

Conflict resolution: The Israeli West Bank Separator

The separator being constructed right now between Israel and the Palestinian West Bank is a source for conflict as it hurts both sides. (A note is required about the term we use for the construction. I called it separator, because most other terms are loaded with meaning and emotion for either or both sides involved. Whatever word I would use it would have connotations that would strengthen one of the positions of involved. Palestinians call it “wall,” because they feel walled in by it, and it reminds them of the Berlin Wall. Israel calls it a “fence,” because their intention with the separator is fencing off Palestinian suicide bombers to enter Israel and kill citizens.)

The conflict it causes and at the same time attempts to deflate is between the country of Israel and the Palestinian nation. However, neither of them is unified in its position related to the separator. The Israeli government initiated the project, thus they support it by default. However there are Israelis who are against it including most of the Israeli Arab population and those peace activist and people on the left who believe that the separator will not be effective and it will just fuel the conflict further. On the Palestinian side, where we cannot talk yet about the country of Palestine, most people oppose the “wall”, a symbol of their limited freedom. Some, including Yasser Arafat at Camp David in 2000, however see it as the beginning sign of their potential sovereign country.

In search of the origin of the conflict we could go back to several thousands of years, because the various Semitic people lived on this territory for at least 3-4 thousands years, often in conflict with each other. However in examining the current conflict and particularly the separator it is more productive to analyze the sequence of events starting from the 20th century. Jews have arrived in several waves to the territory in the past century, although in various numbers they lived on the land continuously from Biblical times. The large number of Jews arriving before, during, and mostly after the Holocaust was essential in the creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948. From this point on the majority of Palestinians lived in the West Bank, and Gaza while a minority of them in the state of Israel itself. This was supposed to lead to the UN supported idea of a two state solution on the ancient land. Displaced Palestinians and those who never acknowledged the right for Israel to exist have been fighting against it from the very beginning. One of the defensive tactics for Israel was to erect physical barriers since the birth of the modern country. To build a full-fledged separator was first proposed by Yitzhak Rabin in 1992. In 1994 Israel built the barrier between itself and the Gaza strip. At the 2000 Camp David summit both sides agreed that building a barrier would be beneficial to both entities. Israel intensified the speed of the development after the second Intifada started against them.

From Israel’s point of view, protecting the lives of its citizens is the first priority. The government sees the separator as an effective tool in this process. They say they tried other methods for accomplishing this goal and they failed. They feel that negotiations did not bring the expected results, because the Palestinian leaders did not, could not or did not want to contain the terrorist members of their society. The majority of Israel’s population supports the project. They see it as an effective tool to provide security. A minority, however, thinks that this will intensify hostility from the Palestinian and on the long term will backfire.

Palestinians are more divided about the project. Their major opposition is related to the fact that crossing over from their own territory to Israel will be more difficult and time consuming. As more jobs are available for them in Israel than in their own space this is a major economic issue, as often their livelihood depends on it. They also point to specific problems about the exact location of the separator. One of the major issues are about how much West Bank territory will still belong to Israel, compared to the “Green Line”, the 1949 Jordanian-Israeli armistice line. They feel that each time the construction derails from that plan into their territory they lose something that should be theirs. They also believe that the separator will become the de facto border between the two states. Many Palestinians believe in a one state solution and a border would make that impossible. Another still important issue is the effect on their daily life. The barrier often goes through middle of town separating one part from the other, thus going around to their farmland, school, or mosque becomes an arduous process. The Israeli Supreme Court in two cases sided with their claims and ordered the separator to change its route and consider their preferences. A final, but not

insignificant detail is about the secrecy of the project. Israel did not make available the specific line and timeline of building the barrier. This makes the Palestinians anxious as practically do not know when and where the next stage of the barrier will be built.

On a deeper level it is a conflict between two principles. For most Israelis there is nothing more important than the lives of its people. The Talmudic principle of taking a life is like killing a whole world is deeply engrained in them. On the other hand the deeply desperate Palestinians, with their limited options to fight for their goals developed a “culture of suicide” where taking one’s life is of high merit, particularly if it kills people on the other side. For Israel any chance of peace would require stopping of the attacks that in return would require changing this mentality. Otherwise there is no Palestinian leader who could guarantee the discontinuation of the attacks.

The other root issue is about territory. A minority of Israeli Jews are willing to sacrifice the above mentioned principle to retain the land that according to their Bible based belief belongs to them. On the other hand Palestinians also feel that this is their ancestral land, where they lived for hundreds of not thousands of years. Thus the problem is that the same land is claimed by two sets of people.

The main points of the positions are summarized in this table.

Israel wants	Palestinians want
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security (from suicide bombers) • Peace • Recognition for the right to exist as a country • Economic stability • Jerusalem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security (from Israeli army’s attacks) • Peace • Recognition for the right the to exist as a country • Legal, political, territorial independence • Sovereignty, self-governance • Right of return (and reparation of taken property) • Jerusalem

From the table above we can see that both sides want peace, security, stability, and their own country. The key to this lies in the third line of the table. If both sides acknowledged the right for the other to exist and is willing to work for it there is a chance that the separator issues can be solved too. This is a necessary first step. It includes Israel building the separator along a line that is the most acceptable for Palestinians. It also includes the Palestinians to accept it, at least as a temporary measure.

Israel in its rhetoric emphasizes that the barrier is temporary. However it is disrupting the lives of Palestinians right now. The two sides should provide specific timeline and sets of requirements about its dismantling. If these are in place the Palestinians might feel less walled in and more willing to work towards their own liberation by following the agreed upon steps to accomplish it. At the same time, Israel should make its plans more transparent and this way diffuse the anxiety it causes in the area where the barrier might run but has not been built yet. The two sides also need to work on a shared vision on how a to state solution would work with a less severe separation. Recognizing the beneficial nature of economic cooperation can help towards it.

In summary, as the separator is considered a temporary solution for one side and no-solution for the other, a plan for its end needs to be in place for the latter to accept it, at least temporarily. Guarantees are required for both sides for its territorial autonomy and security from the other side. In practical terms it means Palestinians have to stop suicide bombers (and the supporting culture behind them), and Israel has to give up the military support of Jewish settlers living in West Bank. In a future state of peace settlers would have a choice of attempting to live amongst Palestinians peacefully or move back to the territory of Israel. On the long run two peaceful nations with minimal security separating form each other is in the interest of the region. This is what they should work towards.

HOW TO WRITE A CONFLICT RESOLUTION PAPER

Follow each of these steps:

1. Identify the conflict -- it must be related to one of these six cases we discussed in class:

- 1- the control of Jerusalem and the division between Muslim/Jewish populations;
- 2- the issue of Jewish settlements on the West Bank and Gaza;
- 3- the barrier (a fence? a wall?) being constructed between Israel and the Palesetinian West Bank;
- 4- the India/Pakistan/Kashmiri dispute over the control of Kashmir;
- 5- the US - North Korea dispute over nuclear weapons and North Korean security;
- 6- the US embargo of Cuba.

2. Identify what are the two (ore three ore more) sides in the dispute

3. Provide a brief background to the dispute, indicating the major historical and contemporary political and social issues that should be considered in understanding the problem and resolving the conflict. You should refer to readings in the reader or sections of the textbook; you will also want to refer to readings or websites about the conflict that you have found on your own. Give a citation for these readings in a simple format, for example: (Juergensmeyer, Terror in the Mind of God, chapter 4); or (Website of the Palestinian Authority, www.pna.gov.ps)

4. Argue for each side of the dispute:

- 4a. Argue for one side, giving its best points
- 4b. Argue for the other side, giving its best points

5. Create a resolution to the conflict, using the best points of each side (and ignoring any part of either side's argument that appears to be self-serving or not conducive to a harmonious solution).

IF YOU ARE NOT CLEAR ABOUT THIS APPROACH TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION, REFER TO THE BOOK, "GANDHI'S WAY"