). Israeli policies are mainly based on the biblical concept "the chosen people". This way of thinking leads the politicians to justify their violent actions with the moral superiority of the Jewish people. Although this conception have always been part of Israeli nationalist policies, universal morality force them to use human rights rhetoric (Gordon & Berkovitch, 2007). The pressure on abiding human rights by international community brought only moderate promotion in Palestinian rights (Shor, 2008). For Israeli politicians, the use of universal humanitarian language is a political tactic which provides political capital to them while Israeli settlers continue to harass Palestinian people. They believe that their mission of violating Palestinian rights is supported by Israeli public and state. Therefore, they have not changed their perception "A Jew does not expel another Jew".

The inherent power imbalance in Israel-Palestine conflict endangers the protection of Palestinian rights and international recognition of Palestine. Giving a universal status to holy places and setting international rules and principles to manage those places may ensure that both parties will preserve their basic interests and develop normal relations with each other. Palestinians are more ready to accept a mindful proposition than Israeli people because of the power imbalance. They

are very thirsty to lead normal lives in their own land without humiliation and intervention. On the other hand, Israel - reliant on the military and political power - wants to close all the doors to peace and confiscate the whole land of Palestine. Current international politics prefer not to see Israel's violent activities towards Palestinians. Therefore, Israel keep practicing its violent policies, which lead to more suffering and insecurity in the region.

Challenges for States and Civil Society

Consisted of many countries with different religions and cultures, Middle East has always been the cradle to the conflicts throughout the history. Discussing a vision of multiculturalism in the Middle East, power disparities and confrontational relationships between Israel and Palestine must be taken into consideration. Building peace in the Middle East depends on the transformation of intolerant relations into mutually accepted policies (Falk, 1994). Violent policies and practices have poisoned communal relations and led to lasting hostility in the long term. Interrelations between the two conflicted parties must depend on a symmetrical framework which references to the human rights and common religious tenets.

It is the fact that religions with the purpose of leading people to the morality has a potency to solve conflicts and sustain peace in the society. The famous 10 Commandments of Judaism and the concept of community sharing in Islamic belief may help to develop a multicultural system in which all diversities are melted for a peaceful common life. However, religious beliefs instigate hostilities rather than peace in the region, because the struggle between the two sides involves claims of sovereignty over the holy places in Jerusalem. People from both sides think that if they compromise from religious and cultural values, their civilizations will collapse. Hence, they adhere to these values and always strive to protect them. Especially in conflicts in which religious beliefs come into prominence, civil society groups may play a significant role in the conflict resolution process by preparing a ground for mutual understanding. Religious actors give reference to religious (Kadayifci, 2002). By using religious rituals such as forgiveness, integrity, personal responsibility, love, patience, and justice, religious actors strive not only to resolve the controversial issues, but also to build a sustainable peace.

Moreover, the historical and religious attachments to the sacred places in Jerusalem increase the severity of antagonism between Israel and the Arab World. Therefore, the issue of sovereignty over the sacred places must be the first issue in conflict resolution agenda. There are numerous studies advocating for the inclusion of the status of sacred places in conflict resolution process (Landau, 2003). These studies also emphasize that the leaders should generate and disseminate inclusive historical and religious narratives to their people in order to develop mutual respect and empathy. The narratives may remind that these holy places have been a cradle for mutual respect and humanity for centuries by giving reference to the tenets of Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

The exclusion of civil society from the peace negotiations is the other significant reason of the failure of peace building efforts in the Middle East. The support of civil society groups and nongovernmental organizations in various perspectives such as respect for diversities, education for democracy and human rights, and economics may facilitate the process of mutual understanding and tolerance. Studies on conflict resolution indicates that in cases involving

directly or indirectly civil society groups, the reconciliation process is possible to continue much longer. (John & Kew, 2008; Walton & McKersie, 1991; Rubin, Pruitt & Kim, 1994). The participation of civil society groups allows the general feeling of the community to be transferred to the reconciliation process. International agents must endeavor to convince the conflicted parties to develop mutually agreeable proposals on the major controversial issues such as strong support of human rights, interfaith dialogue and cooperation, economic and financial integration, and the empowerment of civil society groups that promote human rights and freedoms (Mason, 2013).

The social interactions based on colonial structure in Arab communities negatively affect peace negotiations. Thus, educating people is required in order to eliminate the confrontational and destructive practices and to develop peaceful communication and interaction among the diverse communities of the region.

Conclusion

The lack of peace in the Middle East has deteriorated almost every category in social, economic and political life. Living standards and freedoms have declined over time in Palestine as a result of Israeli closures. Societies adopting a strategy of inclusion (tolerant strategies) will produce unifying mechanisms that strengthen social solidarity. Societies practicing a strategy of exclusion (repressive strategies), on the other hand, will be open to polarization in the population, which breeds conflicts between opposing groups (Kriesi, 2004). Thus, Peace negotiations must be sustained in a way which is far from any kind of conflict approach.

As Building a multicultural two-state system seems to be the most reasonable option to promote democracy and pluralism in the region consisted of diverse cultures and religions. Each side must tolerate other party's different judgments and values. If the ideal principles of multiculturalism become reality, moving towards sustainable peace is much more possible.

This desired system has a potency to transform the conflicting perceptions into a mutual understanding and cooperation. State authorities and civil society groups should focus on the issues (economic development, education for democracy and human rights, the revival of cultural and religious values, and common use and protection of sacred places) that stimulate the desire of coexistence. After defining those issues, then, each party might revise their policies with a respectful and suggestive manner.

It is very clear that current socio-political picture in the region does not reflect such a cooperative framework. Education is the foremost issue that will provide remedies for the deep-rooted problems of region (Calleja, 1994). However, education is not enough to transform the long-lasting hostility into cooperation. Both sides must admit that short term gains obtained through the loss of the other side encourage long term conflicts. The failure of the Oslo process clearly indicate that peace propositions must meet the interests of both sides. Thus, international actors should enforce the parties to develop a culture of peace (Mason, 2013). Mutual respect and confidence are necessary for a secure social environment in which all groups meet their expectations and make plans for future needs. Without recognizing of all communities and

providing equal opportunities in economic and social life, It is impossible for a multicultural society to remain stable and vibrant by getting rid of violence and terrorism.

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