



THE 13<sup>TH</sup> EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
EUROPEAN INTEGRATION  
REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

## State-society Relations and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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**Abstract:** It has been argued that president Donald Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as the eternal capital of Israel lead to a complete freezing of an Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Judging by the internal dynamics of both actors, the prospects of an agreement, established on mutual agreed land swaps, have long been diminished. The theory of neoclassical realism, based on the frame structure by Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro and Steven Lobell, provides the mechanism for conceptualizing the factors influencing decisions on this subject. In such a complex regional environment, the external stimuli, translated through an intervening variable, has a causal effect on the dynamics of reconciliation. Thus, the range of domestic-level arrangements can interweave responses to systemic and sub-systemic pressure and have a significant impact on the strategic behavior of a decision factor. This study analyses the determinants of state-society relations, both in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, underlining the way they had conditioned domestic leaders' foreign policy options before and after Trump's decision. The paper aims to indicate which of these interactions have causal potential in order to include them inside an explanatory scheme that highlights the current freezing status of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

**Keywords:** Middle East; Israeli-Palestinian conflict; internal dynamics

### 1. Theoretical Frame Setup

Since the conclusion of the Oslo Accords (1993) and so far, the talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority have gradually evolved into a deadlock in the matter of conciliation. Often overshadowed by the current wars in the Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian case falls into a status of division that finds increasingly difficult the political perspectives of compromise and peace

The decision of US president, Donald Trump, to recognise Jerusalem as the eternal capital of Israel, though it was not considered "taking a position on any final status issues" (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2017), underlined, at most, the current status-quo where both sides have already given up the diplomatic opening for a gradual evolution in territorial concessions. The geographical area delimited by the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River is still disputed in order to satisfy national aspirations. The lack of dialogue between the two actors amplifies the divisions as time passes, "direct talks have not been organized since the failure of John Kerry's efforts in April 2014". (Black, 2016, p. 459)

Territorial control is seen as a connection with the aspirations of the two actors for stability. Hence the appreciation of the land, that theoreticians like Joshua S. Goldstein and Jon C. Pevehouse (2008) assert that "due to their association with the integrity of states, territories are cited much more than the economic or strategic value they have." (p. 240)

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In the model of neoclassical realism, causal components, such as the independent variable of relative power in the international system and the intermediate variable of constraints at the domestic level provide a true representation of foreign policy options. In the present study, however, the argumentation is formulated, in particular, on the basis of the internal motivations of foreign policy behavior, in the logic according to which “states are billiards, but each ball is made of a material different, affecting the speed, rotation and ricochet on the international plane”. (Zakaria, 1998, p. 14)

Applied to the Israeli-Palestinian level of analysis, although a better understanding of the causes on current peace efforts is possible, in particular, starting from the top of systemic and sub-systemic (regional) developments, the level of internal analysis is important for the purpose of understanding the arrangements and the current context that have direct implications on the diadic relationship. In the end this will lead to limited options on a possible peace process. In the same vein, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a constant issue within the two actors’ political landscape and an “establishment of an existential threat that is sufficiently important to have substantial political effects”. (Buzan, Weaver & de Wilde, 2011, p. 46).

This analysis identifies state-society relations, one of the main categories of the intervening variable instrument for a neoclassical realist and adapts the model to the Israeli-Palestinian landscape, in order to operationalize the manner in which this prism filters the signals from systemic and sub-systemic levels and to underline the nature of constraints on the ability of leaders to undertake strategic adjustments.

Moreover, it identifies the set of causes that unfold over a specific foreign policy behavior, establishing a link with the abandonment of a peace process as it had been configured once, under the parameters of the Oslo Accords.

The following arguments are based on the model proposed by Ripsman, Tagliaferro and Lobell, where domestic variables complete the causal chain of foreign policy adjustments and are seen as pathways to political significance.

## **2. State-Society Relations**

The interest of the academic world towards the Middle East is resumed, in particular, by the theoretical challenges that this geographical space has in terms of explaining phenomena. Numerous times, an appeal to the past is revealed to decipher the current and future elements. In a context of historical disorder, the Middle East is dominated by transnational and international military interventions, seemingly irreconcilable identity confrontations, humanitarian crisis, and escalations of Islamic fundamentalism, whereas the Israeli-Palestinian conflict dimension is becoming more and more difficult to include inside a peace frame. In this regional dynamis, the state is not the only foreign policy actor.

According to Ripsman, Tagliaferro and Lobell, a neoclassical realist views the state, mainly, from the perspective of formulating a foreign policy decision, after the internal filter captures the systemic incentives in order to emphasis the role of decision-makers in terms of security strategy. The three researchers are criticizing the lack of inclusion of cases where there is no feature of the so-called well-defined territory of a state according to Max Webber’s view (1992) and highlights this matter by using a formula where the monopoly over the legitimacy of coercive force is disputed. Although under an umbrella of fragmentation and leadership split, the Palestinian entity can be summed up at least referring to one group of persons charged with such duties in the field of foreign policy. The theory of

neoclassical realism built by Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell provides the tools necessary to resolve this dilemma by avoiding the state's reliance on the exercise of sovereignty and by an evolution that is not limited to the domination of the state as the only reference object or actor of international relations. It is not the only theory that starts from this premise. Also, despite the erosion of legitimacy and institutional problems, according to Buzan, Weaver and de Wilde, practice shows that states are not nowadays primarily pursuing the national model and a number of entities with claims to statehood play increased roles at a primary level, which is why there is the motivation to accept them as autonomous units.

Both Israeli and Palestinian societies have a long history of mutual ostilities and lack of trust when it comes to the negotiation space. This asymmetrical relationship translates into limited possibilities of identifying a path for bilateral talks to address the belligerent beliefs.

When focusing on state-society relations, the driving factor is related to the power of national leaders to extract and mobilize resources in order to pursue a specific foreign affairs agenda. Public support for the state plays a role of guarantor of internal political survival as a mediation source between state institutions and society. The state bases its legitimacy through the interaction with the citizens, and the prosperity of society can also be translated into an extended state's interest in formulating internal and external policies. Dynamics of coalition politics in the state, nature of civil-military relations capture faithful representations of internal affairs that impact preferred foreign policy goals as Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell underline.

In order to advance a peace process, leaders and governments seek legitimacy and political support and the process itself is shaped by a link that reflects the relationships between the conflicting societies. Legitimacy is decisive for leaders engaged in a peace process, both in the initial stages and in the eventuality of signed agreement.

In this particular case, whereas the Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, is dependent on the political configuration of the ruling coalition, on the other side, Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Palestinian Authority, lacks institutional autonomy in pursuing a foreign affairs agenda, mainly due to the failures of the reconciliation agreements with fierce rivals, Hamas, in his attempt to act as a single voice when seeking negotiations with the Israeli counterpart. Thus, the ability to resist domestic challenges, the constraints of coalition partners on one side and lack of control of armed wings and terrorist organisations, on the other side, poses significant obstacles to a peace initiative between the two actors.

### **3. Dynamics of Coalition Politics in Israel**

Referring to the dynamics of parliamentary arrangements in a particular state, Ripsman, Tagliaferro and Lobell argue that a leader who is drawn from that specific political coalition is subject to constraints that can often lead to the inability of enacting policies that diverge from the general preferences of the coalition. Governmental coalitions in Israel are inherently unstable and incapable of surviving grand strategies of peace projects. The electoral threshold for entry into the Knesset is 3.25 percent of the votes, resulting in a system that allows the political representation of a significant number of segments. Thus, from a hypothetical perspective, the possibility of concessions during a peace process is subject to be ensured by the support of the political coalition with a causal mechanism in which small parties exercise a disproportionate influence.

The current ruling coalition, updated in 2016 under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu, includes all right-wing, nationalist and ultra-orthodox parties (Likud, HaBayit HaYehudi, Kulanu, Shas, Jewish Torah and Yisrael Beiteinu). This dynamic is often reinforced by the fact that Benjamin Netanyahu's political survival is in a relationship of dependence on this configuration, which often constrains him to adopt an agenda based on a nationalist and religious ideology. An example of dependency in this regard is played by the ultra-Orthodox formation HaBayit HaYehudi, led by the current Education Minister and member of the Israeli security cabinet, Naftali Bennet. The minimum number of mandates required to strengthen a parliamentary majority is 61, the current majority has 67 seats, while the HaBayit HaYehudi party has 8 seats in the Knesset, enough for a possible withdrawal that automatically leads to the loss of the majority, what Giovanni Sartori (2005) defines as "a party may be small, but it can be strong and with a great deal of negotiation potential in a coalition."

The agenda of the Israeli prime minister and his ruling coalition is, therefore, determined by the survival of the State of Israel in a war-dominated climate and actions to counter Iran in the region and to limit its expansion through Syria, following the ongoing civil war and the change in the balance of power in the Middle East.

The Palestinian file is among the top-level issues that determine the position of a party in Israel, and as a party turns to the right of the political scene and then the emphasis is on a consolidated component, rather than resolving this conflict, because "right-wing parties oppose land abandonment to the Palestinians as a means of ending the conflict."<sup>1</sup> (Schwartz, 2015, p. 3)

An analysis published by Ahren in the Times of Israel (2015, March 17) before the Israeli general election, emphasizes that there is a wide range of views on solving the Palestinian problem. Parties such as the Zionist Union, Joint (Arab) List, Yesh Atid, Kulanu and Meretz, left-wing, center-left are relying on the two state solution, either through direct negotiations or under regional or international patronage, whether or not maintaining Israeli colonies in the future configuration, while right-wing, nationalist and ultra-orthodox political formations - Likud, Shas, HaBayit HaYehudi, Yisrael Beytenu, United Torah Judaism and Yahad are more skeptical, viewing the way the conflict could be settled from a two-state solution perspective with borders redefinition led by Israel, to denouncing any bilateral negotiations or even the full annexation of the West Bank.

Former US Secretary of State, John Kerry, in his 2014 final remarks report, denounced the government's view as flagrantly contradictory to the idea of a peace process, indicating the existence of a risk for the future conciliation prospects, generated especially by the adoption of the right-wing agenda of the movement that supports the construction of Israeli colonies:

"we have to be clear about what is happening in the West Bank. The Israeli prime minister publicly supports a two- state solution. But his current coalition is the most right-wing in Israel history with an agenda driven by the most extreme elements. The result is that policies of this government, which the prime minister himself just described, as more committed to settlements than any in Israel's history are leading in the opposite direction." (U.S. Department of State, 2016, December 28)

One day before the elections, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in an attempt to reduce difference in polls announced that a Palestinian state will not be created during his future mandate, marking his first public statement of desconsidering any territorial concessions with the Palestinian side.

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<sup>1</sup> Eytan Schwartz, Elections in Israel. Is Change Possible?, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, martie 2015, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/11245-20150317.pdf>, consultat ultima dată la 3 martie 2018;

Over the 3 years since the general election in Israel (2015) was held, there has been no coordination and coherence in obtaining public support through legislative proposals or conducting direct negotiations with the Palestinian side. On the contrary, a series of legislative acts, mainly initiatives of nationalist and ultra-Orthodox parties, complementary to public statements, inflicted additional causes for the freezing status of the peace process.

HaBayit HaYehudi initiated a law stipulating the impossibility of splitting Jerusalem without a vote of the Israeli Knesset consisting at least two-thirds in favor of such a move, a bill which was later adopted. At the same time, the law includes stipulations that would allow future changes to Jerusalem's municipal borders, including the placement of Palestinian neighborhoods within separate municipal authorities. Thus, one of the most sensitive points of the Israeli-Palestinian case, the division of Jerusalem, disputed capital by both sides, is placed under the umbrella of a veto actor, the Israeli parliament, which can only allow concessions on this subject in the event of a qualified majority of parliamentarians to support such an initiative. Hamas's reaction to the law in question was to declare the United States out of any peace process, and the Oslo Agreements dead, whereas Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of the Palestinian Authority, considered it was a declaration of war.

During Netanyahu's rule, the State of Israel did not have a clear position on freezing or eliminating colonies built in the West Bank, but instead strengthened its control over territories by extending settlements. Such an approach contributes to the impossibility of creating a viable Palestinian state as shown in numerous reports of the United Nations Human Rights Council and mainly between 1<sup>st</sup> of November 2017 – 31 of December 2017.

“The Israeli settlement enterprise continued unabated in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, with significant new developments. Settlement expansion accelerated, doubling the settlement housing advancement in Area C and East Jerusalem when compared with the previous reporting period, despite a slowdown in the commencement of new construction. The Government of Israel declared that establishing settlements in the West Bank was a natural right of Israeli citizens.” (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2018, March 6)

If prim minister Benjamin Netanyahu continues to be constrained by the nationalist and ultra-orthodox elements of his governing coalition, then it can be said that these assignments, for reasons of maintaining power, might translate into limitations on peace options with the Palestinians, in his capacity as prime minister and foreign minister. In the theory of neoclassical realism, this type of behavior falls within a limited capacity to extract resources for an external policy oriented towards, in our case, the definition of a viable peace process, and adds additional constraints that close return options when going through the stages initiated with the Agreements at Oslo.

#### **4. Nature of Civil-Military Relations in the Palestinian Territories**

Over time, the splitting of the Palestinian political arena has significantly limited the Israeli actor's confidence in the possibility of formulating and implementing a conflict resolution. Over ten years of internal conflict also involved the creation of two parallel administrations and two security apparatuses. Thus, foreign policy decisions of the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, must invariably take account of internal constraints and as Randall Schweller (2006) suggests - vulnerable leaders, in such a context must “take into account the internal costs attached to policy options.”

The absence of unitary leadership structures led to repeated wars in the Gaza Strip, as well as to the recurrence of Palestinian terrorism, manifested by attacks on Israeli militaries and civilians in the West Bank and Jerusalem.

The current developments are concentrated on a peace process inside another one, which consists of efforts to reconcile the two dominant parties – Fatah and Hamas. One of the main obstacles in the quest for a Palestinian unitary agenda is the impossibility of controlling the armed wings in the Gaza Strip. The motivation of civil control lies in the possibility to subordinate the security of national interests, to defend the society and not to define it.

Instead, the Palestinian Territories are dominated by political parties that rely on the contribution of a military wing, the so-called non-statutory security forces.

Of these, the most important power cap is the Brigade of Izz al-Din al-Qassam, initially built as a paramilitary force, and later in a military unit, after Hamas agreed to form the government in Gaza in 2007 and accepted a technocrat's executive with Fatah in 2014. The importance of Hamas' military wing as an obstacle to peace resides in the fact that every conciliation agreement between the ruling party in Gaza and Fatah always skipped the provision of a civil control.

Even apart from the negotiations with Fatah, although there is a distinction between Hamas's political and military activities, it is not possible to establish a clear control mechanism for the military wing, as all elements of the Islamist movement contribute to the resistance activities, according to the Charter (2017, Mai 1) which stipulates that “armed resistance is considered as the strategic choice to protect the principles and rights of the Palestinian people.” Indeed, the very nature of the relationship within a single organism indicates a dynamic of balancing, as an analysis of The Washington Institute Whiteabout indicates that “the movement must manage pressure for military action from within, and the outcomes of these pressures can influence the dynamics of power within the group.” (White, 2011, January 4).

The national unity government that was formed in 2014 encountered resistance from Hamas's armed wing that did not accept assignments on the change of status quo in internal dynamics. The demilitarization of the Gaza Strip was the main condition set by the government led by Benjamin Netanyahu to resume peace negotiations in the format enshrined in the Oslo Accords. The 2014 agreement focused on the administrative side, but the issue of using violence was not included in the final configuration of the negotiations. Moreover, the continuation of terrorist attacks, Israeli abductions and the promotion of violence led to a war with Israel in the Gaza Strip and the erosion of the 2014 agreement. The kidnapping of the three teenagers in the West Bank by the Hamas military wing, recognized by Saleh-Arouri according to Crawford (2014, August 21), one of the co-founders of the armed movement (who in the meantime became deputy at the political office of the organization) at a conference of the World Association of Muslim Researchers, helped escalate the tensions that led to Operation Protective Edge, a war that opposed the Hamas military wing and the Israeli IDF army.

The latest reconciliation and formation agreements of a Fatah-Hamas national unity government have not found a common denominator regarding the control or disarmament of the military wing Izz al-Din al-Qassam, a subject that is disqualified from the conditions assumed through the Oslo frame, where the two actors undertook to “act immediately and effectively in accordance with this agreement against acts or threats of terrorism, violence or incitement, whether committed by Palestinians or Israelis.” (Israeli Palestinian Interim Agreement, 1995).

Still, during the current reconciliation process which was agreed upon in October 2017, Hamas refused to disarm. President Donald Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's eternal capital

highlighted, once again, the split between the two organizations. Whereas Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyeh encouraged a violent mobilization, president Abbas condemned the decision, but did not change its peaceful approach and security coordination with Israel.

According to Harel (2018, April 1), after the failed assassination attempt against PA Prime Minister, Rami Hamdallah, an action took place Gaza before an official meeting, it was clear that the reconciliation process was over, and that Hamas is not a serious partner when it comes to renounce violence.

The lack of real control over Hamas's military wing denotes a perpetual conflict and a strategy centered on terrorist violence in particular, which can be placed outside the Declaration of Principles signed between the Israeli Government and the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1993 and can contribute to a continuous social fragmentation and government vulnerability.

## **5. Conclusions**

The public statements and decisions of the current Israeli ruling coalition and the Palestinian leadership are also following the backdrop of historical mistrust in the two states solution. The latest Israeli-Palestinian joint poll in December 2017 found that only 46% of Israelis and the Palestinians now support the two-state solution, a historical fall below the 50% threshold, indicating a retreat from the framework that the international community has sought to implement over the last quarter of a century (Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 2018, January 25).

In the dynamics of state-society relations one can see a consistent support for the way Israeli society relates to the conflict with the Palestinians, resulting in a high degree of harmony with foreign policy decisions on this subject, in a mechanism that Randal Schweller puts it in the ideal scheme where the consensus at the level of the elites is complemented by social cohesion. Instead, on the same basis of Randal Schweller's schemas, the declining legitimacy of the Palestinian leaders in both territories (the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) indicates a form of vulnerable government to which a fragmented society adds, and thus, in the absence of real mobilization of resources for a peace process with the State of Israel, a strategy of unbalancing is most probable to pursue.

Absorbing the external stimuli through nationalist and ultra-Orthodox elements of the governing coalition in the State of Israel, it is highly possible that this could lead to serious constraints for prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's willingness to advance talks with the Palestinian side on reconciliation. This detachment from solving the Palestinian dossier has a number of explanations that emanate from reasons of internal balance of power. The ruling coalition's bill approval on sensitive matters isolate the field of options to a dialogue with the Palestinians and removes, from the negotiating space, a series of important milestones left alongside the Oslo Accords, such as negotiating the status of Jerusalem.

In the case of the Palestinians, however, the vast autonomy of the military wings inside the Gaza Strip and the consecutive failures in seizing a Fatah-Hamas agreement that could lead at least to some sort of control of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades makes the administrative segment of the settlement insufficient for restarting a dialogue with the Israeli counterparts.

Thus, one of the most important categories of the neoclassical realism intervening variable – the state-society relations – emphasizes a series of behaviors of high empirical value that leads to a lack of perspective for an Israeli-Palestinian peace process on the basis of past agreements initiated once with the Oslo Accords.

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