How do Arab and Jewish opinions differ on Zionism, to what extent, and what are the origins of these differences?

Occupation, security fence, West Bank settlements, Kasam rockets, and suicide bombings; when someone thinks of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the state of Israel as a whole these are just some of the thoughts that come to mind. There is no doubt that this issue stirs strong emotions in many, but why is this? Does it come about only because of knowledge about the conflict, or are there more complicated roots to these opinions? Also, will Jewish people identify more strongly with the Israelis because of their common religion and culture? Likewise, will Arab people identify more strongly with Palestinians because the vast majority shares a common religion and culture? These are the questions that I sought out to answer when interviewing students here at the U of I.

Zionism is defined as the following by Merriam Webster's online dictionary. “An international movement originally for the establishment of a Jewish national or religious community in Palestine and later for the support of modern Israel.” Essentially it is promotion of the modern state of Israel. I hypothesized that because of their strong connection to Israelis, Jewish people will strongly support the state of Israel while Arabs will not due to their strong connection to Palestinians. It would be foolish however to believe that the opinions of these subjects would be so simply categorized when one considers the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I believe that the reasons for these beliefs on both sides will not be based solely on facts, but rather because of the personal connection they feel towards the region and the people that inhabit it.

Recently, on Israeli Independence Day there was a celebration organized by the Illini Hillel on the Quad during the day. There was music, falafel, and some socializing. No more than
twenty feet away there was a group of about 20 Arab students at a time who were protesting this celebration through signs and chants displaying their clear dismay at current policies of Israel. Students would chant, “End the Occupation” and “Free Palestine.” Many Jewish students were clearly unsettled that other students were demonstrating against the country for which they share a strong connection. These Jewish students chanted back, “Free Falafel” trying to diminish the other student’s chants. When one walked through the middle of these two groups one could clearly sense the tension that existed. This further proves how much passion each of these groups invests in the support of Israel and Palestine respectively.

I decided to approach some of the individuals on the pro-Palestinian side and try to set up some interviews. After explaining my project to some of the individuals they immediately had problems with my hypothesis. They vehemently denied that their Arab origin had anything to do with their political beliefs and that the issue of Israel and Palestine was purely a political issue and not an Arab and Jewish issue. Although these individuals declined an interview, the sentiment they expressed is a very important one. It suggests that many in this group probably felt as though their origins did not have an affect on how they felt about the issue, but rather their carefully formulated political opinions governed how they felt about it. The question remains however, is it naive to believe that one’s personal connections do not in any way affect one’s political opinion?

Attending a couple of events at the Cohen Center for Jewish Life has also helped to shed some light on the opinions of some Jews who have gained very interesting perspectives on the conflict. The first of these was a sergeant in the Israeli Defense Force who shared stories about his experiences and gave his perspective on the conflict as a soldier. In several parts of this presentation the sergeant let the audience see how passionate he was about the subject. The
most striking of these moments was when an audience member started speaking about being a descendent of a Holocaust survivor, and then went on to criticize the speaker about some of the points he made during his speech. The sergeant immediately challenged the student for trying to use his Jewish background as a justification for disagreeing with him. He went on to say that his Jewish background should not have anything to do with how he felt about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and that he should use facts to justify his points. To his credit, the sergeant addressed all of the issues the questioner raised that tried to invalidate the points he made during his speech. He attempted to use factually based arguments, although some were through his perspective as an Israeli soldier. A good example of this came when he talked about the Ghaza crisis of 2009. When a student questioned how he could justify over 1,000 Palestinians civilian casualties with the majority of them being women and children, he cited the fact that in all other major military operations that involved Arab enemy combatants the civilian casualties were exponentially higher with similar percentages in terms of the casualties of women and children. Rather than trying to use an argument that would try to use his culture or heritage to justify the Israeli response, he used facts and compared this situation to other military operations around the world. However, he shared the same sentiment as the Arab students whom I spoke with on the quad. Religious or racial identification of someone should not be a basis for one’s beliefs on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The sergeant did not go so far as to say that the conflict was purely a political one, although he also did not refute this point. This vagueness could express a personal uncertainty that may be shared by others who are also trying to evaluate this difficult situation.

My pool of interviewees consisted of two subjects who are students at the University of Illinois, and both of who are international students. The following subjects are students from the
U of I and follow the IRB protocol when it comes to interviewing subjects. Also, these interviews and the entire paper is an EUI project.

Omar is from the eastern part of Saudia Arabia, from Dammam. He says it is a big city, with one of the larger oil companies in the country located there. Omar came to the states for an intensive English program so that he can study here for the next four years. However, he stressed that he wants to immerse himself in the culture as much as possible because he wants to learn about the people as well as the language.

We talked a little bit about his life growing up in Saudi Arabia. He tries to keep up to date with the news by reading and watching from several sources including the New York Times, Al Jazeera, CNN, and Aralriyadh (his favorite Saudi based paper). When talking about the biases he sees in the news he recognizes that many sources contain biases and promote agendas, but he doesn’t necessarily blame these sources. “There are many organizations that try to shape opinions through biases in their reports,” he said, “but it would be ridiculous to believe everything you see. You need to use your own rational mind in order to evaluate the news and form your own opinions.” Although it seems like a fairly obvious sentiment, it is still a very important one.

Along the same lines, when we discussed his high school history lessons he felt as though they usually just talked about facts and not opinions or judgments. He went on to explain that the lessons never seemed to analyze particular events and evaluate if these events were just. This seemed to be quite a departure from the education I received in high school where injustices in historical events were often questioned, debated, and discussed in the classroom.

After we went over this background information, we started to talk about the Israeli-
Palestinian conflict. He seemed a little bit uncomfortable to talk to me about the subject, although he remained direct and straightforward in all of our subsequent discussions about the conflict. The first question I posed to him concerned the original establishment of the state of Israel and if it was justified. He said there was no point in looking back on the past and thinking about what should have happened or not happened, but rather to look to find a solution to the conflict at hand. He emphasized the fact that the Israeli government and the Palestinian authority need to try for peace.

It was clear Omar did not want to come out and identify with a side, but not because he was uncomfortable about doing so. Rather, it seemed he would rather talk about the peace agreements that have so long eluded that region of the world.

We next discussed the United States and what role they should be playing in the conflict and if he believes that the US shows considerable favor towards one side. Omar had a very interesting take on this point. He did not believe that the US showed considerable favor towards one side or the other but rather that one side of its support receives more attention from the media. Considering the fact that there is usually a general perception that the US provides more support for Israel than might be desirable. It was very interesting to find someone who had such an open perspective. Along the same lines Omar expressed several strong opinions about what role the US needs to take in facilitating peace between Israel and Palestine. “As one of the most powerful countries in the world, there is a responsibility to speed up peace agreements,” said Omar. He goes on to say that this should be a priority because it is the source of many other problems that exist in the region and other problems could be solved indirectly.

When I mentioned the Israeli response to Kasam rockets being fired from Ghaza, Omar immediately seemed a bit uncomfortable about answering. He believed that the Israeli response
to the Kasam rocket firings was more aggressive than it should have been. He saw it as a counterproductive measure in the peace process and used the following analogy to express how he felt about the response. “If I take five dollars from you, then you should take five dollars back from me, not ten or twenty.”

When we spoke about Jerusalem and in which state it should reside in any peace solution Omar seemed very unsure about how to answer. He clearly believes both sides should have access to the city but his hesitation in this response is an answer itself. This is because both Muslims and Jews have very strong religious ties to the city but a sharing of the city would create greater tension between the two groups.

Throughout the entire interview Omar avoided siding specifically with Israel or Palestine, so I asked him directly which side of the line he falls on. He said that his Muslim identity lent him to side with the Palestinians. A sharing of language, religion, and culture makes him feel a strong personal connection to the Palestinian people. He said, “politics come and go and change all the time, it is not permanent like cultural connections are.”

Culturally, Omar pointed out, Israel and Palestine tend to be very different from one another because Palestinians lend themselves to more of a Middle Eastern culture while Israel tends to see itself as a “westernized nation.” Omar pointed out that among these cultures he believes that everyone just wants peace. However, he also said that sometimes-political leadership looks past the best interest of its people and uses positions of power for their own selfish gain. This, he believes is currently the biggest barrier to peace.

At the end of our talk, I asked Omar if there was anything he wished to add to his already very detailed thoughts. Though it doesn’t hold a huge meaning in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Omar felt it important to make the point that simply because some Muslim extremists
are terrorists, it does not mean Muslims as a group are terrorists. Though this is widely known, our culture still perpetuates many negative Muslim stereotypes and Islamophobia. There was a distinct frustrated tone of voice when Omar spoke about this Islamophobia. He finished by asking very simply to be treated fairly and as an individual, not based on the actions of others; a very reasonable request.

Moshe

An Israeli citizen, here for a graduate program, Moshe has been in the thick of the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Growing up, he saw the peace process rapidly moving forward in his teenage years with Yitzhak Rabin leading the way. “They were hopeful times,” said Moshe. However, there were people on both sides who were not ready to move forward with Hamas and other terrorist groups pushing suicide bombings and violent protest. This culminated in the assassination of Rabin in 1995 when Moshe believes the peace process came to a screeching halt. He now believes that there has been negative progress since the second intafada and today, “there is an understanding of the status quo that isn’t useful to either side.” He went on to say that he believes both sides are waiting for a change in leadership.

We next discussed Moshe’s time in the army, as is mandatory for all Israeli citizens. His main duty during was to protect Israeli settlements in the Ghaza strip and during this time he gained a breadth of knowledge about the Palestinian people. He experienced first hand the kindness of the Palestinian people who were, “nice, warm people, just living their daily lives like anyone else.” There were also situations that arose in which there were attacks on the settlements and he was forced to defend himself. These two contrasting characteristics allowed Moshe to, “understand the population better and the challenges faced with terrorist organizations.”
“The United States supports Israel because they share common values,” said Moshe. He believes they are both westernized, democratic countries with long histories of receiving immigrants, talking about pluralism, and forming communities through immigration. Furthermore, he cited the fact that they share a symbiotic relationship with one another benefiting from technologic and military improvements from both parties.

When I asked Moshe about the situation in Ghaza in 2009, he responded by saying, “That’s a very neutral question.” Though he said it tongue in cheek, it still shows his discomfort at talking about this subject. He went on to explain why he believed the Israeli response was completely justified. “Israel has been enduring eight years of kasam rocket firings, with thousands of missiles shot that do not distinguish between civilians and military personnel,” Moshe began. He went on to say that the IDF’s (Israeli Defense Force) job was to fight military combatants and in the densely populated area of Ghaza, there were unintentional civilian casualties. He then stated why he believed the civilian death count was slightly inflated. “If an Israeli shoots a terrorist, his gun can be taken and because he does not have a specific uniform, he can be counted as a civilian.” He expressed frustration at the fact the much of the time these events were displayed in the media; it was portrayed as Israel intentionally harming civilians. Then, Moshe gave a lengthy explanation to demonstrate the lengths that the IDF goes through to limit civilian casualties. “If a Hamas combatant is combating the IDF and is holding a Molotov bottle, an officer from the IDF needs to decide if it is ok to fire against the person. The office has to decide if the person is standing close enough to throw and hit the soldiers.” He went on to discuss that all of this only occurs in a time period of a couple seconds and other safety measures. “If he has thrown the bottle, the soldiers aren’t allowed to shoot the combatant because he is no longer a threat. This is the extent to which Israeli soldiers are trying to
maintain moral values while fighting terror.” When talking about how he felt the international media portrayed these events he was visibly a little annoyed by it. He cited the fact that these procedures did not appear in the news since no one really knew about them.

“I sure hope so,” was Moshe’s response when asked if he thought a two-state solution was possible. His optimism for how soon this would happen was very limited however. He did not believe that there would be much progress in the next couple of years citing the fact that leadership change needs to occur. There are people on both sides who are not ready for change according to Moshe. “Some Palestinian extremists need to know that Israel is here to stay and some extremists in Israel need to understand that Israel is a democratic, Jewish country.”

Going along with the two-state solution, we then discussed what should happen to Israeli settlements if a two-state solution is indeed reached. He believes it would be impossible to clear the larger settlements citing the difficulties faced when large settlements were removed from Ghaza in 2005. Instead, an exchange of territory could occur with some land in the Negev or with a road that connects the West Bank and Ghaza. There were a couple of locations that Moshe thought would never be negotiated upon, mainly Jerusalem and the Golan Heights.

When asked what he could say to those who believe the security fence should have never happened he retorted, “suicide bombings should have never happened.” This outburst of anger was Moshe’s first and only one, but showed his loyalty and passion for Israel. He cited the fact that from 2001-2004 there were more than 1000 civilians killed and wounded from suicide bombers and after the security fence was erected casualties decreased by 99% and suicide bombings by 96% (according to the Israel Ministry of Foreign affairs suicide bombing casualties have decreased by 92% when comparing the years 2001-2004 and 2005 to today). “Even though there was suffering in Palestinian territory, losing land isn’t as important as losing life,”
said Moshe. He believes that in order to remove the fence, a new process of trust building must begin.

When asked if there was anything else he would like to add, he immediately started talking about the cultures of Israel and Palestine. He believes Israel’s partially westernized culture and the Palestinian one that is a “more honor based system,” have clashed. However, he also believes that because of past success in negotiating for peace with Jordan and Egypt, the same can be done with the Palestinians. The most important thing is to agree on a common set of values and make sure that the leadership on both sides understands one another.

Having observed several events and sitting down with a couple of individuals on both sides of this debate, what can be concluded? Though everyone whom I talked to based their opinions on logical arguments, there always seemed to be deep seated allegiances that swayed their opinion to a particular side. In Omar’s case, he even came out and said that the main reason for his loyalty to the Palestinian side was the cultural and religious connection he had. Though the others whom I observed and interviewed did not come out and say this, it was clear through their use of language and demeanor that they felt the same, even if they did not admit it to themselves.

More important than these barriers that seem to exist were the bridges that appeared when talking to Omar and Moshe. Though they both staunchly support separate sides they both cited similar reasons as to why progress is not being made and how progress can be made. Neither believed current leadership was doing enough to further the peace process. Furthermore, they both believe that the key to each side understanding one another is to bridge the cultural gap that exists between the two sides and find common values that already exist between both peoples. The fact that two individuals who support opposite sides believe in very
similar ideas when it comes to how peace can be reached is encouraging.

There were some key disagreements between the two interviewees however that could make it difficult to create a lasting solution to the conflict. The city of Jerusalem in particular, seemed to show the stark contrast between Omar and Moshe. Omar believed that both Israel and Palestine should have easy access to the city of Jerusalem in a two-state solution. While many Muslims reside in East Jerusalem, and the “Old City” includes Muslim Holy sites, the complexities of the relationship between these two states would make it exceedingly difficult to fully share control and access. Moshe believed that Jerusalem would never be on the bargaining table as a piece of land and that it would always be a part of Israel.

Looking at the similarities in how both believe peace can be achieved and the stark contrasts in their views on Jerusalem one can see just how complex the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is, and why there have been so many difficulties when trying to achieve peace. This proves how set people are in their beliefs on both sides of the conflict are and how difficult it is to bridge these gaps. The good news is that most people are willing to try to bridge these gaps; they just seem to be unsure how. This is where the lack of leadership enters. Both Omar and Moshe believe that peace can be reached and they are both ready and willing to do so as it seems to be the case with many others as well. According to Omar and Moshe there is a general lack of strong leadership however, which prompts many difficulties when there are large groups of people ready to do something and there is no one to lead them there.
Works Cited

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