Intercultural Communication and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict:

How a Greater Understanding of Intercultural Communication can Aid in Reconciliation

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Introduction

The complex, multifaceted, and impassioned conflict between the people of Israel and Palestine has become a classic example of intercultural conflict. While this dispute can appear irreconcilable, through a deeper understanding of intercultural conflict in tandem with communication theories like identity theory and conflict management, Israelis and Palestinians can work through deeply rooted differences by partaking in effective intercultural communication. This analysis of the conflict will unpack its history, pinpoint specific intercultural communication theories that provide key insight into the dispute, as well as discuss a negotiation utilizing these communication theories should an attempt to resolve this conflict take place.

History and Background

The history and background of this conflict is rooted in the concept of Zionism. Zionism is the Jewish belief that God would one day gather together His scattered and exiled people and restore them once again to their promised land (Tessler, 1994, p. 16). This land, now modern day Palestine, is a territory that Jew's refer to as "Eretz Yisrael" or "Land of Israel"(Tessler, 1994, p. 16). The Jewish people feel a very strong spiritual bond to this land and believe that it is rightfully theirs, promised to them by God. For centuries however, Zionism spurred no Jews into action; classical Zionism is actually quite passive (Tessler, 1994 p.19). According to political science professor Dr. Mark Tessler (1994), "most Jews nonetheless did not believe it was appropriate to initiate steps toward the reconstruction of their national home in Palestine, such action would indicate a loss of faith and the absence of a willingness to wait for the Creator's plan to unfold in its own Divinely ordained fashion"(p.19).

By the second half of the eighteenth century however, its classical predecessor began to give way to Modern Zionism, ushered in by persecution and anti-Semitism rising up throughout the world (Tessler, 1994, p. 24). Modern Zionism actively seeks the establishment of the kingdom of Israel within the borders of its promised land, which includes modern day Palestine (Tessler, 1994, p. 4). According to Tessler (1994) Jews who adhere to Zionism believe that this home for their nation will provide safe shelter from persecution, and "permit the construction of a spiritual center where Jewish religious and cultural norms could be put into practice and thereafter evolve"(p.4).

During the early 1900's a steady stream of Jews began to flee mistreatment in their communities throughout Europe and other parts of the world to resettle in their Holy Land (Tessler, 1994, p. 123). The Arab response to Jewish immigration came in waves. According to Tessler (1994), "Their was indifference, followed by suspicion and, eventually, mutual antagonism," (p. 127). The majority Muslim and Arab population had resided in that area since 3000 B.C.E. and did not recognize the Jews as the rightful owners of the land that had been their home for centuries (Tessler, 1994, p. 69).

The conflict began to take shape in World War I. By 1917, what was then the Ottoman Empire, and with it the region of Palestine, had fallen to Great Britain ("Israel Profile-Timeline", 2019). By November of that year, Britain released the Balfour Declaration, which stated "His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people…" sympathizing with the Zionist movement and making provision for its establishment in Palestine (Tessler, 1994, p. 148). Britain's motives for such a declaration have been the topic of much debate and discussion, but are generally believed to have been

motivated by war needs at the time and strategic political reasoning (Tessler, 1994, p. 149). This mandate gave provision for continued Israeli immigration and growing resentment from Palestinians towards their increasing numbers.

Jewish immigration to Palestine continued, especially during the Second World War and Hitler's regime. The violent persecution and intense anti-Semitism that ravaged the Jewish people during the Holocaust immensely fueled Modern Zionism among Israelis. "Many overseas Jews who has once been indifferent to Zionism, or no more than apathetic to supporters of its political program, rallied to the cause" (Tessler, 1994, p.225). Jews poured into the region, more determined than ever to lay claim to what they so passionately believed was their rightful home.

Rising tensions in the area caught the attention of the United Nations, and on November 29, 1947, a partition resolution was voted on and passed, establishing separate and delineated Jewish and Arab states (Tessler, 1994, p. 261). According to Tessler (1994), this resolution was not well received, and fighting broke out immediately upon its passage (p. 261). This fighting came to a fever pitch, and erupted in the first Arab-Israeli War as of May 14, 1947, the day Israel declared independence and established themselves as a Jewish state (Tessler, 1994, p. 269).

Since that day, the past seventy-two years have been filled with unrest, war, violence, and failed attempts at peace between the Israeli and Palestinian people. The Holy Land, broken up into the West Bank, Gaza strip, and the State of Israel, have become sites of bombings, stabbings, shootings, and combat ("Global Conflict Tracker" 2019). Peace between Israel and Palestine seems more like an unattainable Utopia than a real tangible place, even if one admits that it would require much healing over time, perhaps generations, to arrive there.

Intercultural Communication Theory Analysis

Looking at this conflict through the lens of intercultural communication theory, what appears to be at the core of this conflict is identity. According to researcher and professor of Psychology at the University of California Dr. Phillip L. Hammack, a conflict between two groups becomes less about the land or resources that they may be contenting for, but rather about the legitimacy of their identities that are under threat (Hammack, 2006, p. 328). According to Hammack (2006), "in the case of Israelis and Palestinians, the acceptance of one group's identity and aspiration for national self-determination is often interpreted as necessarily invalidating the identity of the other- given the extent to which each group desires a monopoly on political and territorial control"(p.328). He calls this phenomenon "negative interdependence" which is passed on from generation to generation and keeps the coals of the conflict aflame (Hammack, 2006, p. 328). He also notes that collective identities are made up of a network of personal identities. As individual Israelis and Palestinians develop their senses of self and what it means to be an Israeli and Palestinian, as well as there opinions of each other, during this process the conflict is taking shape (Hammack, 2006, p. 328).

According to the authors Martin and Nakayama (2018) of the textbook, "Intercultural Communication in Contexts", our identities are at the very core of who we are (p. 167) One of the most important facets of our identities, our religious identity, is largely at play in this conflict. Because of that, the depth of the impassioned ground-holding taking place on either side of the dispute is immense. Regional identity is also a large part of this conflict (Martin & Nakayama, 2018, p. 201). Arab peoples have inhabited the contested land for centuries; their historical bond to the region cannot be easily compromised or broken. National identity plays

into this conflict as well. The loyalty bound up in what it means to be a part of a nation can keep members of each nation fiercely passionate about defending one another when that nation is under threat (Martin and Nakayama, 2018, p.199). This loyalty can make compromise or even dialogue with members of the opposing nation seem like betrayal.

These notions of identity also play into in-group and out-group communication and conflict. Communication researchers Yiftach Ron and Ifat Maoz (2013) found that prejudices and negative attitudes about an opposing group can make reconciliation especially challenging (p. 76). However, in light of this challenge, they also found that "group contact, under certain conditions, can radically transform in-group prejudice and the negative attitudes toward the out-group that contribute to group conflict" (Maoz & Ron, 2013, pg. 77). Maoz also partnered in research with communication scholar Donald G. Ellis to study intergroup communication in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They found that members of opposing groups did posses stereotypes about one another and harbored distrust, however, intergroup communicative contact helped to deteriorate these barriers and make provision for trust and conflict resolution to take place (Maoz & Ellis, 2008, p. 491).

In their study they discussed the importance of creating a nonthreatening and safe environment where Israelis and Palestinians could discuss the conflict and the various misperceptions they may have, find common ground and interests, and thus move toward conflict resolution (Maoz & Ellis, 2008, p. 491). This dialogue makes provision for members of each party to listen and empathize with one another; they may still disagree about the core issues of the conflict, but through communication they may come to understand the opposing parties stance and reasoning behind their commitment to their perspective. This understanding builds

trust, which Maoz and Ellis (2008) say is "the most important affective tie that emerges from intergroup contact" (p.495). This trust is something that is the first to go in conflicts such as these that deal with religion, prejudice, feelings of disenfranchisement, and intolerance. Without trust a willingness to reconcile slips away, and without the will to resolve conflict it becomes extremely difficult to do so.

Managing intercultural conflict is inextricably linked to managing interpersonal conflict. An understanding of identity theory, empathy, and open dialogue on an interpersonal level can foster trust and over time reconciliation. The use of the "platinum rule" is also at play here in these interpersonal conflicts, as each opposing party attempts to understand how the other would like to be treated, not just how their own preferences.

Peace campaigns driven by organizations like "Combatants for Peace" have worked to spread these intercultural communication concepts and theories on an international scale (Martin & Nakayama, 2018, p. 480). The group comprised of both Israeli and Palestinian soldiers have laid down their guns and taken up effective intercultural communication in pursuit of peaceful progress instead. They saw that their conflict was one that their militaries were not solving alone, and peace was worth fighting for through nonviolent means ("Combatants for Peace", 2019). According to Martin & Nakayama (2018), "they now organize activities, tours, lectures and events for both Israeli and Palestinian audiences, with the goals of better understanding of the other group through active dialogue and ultimately reducing violence and conflict" (p. 480). They travel the region and promote the dialogue that is crucial for both Israelis and Palestinians to understand one another. Through their events, trust and empathy are fostered, and provision is made for steps toward peace to be taken. If Israeli and Palestinian leadership adhere to these

facets of intercultural communication, incremental progress could be made through peaceful means. Although this may be a Utopian-like thought, progress towards peace as a result of these theories, even on the smallest of scales, is effective and can develop momentum for change over time and generations.

Negotiation

As a negotiator between an Israeli and Palestinian, I would first explain identity theory. Before discussing the conflict itself, it would want them both to understand why they each believe so fiercely in their positions; that their religion, cultures, regions, perceptions, and biases justly color their perspectives. I would explain value conflict theory and tie it back to identity theory, establishing the fact that this derision is deeply impassioned and personal, stemming from the core of who they are as people and members of their group. I would explain the crucial role that empathy must play for understanding to take place, and attempt to find common ground such as family and their commitment to faith and nation. I would explain the platinum rule, and try to enable both people to imagine how other may desire to be spoken to or treated, especially if that may be different than their own preferences. During this first phase of negotiating I would simply try to construct a safe environment where they both know they are heard, understood, and safe to express their commonalities as well as their differences.

Next, I would invite them to express any stereotypes they may have of one another, in an effort to break down misperceptions and preconceived notions. By this point in the process my goal would be that an initial element of trust and conformability would be fostered, one that would enable both parties to feel safe in moving into a discussion of the conflict itself. I would invite them both to first not seek to be understood, but to understand. On each point of issue, I

would relate it back to a value conflict and encourage them to empathize with the depth of the passion that fuels the opposing parties position on that issue. My ultimate goal, if not to reach complete reconciliation, would be for both parties to understand and empathize with one another more than they did at the beginning of our negotiation; that they would use these various theories of intercultural communication to understand themselves and each other on a deeper level.

Conclusion

These theories provide Israelis and Palestinians with an alternative to violence. Possessing a mutual understanding of their histories that have brought them to where they are, grasping that the nature of their own conflict is so strongly linked to their core identities, and being motivated to understand the "why" behind those belief systems will provide the tools they need to constructively move towards peace, on an interpersonal level and international level as well. This conflict that is so steeped in history, violence, prejudice, and deeply rooted in core values must be reconciled through a complete transformation of perspective through education, empathy, trust, and compromise through the vehicle of effective intercultural communication.

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