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The Dilemmas of the Conflict

Review Essay by Khinvraj Jangid, Jawaharlal Nehru University, khinvraj@gmail.com

Elizabeth G. Matthews (Ed.). *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: Parallel Discourses*. Routledge. 2011.

Sapir Handelman. *Conflict and Peacemaking in Israel-Palestine: Theory and Application*. Routledge. 2011.

In a city as ancient and hallowed as Jerusalem, things are often not what they seem to be. More often than not, newspapers headlines and history books miss the essential, because at the heart of our conflict lies something difficult to put your finger on.

Once Upon a Country, 528 p, Sari Nusseibeh

The Arab Spring has arrived, and it is changing the Arab world, much to the surprise, of many Arab world inhabitants themselves. This revolution-in-progress has not, however, taken root everywhere: Amidst the Arab Spring, the Israel-Palestine conflict, known for its more than sixty years of enduring violence, continues (and does not appear to be ending any time soon). The peace process (which also does not appear to be working at the moment) is likely the only route to peace. On September 23, 2011, the Palestinians requested U.N. recognition of statehood, a request that is now being considered by the U.N. Security Council. Any diplomatic recognition Palestine might receive, however, would only be a symbolic gain. The long path toward elusive peace seems as difficult to navigate as it always has been for the Palestinians and the Israelis.

The persistence of the Israel-Palestine conflict has not dissuaded historians and political scientists from writing of it, examining it, and attempting to explain it in search of its ultimate solution. The plethora of literature on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is extensive, yet the complex nature of the conflict often renders it rather vexing to observers. Elizabeth G. Matthews with David Newman and Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi, in *The Israeli-Palestine Conflict: Parallel Discourses*, discuss the distinctly different Palestinian and Israeli narratives with respect to issues of refugees, borders, settlements, water, and, most importantly, peace. The distinct feature of this book is that each issue is presented from the points of view of both the parties of the conflict. In *Conflict and Peacemaking in Israel-Palestine: Theory and Application*, Sapir Handelman deals with the theoretical aspect of conflict-solving and approaches to conflict resolution and conflict management. An intractable conflict like one between the Israelis and Palestinians requires a multifaceted approach to peace-making, says Handelman. He explains that such an approach has great potential for transforming an intractable conflict into a mutually beneficial social order. He asserts that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict can, in fact, serve as an excellent laboratory for the study of destructive social conflicts and the examination of multifaceted approaches to peace-making. In brief, the author presents theoretical background, comparative studies of conflict resolution processes in similar circumstances around the world, and policy recommendations regarding this particular conflict.

The nature of this conflict is explored in the *Parallel Discourses* by examining the key issues of contention: refugees, borders, settlements, territory and water. Of these, the most enduring may be the issue of Palestinian refugees, who got displaced during and after the 1948 war. The Israeli and Palestinian discourses on the topic of refugees are presented, respectively, by Joel Peters and Dajani Daoudi. The two narratives summarized here are well known ones: (1) the Israeli narrative, which claims no responsibility for the Palestinians' refugee status and (2) the Palestinian narrative, which states that Israel is directly responsible for the fate of Palestinian refugees. Peters asserts that Israel, in fact, sought to prevent the mass return of the refugees after the 1948 war ended. However, there is no citation of a source to substantiate this, which weakens his narrative (particularly as it appears that the plight of the refugees *has* been affected by Israeli policy even if Israel does not claim responsibility for creating their predicament). According to the Palestinian narrative, in contrast, those who became refugees did so because of war, (to which Israel responds that the Palestinians fled at the call of Arab leaders). Peters writes that the Israeli approach to the refugee question is deeply conflicted, making it difficult to frame any discussion of how to manage the Palestinian refugees in purely humanitarian (as opposed to political) terms.

Daoudi presents the Palestinian narrative and attempts to conclude the matter rather passionately. He asserts that the refugee issue can only be resolved if (1) Israel accepts the right of return and (2) a subsequent agreement is reached regarding the geographic destination to which the refugees should return. In his discourse, Daoudi quotes new historians Ilan Pappé, Tom Segev, and Benny Morris to suggest that the Palestinians were expelled during and after the 1948 war. Of course, historical objectivity is elusive, and both the Palestinians and the Israelis claim their own narratives as historical truth. For this reason, history, the lens through which all narratives are constructed, has its limitations.

What can be done to resolve the practical problem encountered by researchers faced with multiple narratives and historical bias? David Isacoff, quoted by Daoudi, presents a plausible solution: Isacoff suggests that while historical objectivity is elusive, some narratives are better than others at adjudicating both political science debates and 'real-world' political problems. By looking at the unending fight over the 'correct-narratives' of both the parties, the pragmatic approach to history promises some reconciliation. This requires willingness of the parties to stop insisting on being right vis-à-vis the other and a political will to end the debate in order to move forward constructively.

Sapir Handelman's main thesis is based on such a pragmatic approach to ending the conflict. In order to resolve the conflict, his *Theory and Application* presents four interactive models of peacemaking: The "strong-leader model" and the "social-reformer model" ask for innovative leadership from both the sides. The other two models, namely "the political-elite model" and the "public-assembly model" are the initiatives wherein public diplomacy is prescribed as a useful means of bridging the gap between the two societies, the thinking being that people, by interacting with each other can educate each other directly and alleviate the anxieties of the other group. This type of person-to-person negotiation is already being conducted by a group called the "Minds of Peace Experiment," of which the author is member. The group's objective is to provoke a public debate to make obvious the complexity of the situation, to denounce violence, and to explore what ordinary people can do in order to promote peace.

In Handelman's four-model theory, the first model (strong-leadership) intrigues the reader. There are two notable examples of leadership that changed the politics of this conflict:

Anwar Sadat (with his historical visit to the *Knesset* in 1977) and Ariel Sharon (with his unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005). These two strong, (though the author does not say “ideal”), leaders are exemplars of this model. Sadat took his political step despite heavy risk and went for peace. He made peace with Israel by recovering the land in return for full peace (though at the cost of dismissal from the Arab League). The legacy of Sadat is respected for going that far for peace at that time. But for what Handelman mentions Sharon’s contribution to the Israel-Palestinians issue is debateable. Sharon’s legacy is as one of the strong Prime Ministers Israel. His policies with regard to the Palestinians and other Arabs states are not known for any constructive examples. Like Baruch Kimmerling, the well known sociologist, considers Sharon’s policy a form of “politicide,” which he says, aggravated the conflict instead of defusing it. Sharon’s decision to withdraw from Gaza was intended to distract attention from his intention to erect a defense wall in the West Bank, which many agree has decreased the likelihood of two-state solution in any future settlement of the conflict. Handelman gives credit to Sharon for the withdrawal which was not for the sake of well being of the Gazans. He could have avoided this leader from his ‘strong-leadership’ model.

The central question that Handelman’s book struggles to address is how to build the foundation of an effective peace process in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Sadly, the question remains without a plausible response. The policy recommendations such as those that emphasize combining conflict management and conflict resolution have already been discussed in academic circles time and again, but it’s not clear how such an approach would work in the real world. For one thing, *Parallel Discourses* illustrates (via the juxtaposition of the opposing narratives) precisely why and how the difficulty of resolving this conflict exists and how the emotional convictions of both parties lie at the heart of the conflict. The trajectory of the conflict has been changing with years. The initial war started in (1947) between the Palestinians and the Jews over the territory. Unlike other wars that have been fought for land, this war was not about a dispute over contested borders. Instead, the whole of territory is claimed by *both* parties as their own; both parties believe they are legitimately owed the right to statehood about the same ground. Once the war ended in (1948), displaced refugees and disputed borders were the main issues in conflict. After 1967, the matter of occupation and settlement emerged. This is not to say that the aim of peace was forgotten, however.

In addition to the disputes over right to statehood, refugees, and borders, the fight for water is now one of the main issues to be resolved. The edited volume by Matthews is noteworthy for its detailed chapters on the issue of water. Although the fight for water is often subsumed under the primary fight for territory, in the changing realities with regard to territorial claims, the fight for water also stands out as an issue in and of itself.

The Mountain Aquifer (ground water layer) centred in the West Bank is the contested water source and is by far the most important source of water in this area. Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv both depend on the water from this aquifer. The 1967 war ended the Jordanian rule over West Bank, and since that time, Israel has controlled the aquifer despite the fact that Article 40 of Annex III of the Oslo II Accord in 1995 recognized the water rights of the Palestinians in the West Bank. The rights to the aquifer were to be settled in the permanent status agreement after the final negotiations with the critical matters like refugees and Jerusalem. However, the Oslo peace process did not reach its final stages of negotiation.

The Palestinians’ major argument, here presented by Amjad Aliawi et al. is centred around the demand for Palestinians to control their own sources of water. Since the West Bank is under Israel’s control, however, the local Palestinians have no control over the amount of the

water supply they get. The over-consumption of water by Israel is one of the Palestinians' major grievances against Israel. The Israeli perspective is presented by Hillel Shuval. He claims that Israel is entitled to consume water as they see fit. He says that the Israeli water companies have a legal right to the water, as it is found within the territory of the Israeli state, as recognized by the partition plan of the UN. The sharing of the water is something that Israel agrees to, says Shuval. However, the issue of the water source remains entangled with the demarcation of the territory. Since the borders are yet to be finalized, the bodies of water are bound to be disputed. Water, the need of everyday survival, remains one a thorny issue.

Parallel Discourses is a good reader for an understanding of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The chapters on the key issues of the conflict are comprehensive and contain the perspectives of both the Israelis and the Palestinians. One who reads it is advised at the outset by the editor to keep in mind that the chapters are not meant to be unbiased views of the conflict, recognizing that bias is a part of understanding what makes this conflict so contentious. There are obviously differences in perception among the parties in this conflict, and the authors in this text express their personal viewpoints. What one can learn from arguments of the authors is that there *are* areas of agreement and disagreement in this conflict and that it is important to recognize the ways in which their agreements converge and the places where they diverge. It is also important to consider whether the disagreements are really too intractable as they seem. The different chapters on the various issues both ask and attempt to answer these questions. Nevertheless, readers who are more knowledgeable on this conflict and its history will have to reconsider much of what they believe to be the apparent picture, as things are often not what they seem to be. One last word should be saved for the publisher: Routledge has brought out numerous books under the series *Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Politics*. Some of the most important events and new developments of the region are given due attention in the books published under the series. The major titles have added value to the existing knowledge of the subject.