

How Unique is the Israel-Palestine Conflict?

by Omar Shahabudin McDoom



Protestors in support of Israel and Palestine clash in the United States. Source: Ted CC License

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As the powerful reactions to the most recent round of violence attest, few of the world's ongoing conflicts elicit such intense and polarised feelings among observers as the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Each violent episode in the struggle exposes a deeply troubling lack of empathy on both sides for the humanity, suffering, and tragedy of the other. It also stirs sentiments among a remarkably broad and diverse set of constituencies. The Palestinian cause unsurprisingly finds much support within the Arab and Muslim worlds where feelings of ethnic and religious kinship solidarity are strong. It also resonates in many parts of the postcolonial world, and with other subjugated

peoples, but especially within former European colonies in Africa and Asia that fought for their national liberation. The Palestinian struggle also has ideological dimensions. The Left sees them as an oppressed class of people whose racial subjugation is underwritten by capitalist and imperialist nations such as the United States and United Kingdom while progressives see the Palestinian plight in human rights and humanitarian terms.

The Israeli cause for its part evidently engages much of the world's small Jewish population for whom Israel represents variously a promised sacred land, a secular nationalist ideal, and a safe haven. Within the diaspora also circulates the fear that underlying criticism of Israel is longstanding antisemitism. Their cause also finds support among white Evangelical Christian communities, for whom the conflict has biblical prophetic implications and for whom it echoes the historic struggle for the Holy Land. It also draws popular sympathy within secular communities in western liberal democracies for whom the memory of the Holocaust is still fresh, for whom Palestinian militancy echoes Islamist terrorism post 9/11, and for whom Israel represents a democracy within a region of corrupt authoritarians.

Is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict then unique? If so, what is it that distinguishes the conflict and that might account for the impassioned and opposing views it inspires among so many different people not directly involved in it? I select ten characteristics of the conflict often cited in explanations for why the Israeli-Palestinian dispute is so widely engaging and so deeply polarising and set out to analyse these claims in comparative and historical perspective.

1. **Civilian destruction:** Is the conflict's distinction a particularly horrific death toll? Counting in war is evidently always contentious. Israeli human rights organisation, B'tselem, which has [investigated and identified by name](#) every individual killed since the start of the second Intifada in October 2000 until September 2023, numbers Israeli civilian casualties at 881 and Israeli combatants at 449; while Palestinians killed, both civilians and combatants, at 10,667. These numbers exclude those lost to the current continuing violence. While truly terrible, they do not distinguish the conflict. Estimates for the loss of civilian life to war-time violence in Syria (2011–), Iraq (2003–17), Afghanistan (2001–21), Sri Lanka (2008–9) the DRC (1998–), the Sudan (2003–), and Ethiopia (2020–) – each examples of high-profile conflicts within the last 25 years – are in the tens or hundreds of thousands. While not verified as precisely as B'tselem's data, these numbers should make

clear the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not unique for its civilian destructiveness.

- 2. Asymmetric struggle:** Is the distinction the imbalance in military power between Israeli and Palestinian armed actors? Armed resistance to alien occupation is invariably asymmetric. Logically, were the occupier militarily weaker, it would be unlikely to be able to conquer and then hold the occupied land. Similarly, anti-colonial movements that have used force in their national liberation campaigns – the Viet Minh against the French in Indo-China, the Mau Mau against the British in Kenya, black Zimbabweans against white settler rule in Rhodesia for example – have almost always faced militarily superior opponents. Is it instead the asymmetry in victimisation? Were one to take an unambiguous measure – children killed on each side – the asymmetry is evident: 145 Israeli children to Palestinian children 2270 or a ratio of over 15:1.

However, imbalances in civilian casualties are all too common in armed resistance to occupations. The Algerian War of Independence (1954–62), for example, involved both foreign occupation and foreign settlement and was particularly brutal on civilians. The FLN, the Algerian militant group, targeted not only French soldiers but also French settlers, the *pieds noirs*. French sources place the number of French soldiers killed at about 25,000 and French civilians at approximately 3,000. In contrast, non-Algerian estimates for the number of Algerians killed range from 400,000 to 700,000. These figures frequently combine civilians and combatants as reliably distinguishing between them is challenging in guerrilla and urban warfare. Still, the combined numbers suggest a ratio ranging from 14 to 25:1. Asymmetric loss and suffering then does not distinguish the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But it does inspire sympathy and anger on behalf of the weaker party and indignation and denial from the stronger opponent.

- 3. Indiscriminate violence:** Is the conflict distinctive for the indiscriminate violence committed? The deliberate targeting of civilians and not distinguishing between civilians and combatants both represent violations of international criminal and humanitarian law. Palestinian militant groups have in the past, and especially during the second Intifada (2000–5), conducted suicide attacks in Israeli cities. They have also fired missiles, overwhelmingly from Gaza, indiscriminately into Israel. These actions are the primary reason for the early designation of Hamas' militant wing and Palestinian Islamic Jihad as terrorist groups by the US and UK. At

the same time, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have engaged in periodic aerial bombardment of areas inhabited by civilians, most notably in five major aerial attacks on Gaza since Israel's withdrawal in 2005. The IDF also stands accused of [using white phosphorous](#) in these same areas.

None of these tactics, however, is unique to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The modern use of suicide attacks was pioneered by the LTTE, the Tamil Tigers, in the 1980s, who famously used them to assassinate Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 and Sri Lankan President, Ranasinghe Premadasa, in 1993. The LTTE have committed more suicide attacks than all Palestinian militant groups combined. Similarly, the firing of missiles on civilian areas is a tactic commonly used by weaker actors in asymmetric warfare. The Houthis in Yemen have done so against the Saudi capital, Riyadh; the Taliban did so against Afghan towns defended by the US and allied troops; and ISIS fired missile and rocket against towns in Iraq and Syria.

Aerial bombardment of urban areas is even more commonplace. It is also far more destructive of civilian lives. In World War II, the German Luftwaffe targeted London and the Allies fire-bombed Dresden and Tokyo; the US intensively bombed towns in north Vietnam in Operation Rolling Thunder (1965–8); and the Syrian government, with support from Russia, bombarded rebel-held towns such as Aleppo and Ghouta. The US also used white phosphorous, along with napalm, in the Vietnam war, and did so again in the Iraq war during the Battle for Fallujah (2004). Indiscriminate violence then does not distinguish the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, it certainly contributes to the moral outrage generated on both sides.

4. **Indivisible territory:** Is it because the Israeli-Palestinian rivalry is a zero-sum conflict in which both sides want the same territory? Most Palestinian Arabs and many Israeli Jews see the area encompassing modern-day Israel and the occupied territories as a homeland. In the biblical narrative, the Jewish presence in the region began some time in the second millennium BCE with Abraham's migration from Ur, in modern day Iraq, to Canaan. Israelite rule in the area begins with Joshua's conquest of Jericho some time between the 15th and 12th century BCE and definitively ends with the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem in 586BCE. In

contrast, Arab presence and rule in the region began with the capture of Jerusalem from the Byzantine Empire in 638CE by the second Muslim caliph, Umar Ibn Al-Khattab. Muslim rule of the region continued from then, interrupted by periods of Christian rule during the Crusades, until the Ottoman Empire's defeat in World War I at which point Palestine became a British mandate territory in 1920. Both Arabs and Jews then believe they have strong claims to the land based on the length of their presence and rule in the area.

Yet wars involving competing claims to a homeland are not unique to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave within modern-day Azerbaijan, is a historic and religious homeland for Armenians whose presence in the area may date back to the first millennium BCE and for whom the enclave became the Christian kingdom of Artsakh in the early 9th century BCE. At the same time, ethnic Azeris, also claim the land asserting a historic link based on Turkic migrations to the area in the Middle Ages, and their longstanding presence in the enclave until conflict in the 1990s displaced them. Similarly, Kosovo has historic and symbolic significance for both ethnic Serbs and Albanians. For Serbs, Kosovo, as the site of a famous yet inconclusive battle in 1389, symbolises Serb resistance to Ottoman conquest. Serbs also maintained a significant presence in the area until the 20th century. At the same time, Albanians assert a historic tie to Kosovo based on their claimed ancestry from the ancient Illyrians who were present in the area since the first millennium BCE. Albanians also formed a natural majority in Kosovo in the 20th century. Wars over homelands then are particularly emotionally charged and particularly difficult to resolve. But the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not unique in this sense.

- 5. Inconsistent denunciation of international law violations:** Is it that so many liberal democracies, committed to the rule of law and to human rights, seem more willing to recognise and denounce violations of international law by one party than by the other? Palestinian armed groups stand accused of deliberately and [indiscriminately targeting Israeli civilians](#), using [human shields](#), [taking hostages](#), inciting individuals to violence, and [summarily executing and torturing collaborators](#), among other wrongs. The US, UK, France, Germany, Canada, Australia and other democratic states have forcefully denounced many of these actions as crimes. The Israeli Defense Forces, for its part, stand accused of using

[disproportionate force](#), [failing to distinguish between civilians and combatants](#), [collectively punishing Palestinians](#), using [human shields](#), deliberately depriving civilians of the necessities of life, and most recently potentially [genocide](#). Various, these actions are likely to be contrary to international criminal, humanitarian, and human rights law. In addition, the Israeli government has also unlawfully annexed East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, permitted if not promoted illegal settlement in the occupied territories, erected a separation wall contrary to the International Court of Justice's [advisory opinion](#), demolished Palestinian homes without due process, detained Palestinians without charge or trial, and severely restricted freedom of movement for them. However, official condemnation by liberal democracies of these actions is conspicuously rarer and weaker.

Yet it is not uncommon for liberal democracies to be inconsistent in their commitment to international norms of good behaviour. The US, for example, has supported many governments that have violated international human rights laws. Some have even involved mass atrocities. Take its military support to the Salvadorean and Guatemalan governments in counter-insurgency campaigns that involved massacres of indigenous groups; to the Indonesian government during its brutal occupation of East Timor and West Papua; to the Iraqi government in its campaign against the Kurds; and to Saudi Arabia in its prosecution of war in Yemen that has seen thousands of civilians killed. But, respond critics, Israel is [acclaimed as a democracy](#) also committed to liberal values, whereas these countries were not at the time of US support. Yet it also not uncommon for liberal democracies to give allies a pass when it comes to bad behaviour. Few democracies officially denounced the US after 9/11 for its use of enhanced interrogation techniques, for the indefinite detention of individuals without trial or charge, for the creation of 'unlawful combatant' status placing individuals outside of the protection of the Geneva Conventions, and for extraordinary renditions, for example.

- 6. Alien occupation and settler colonialism:** Is it the fact that Israel is involved in the continued occupation and continued settlement of Palestinian land? The [United Nations recognises](#) Israel's control of the West Bank and Gaza as that of an occupier. Yet Israel is hardly the only occupying power in the modern world. Ongoing situations, cited by some as occupations, include China in Tibet; Russia

in Crimea; Turkey in northern Cyprus; and Morocco in Western Sahara. Israel's occupation, however, may be the longest ongoing occupation today. While most countries see the land captured following the 1967 war as clearly under occupation, there is a reasonable case that the land captured in the 1948 war beyond the borders recognised in the UN's partition plan is also occupied territory. The [1947 plan](#) allocated 56% of the land for Israel, 44% for the Palestinians, and provided for the international administration of Jerusalem. Yet Israel controlled 78% of the land after the 1948 war. If this additional 22% of captured land was unlawful, then Israel's occupation has been ongoing for 75 years.

Does the conflict also stand out as anachronistic colonial settlement in the 21st century? Israel's occupation has been [likened to apartheid](#) in South Africa, the last and most extreme example of the racially segregated settler-colonies in southern Africa. Israel rejects the characterisation of its presence in the occupied territories as a settler-colonial project. It argues Jews have a longstanding historical connection to the land and this ancient tie means they cannot be considered colonists. Critics respond that, even according to the Jewish narrative, Abraham, the original patriarch of the Jewish people, was himself a settler from modern-day Iraq and the Jews, having migrated to Egypt, then returned and forcibly took the land from the ancient Canaanites. If international law gave credence to ancient ties then the modern-day descendants of the Canaanites, many of whom live in Lebanon, would have the strongest claim to the land. However Israel's settlements in the occupied territories should be characterised, it is clear they stir feelings, not least in the postcolonial world, and make a peaceful and equitable solution to the conflict much harder. At the same time, such practices continue in the modern world. China's resettlement of Han Chinese to Tibet and Xinjiang, and Morocco's resettlement of its citizens to the Western Sahara have, for example, also been described in such terms. Israel is not alone in this regard.

- 7. Religious significance:** Do the religious dimensions of the conflict distinguish it? As roughly 97% of Palestinians are Muslim and some 74% of Israelis are Jewish, the conflict easily lends itself to religious framing. Even more so because the land in contention is considered sacred by Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike and historic rivalries exist between the three Abrahamic faiths. Yet the framing of wars in terms of religious identities is hardly new, even in the 20th century. The frame

has been invoked to characterise conflict in Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia, Myanmar, and the Sudan to give but a few recent examples.

Perhaps instead it is because the conflict involves contestation over holy sites? The Old City in occupied East Jerusalem contains the Temple Mount on which the First and Second Temples were built, and on which the al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock are presently located. The site then is deeply sacred to Jews and Muslims alike. Other conflicts have involved contestation over symbolically charged sites such as the Gandzasar Monastery in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Visoki Dečani Monastery in Kosovo. But few if any involve the situation where two faiths both see the same site as sacred. The closest parallel may be the Babri Masjid, in Ayodhya, India located on the supposed birthplace of Lord Rama, whose destruction triggered nation-wide communal violence between Muslims and Hindus in 1992. However, Babri holds far less significance for the global Muslim community than al-Aqsa, considered to be the third holiest site after Mecca and Medina. Contestation then over deeply sacred land then is a distinguishing feature of the conflict. It makes it particularly inflammable and particularly intractable.

- 8. External 'kinship' communities and international support:** Is the conflict distinctive for the international support each side draws? Both Palestinians and Israeli Jews have ties to external communities many of whose members, though not all, feel ethnic or religious kinship-based solidarity with them. Israeli Jews have the Jewish diaspora while Palestinians have the wider Arab community and the even larger Muslim world from which to draw sympathy. This sympathy can translate into political advocacy and also material support, usually through the host state's government, on behalf of each party. The global Arab population, comprising ethnically Arab citizens in the 22 states of the Arab League as well as the Arab diaspora, may number between 400 and 500 million individuals. The global Muslim population is estimated at some 1.9 billion individuals most of whom live in the world's 49 Muslim majority countries. The potential pool of sympathisers with the Palestinian cause then is significant. The Palestinian cause was central to the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948 in which Egypt, Syria, Transjordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia all participated. Since then, various Arab states have given humanitarian and development aid to the Palestinians; and several Muslim-majority states have supplied at least rhetorical diplomatic support.

The Jewish diaspora, in contrast, is considerably smaller, estimated to be between 7 and 8 million persons, of whom well over 5 million live in the US. Notwithstanding their much smaller 'kinship' community, Israeli Jews receive significant international support. Israel's strongest supporter is the world's most powerful nation. Since the 1967 war, initially as part of its geopolitical rivalry with the Soviet Union, the US has provided enormous diplomatic, economic, and military assistance to Israel whom it sees as its closest ally in the region. Cumulatively, it has been the [biggest beneficiary](#), by far, of American military aid of any country in the world. The reasons for this continued support are contested. Some argue it is because of shared values and aligned interests. Israel is seen as the only democracy in a volatile region where anti-American sentiment is high. Others argue it is down to the successful advocacy and influence of [pro-Israel interest groups](#) whose members include Jewish-Americans sympathetic to Israel. They believe the US' remarkable support to Israel is against its own – and also Israel's – strategic interests. Whatever the reason, the scale of popular sympathy on the Arab street and within the Muslim world for Palestinians, and the strength of official support for Israel from the US, are distinctive features of the conflict. They may partly account for the intensity of feeling the conflict generates.

9. **Zionism and state formation:** Is it the unusual manner through which the state of Israel was created that distinguishes the conflict? The quest for a modern Jewish state properly began with the Zionist movement in Europe in the late nineteenth century. As a nationalist movement, Zionism was not unique for the time. Irish nationalism, Indian nationalism, Armenian nationalism, and various African nationalisms were all emerging in the same era that also saw international recognition of the right of people to self-determination. However, Zionism was different in one important respect. While other nationalist movements sought to liberate land people had owned and occupied for hundreds of years from foreign presence, Zionists sought to bring Jews from abroad to settle in land already owned and occupied by other people for hundreds of years. The foundational Zionist document, the Basel Program of 1897, articulated the Zionist objective as to '[establish a home for the Jewish people in Palestine secured under public law](#)'. It was conspicuously silent on the status and rights of the existing Arab population. The British then endorsed the Zionist aspiration of a 'Jewish homeland' in Palestine in the infamous [Balfour declaration](#) of 1917, betraying the understanding

there would be independent lands for the Arabs in return for their help defeating the Ottoman army in World War I. Thirty-one years later and the Zionist vision of a state was realised and its Jewish character reflected in the 1950 Law of Return guaranteeing the right to settle in Israel to any Jew in the world who sought it. 6.9 million Jews now live in Israel. 106 years later and the Palestinian right to self-determination remains unfulfilled with some 5 million Palestinians under occupation and an estimated 5–7 million Palestinians as refugees in other countries. The different fortunes of the two peoples seem particularly stark in light of the highly improbable Zionist ambition of satisfying Jewish self-determination in land occupied by another people.

10. **Historic moral responsibility:** Does the conflict stand out for the extent of external involvement in the conflict's creation? The Jewish state was achieved in no small part because of an exceptional world historical event: the Holocaust. There was enormous sympathy among Allied nations '[in the light of the terrible ordeal which the Jewish people of Europe endured during the recent war](#)', as President Truman put it in 1946. It was likely more than simple sympathy. There may have also been a strong sense of moral responsibility among them for not having done more, and sooner, to stop the mass atrocities and genocide Hitler had perpetrated against the Jews. To Palestinians, it appeared as if the crime had been committed by the German state; but restitution was being made by them. The state of Israel had been created by taking land inhabited by one people and promising it to another people for wrongs committed by yet another people. Between Britain's promise of a Jewish homeland, Germany's perpetration of genocide, the Allied nations' belated response to it, and the US' successful lobbying for [UN Resolution 181](#) on which thirty-three countries ultimately voted to partition Palestine into two states, there was extensive involvement of so many of the world's most prominent liberal democracies in the creation of Israel. This involvement is a distinguishing feature of the dispute. The historic responsibility they bear for the ensuing conflict may in part account for the strength of feeling it generates up until today.

In sum, characteristics 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 do distinguish the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: (i) the longevity of the occupation; (ii) the contestation over land considered sacred to both parties; (iii) the unparalleled level of US material support for Israel; (iv) the distinctiveness of Zionism as a nationalist movement and (v) the historical moral responsibility of so many countries for the situation today are all distinctive features of

the conflict. At the same time, while characteristics 1–5 are not unique to the conflict, they contribute still to its polarising effects and intractability. Indeed, the coincidence of all ten characteristics in a single conflict is itself a remarkable thing. It should not be surprising then that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has inspired such strong feeling, among so many different people, and for such a prolonged period of time. The conflict deserves the world's attention.