

Greek Tragedy Theory:  
Understanding the Israel-Palestine Conflict

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*The dynamic of violence, revenge and all other forms of dehumanisation seem to have taken hold as both Palestinians and Israelis are locked in a fatal embrace that promises to plunge both peoples into the abyss.<sup>1</sup>*

The Israel-Palestinian conflict is an incredibly complex issue, with history, religion, pain and hate surrounding and embedded in it. Israel-Palestine is a country located in the Middle East, on the Mediterranean Sea. It is a land that has holy sites for three major faith groups, Jewish, Muslim and Christian.<sup>2</sup> As a result of this, much of the region has been embroiled in conflict for thousands of years. This has produced a lot of pain in the region, as well as attempts to resolve it. The modern iteration of this conflict can be seen to have begun at the UN partition in 1947.<sup>3</sup> The current conflict is between two main groups, the Jewish who control Israel as a religious state, and the Palestinians, an Arab group who primarily occupy and control the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, though also make up a significant minority within Israel.<sup>4</sup> This conflict has produced many theories, ways of understanding the conflict, and proposed peace solutions. This paper will argue that the Greek Tragedy Theory is the best theory to understand the Israel-Palestine conflict as it is cognizant of the painful history in the area, it recognizes the limited desire for negotiations, and understand the continued pain, and with this theory, new methods of peacebuilding can be proposed.

This paper will begin with an overview of what The Greek Tragedy Theory argues. This theory believes that the Israel-Palestine conflict is complex and that blame for it does not lie with

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<sup>1</sup> Hanan Ashrawi, "Challenging Questions (Middle East Politics)," *Catholic New Times* 26, no. 8 (2002): [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A30343919/CPI?u=ocul\\_thomas&sid=bookmark-CPI&xid=cc185ceb](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A30343919/CPI?u=ocul_thomas&sid=bookmark-CPI&xid=cc185ceb).

<sup>2</sup> Philip, Giurlando, "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Module 6," (Lecture, POST 2230Y, Trent University February 16th 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Raja Shehadeh, "In Pursuit of My Ottoman Uncle: Reimagining the Middle East Region as One," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 4 (2011): 86, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2011.XL.4.82>

<sup>4</sup> Dov Waxman, "Israel's Palestinian Minority in the Two-State Solution: The Missing Dimension," *Middle East Policy*, 18 (2011): 68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2011.00511.x>

one party or the other.<sup>5</sup> Instead, both parties are victims, and have been harmed.<sup>6</sup> It views this conflict as a nationalistic one, due to the importance of national self-determination and the centrality of the debate over who should control and lead the area.<sup>7</sup> It argues that there has been no resolution to this conflict as there is no easy or obvious solution to be found.<sup>8</sup> This theory can help to understand why this conflict is complicated, and why there has not been a successful peace deal. The Greek Tragedy Theory is convincing for three reasons; it is cognizant of the deep and painful history in the region, it understands the limited desire for negotiations, and it recognizes the continued pain that is directed at both groups.

The first reason why this theory is convincing is that it recognizes the painful history in the region. The Greek Tragedy Theory argues that a deep history in the region and a sense of geographical importance impact the conflict.<sup>9</sup> This is convincing because it aligns with the historical narratives created by both communities. The Israelites argue that the land has been theirs since 3500 years before Palestine existed.<sup>10</sup> The Palestinians argue that they have an ancient history, claiming that they have existed as a distinct society since before the Mamluk state collapsed in the 16th century.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, there is a lot of meaning attributed to the geographical location of the country. Jerusalem is a historically important city that contains major holy sites for Muslims, Jewish people, and Christians.<sup>12</sup> This makes the city very emotionally and historically charged and gives the inhabitants a feeling of importance.<sup>13</sup> This

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<sup>5</sup> Giurlando, "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Module 6."

<sup>6</sup> Giurlando, "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Module 6."

<sup>7</sup> Giurlando, "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Module 6."

<sup>8</sup> Giurlando, "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Module 6."

<sup>9</sup> Giurlando, "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Module 6."

<sup>10</sup> Yair Mazor, "A Tale of Two Nations: the Deadly Road from the Holocaust to Israel/Palestina," *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 13 (2004): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1949-3606.2004.tb00847.x>.

<sup>11</sup> Haim Gerber, "Zionism, Orientalism, and the Palestinians," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33, no. 1 (2003): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2003.33.1.23>.

<sup>12</sup> Gerber, "Zionism, Orientalism, and the Palestinians," 26.

<sup>13</sup> Gerber, "Zionism, Orientalism, and the Palestinians," 27.

deep, distinct and geographically important history makes negotiations very difficult, as there is a lot of generational pain and religious significance which makes rational discussions challenging. The Greek Tragedy Theory recognizes the importance to both communities, and presents a better way to understand the conflict, the hurt, and how to negotiate more effectively.

The second reason why this theory is effective is that it explains why there is little motivation for negotiations. The Greek Tragedy Theory recognizes that there is no easy or obvious solution to this conflict.<sup>14</sup> This is primarily due to the unwillingness of parties to negotiate or compromise in negotiations as well as the lack of strong leadership. This is convincing because it aligns with many of the fears and issues within both communities. The first reason why the Jewish community is unwilling to make concessions is that they fear the Arab demographic growth.<sup>15</sup> The Jewish population is growing more slowly, so in an open democracy, they would soon lose power. Thus, there is an unwillingness to open democracy to more Arabs. The second reason is that the Jewish community is unwilling to offer more concessions, as they believe that they have offered enough.<sup>16</sup> Convincing their leaders to give more will be increasingly challenging. Finally, there is a Jewish reluctance to compromise on the religious character of the state.<sup>17</sup> However, many Palestinians believe that they will never be able to gain equality while Israel is a Jewish state.<sup>18</sup> It is also difficult to negotiate with the Palestinian community because they have a divided national movement and lack strong leadership, so finding a person to negotiate on behalf of the whole community is difficult.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, there

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<sup>14</sup> Giurlando, "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Module 6."

<sup>15</sup> Hussein Abu el Naml, "Population Growth and Demographic Balance Between Arabs and Jews in Israel and Historic Palestine," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 3, no. 1 (2010): 71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17550910903488490>.

<sup>16</sup> Bassma Kodmani, "Peace in the Middle East: The Dangers of Delay," *Politique étrangère*, 5, (2008): 127, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-politique-etrangere-2008-5-page-123.htm?contenu=citepar>.

<sup>17</sup> Kodmani, "Peace in the Middle East: The Dangers of Delay," 127.

<sup>18</sup> Waxman, "Israel's Palestinian Minority in the Two-State Solution: The Missing Dimension," 70.

<sup>19</sup> Graham Usher, "Letter from the UN: After the U.S. Veto on Settlements," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 3 (2011): 82, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2011.XL.3.74>.

are Palestinians within Israel that Arab leaders would have to represent, as well as Palestinians living in defined areas.<sup>20</sup> This expanse of needs and lack of cohesion makes it very difficult to successfully negotiate a peace agreement that will be satisfactory to all. Finally, on both sides, there is an increase in radicals becoming prominent, and exploiting the conflict for their own purposes.<sup>21</sup> All of these barriers, plus radical leaders make successful negotiations increasingly difficult, and a middle ground more challenging to find.

The third reason why the Greek Tragedy theory is convincing is that it recognizes the continuing pain in the region. This theory recognizes that both parties have done harm, and continue to do harm as well as are being harmed.<sup>22</sup> This aspect is convincing as currently there are many facets in which each group does harm, and is being harmed by the current system. Firstly they are being harmed through education. Jewish children receive an education characterised by ultranationalism, with a skewed view of history.<sup>23</sup> This nationalistic approach can reduce tolerance of the other, and prevent them from understanding the nuances in the regional history. Palestinian children receive a traditional and conservative education that is designed to eliminate nationalism.<sup>24</sup> This means that the Palestinians are an increasingly fractured group, with no identity. This educational divide means that they are not exposed to the same ideas and are not given access to integration. As a result, hatred of the other and inequality are not decreased, and these differences make negotiations and finding peace increasingly difficult. The second way that they are being harmed is through the discrimination that exists against Palestinians. They have high poverty levels, unemployment levels inadequate education, land confiscations, home demolitions, municipal underfunding and discriminatory legislation

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<sup>20</sup> Abu el Naml, "Population Growth and Demographic Balance Between Arabs and Jews in Israel and Historic Palestine," 76.

<sup>21</sup> Kodmani, "Peace in the Middle East: The Dangers of Delay," 129.

<sup>22</sup> Giurlando, "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Module 6."

<sup>23</sup> Gerber, "Zionism, Orientalism, and the Palestinians," 37.

<sup>24</sup> Gerber, "Zionism, Orientalism, and the Palestinians," 37.

levied at them.<sup>25</sup> Poverty and discrimination creates conditions that grow hate, and these increasing levels of hate mean that there are increasing levels of dehumanization, violence and revenge directed at each group.<sup>26</sup> Finally, there are many attempts to prevent the Palestinians from integrating. Israel has maintained uncertainty by continually expanding and contracting the space for Palestinians to create a sense of temporariness.<sup>27</sup> They continue to perceive them as a security threat, enemies, or terrorists, instead of citizens.<sup>28</sup> This has resulted in the Palestinians being a distinct, separate and largely unassimilated society.<sup>29</sup> While much of the immediate pain from these attempts to prevent integration will be felt by Palestinians, it also means that the Jewish people in the area will not be able to get an effective peace agreement as there is no cohesive society to negotiate with.

The Greek Tragedy Theorists believe that it is possible that there is no solution to this conflict.<sup>30</sup> However, there are many suggestions that other scholars have made regarding this conflict that recognize the base aspects of the Greek Tragedy Theory: historical pain, the unwillingness to negotiate, and the present pain felt by both communities. Past negotiations have not sufficiently recognized the differences between the historical narratives of the two groups, and have been unable to negotiate off of shared terminology or historical facts.<sup>31</sup> One way to make negotiations more successful is to first agree upon a set of facts that recognize that each community has done harm and was harmed.

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<sup>25</sup> Waxman, "Israel's Palestinian Minority in the Two-State Solution: The Missing Dimension," 70.

<sup>26</sup> Ashrawi, "Challenging Questions (Middle East Politics)."

<sup>27</sup> Shehadeh, "In Pursuit of My Ottoman Uncle: Reimagining the Middle East Region as One," 82.

<sup>28</sup> Samer Al-Saber, "Jerusalem's Roses and Jasmine: A Resistant Ventriloquism Against Racialized Orientalism," *Theater Research International* 43, no. 1 (2018): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883318000032>.

<sup>29</sup> Waxman, "Israel's Palestinian Minority in the Two-State Solution: The Missing Dimension," 69.

<sup>30</sup> Giurlando, "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Module 6."

<sup>31</sup> Nancy Partner, "The Linguistic Turn along Post-Postmodern Borders: Israeli/Palestinian Narrative Conflict," *New Literary History* 39, no. 4 (2008): 825, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20533118>.

The second issue that has occurred in past negotiations was the two-state solutions proposed. A two-state solution only addresses the needs of Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, and Jews who live within the recognized territories of Israel.<sup>32</sup> It does not recognize the minority groups that live outside of these, and their needs which both groups have agreed to include in their negotiations.<sup>33</sup> Thus, a two-state solution will not serve enough people, and a peace process is unlikely to be founded on this principle.

The third issue that has occurred in past negotiations is the failure to recognize the colonial elements of Zionists. Past negotiations have avoided using the colonial lens as it is often portrayed as anti-Semitic.<sup>34</sup> However, by beginning to use colonial theories to understand this conflict, the default sympathy and lease of exceptionalism attributed to the Jews can be overturned, and a more nuanced view of the situation can be achieved.<sup>35</sup> Using anti-colonial theories could also propose a solution to this conflict, by decolonizing institutions, and overturning colonial relationships of power, reducing inequalities and promoting reconciliation between the communities.<sup>36</sup>

None of the solutions proposed by scholars using the basis of the Greek Tragedy Theory would guarantee peace, but they would help to prevent peace processes from creating more pain, and they would promote reconciliation between the two groups. Peace is likely not achievable with just an agreement between leaders of the two communities. However, by recognizing past pain, and preventing more, the two communities may be able to finally escape the continual cycles of pain.

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<sup>32</sup> Waxman, "Israel's Palestinian Minority in the Two-State Solution: The Missing Dimension," 68.

<sup>33</sup> Waxman, "Israel's Palestinian Minority in the Two-State Solution: The Missing Dimension," 68.

<sup>34</sup> Rachel Busbridge, "Israel-Palestine and the Settler Colonial 'Turn': From Interpretation to Decolonization," *Theory, Culture & Society* 35, no. 1 (2018): 98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416688544>.

<sup>35</sup> Busbridge, "Israel-Palestine and the Settler Colonial 'Turn': From Interpretation to Decolonization," 92.

<sup>36</sup> Busbridge, "Israel-Palestine and the Settler Colonial 'Turn': From Interpretation to Decolonization," 101.

The final concept to be discussed is why the two other theories of this conflict are incorrect. The two other major theories of the Israel-Palestine conflict are the Old Historian and the New Historian Theories. Both of these theories raise valuable ideas, however, they fail to recognize the pain experienced by both the Jewish and Palestinian communities. The Old Historian Theory argues that the British favoured the Arabs, and encouraged them to attack the new Jewish state.<sup>37</sup> Jewish victory was then a miracle created by God as there were fewer Jews.<sup>38</sup> This theory is not convincing. In reality, there were more Jewish fighters for most of the conflict.<sup>39</sup> This narrative also paints the Jewish people as the sole victims, and in reality, they also committed a lot of horrors in war and victimised the Arabs. This theory is often taught to Jewish children and paints a national narrative they can take pride in, and feel chosen by God.<sup>40</sup> However it is not factual and it causes hurt as it does not acknowledge the pain of the Arabs.

The New Historian Theory argues that the British were sympathetic to the Jews and that the Jewish army had more soldiers.<sup>41</sup> It also argues that there was not a united Arab coalition in the area and that the other Arab nations were pursuing their own goals.<sup>42</sup> This theory is also problematic, as it sees the Arabs as the sole victims of the conflict which is not balanced to the realities of the war. While it helps to address the issues of the old historian approach, it does not fully recognize the colonial aspect of the conflict, and just switches the victim, without recognition of the fact that both groups were the victims, and the oppressors. Overall, these two theories are not effective, or persuasive. They fail to account for the complexities of victimhood

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<sup>37</sup> Avi Shlaim, "The Debate about 1948," *Making Israel*, ed. Benny Morris, (University of Michigan Press, 2007), 131.

<sup>38</sup> Shlaim, "The Debate about 1948," 133.

<sup>39</sup> Mordechai Bar-On, "Remembering 1948," *Making Israel*, ed. Benny Morris, (University of Michigan Press, 2007), 38.

<sup>40</sup> Nur Masalha, "New History, Post-Zionism and Neo-Colonialism: A Critique of the Israeli "New Historians,"" *Holy Land Studies* 10, no. 1 (2011): <https://doi.org/10.3366/hls.2011.0002>.

<sup>41</sup> Bar-On, "Remembering 1948," 38.

<sup>42</sup> Shlaim, "The Debate about 1948," 141.



in the conflict. As the Greek Tragedy Theory recognizes these complexities and their importance in historical pain, current negotiations, and present pain, it is more effective and proposes a better method to addressing the conflict.

In conclusion, the Greek Tragedy Theory is the best theory to use to approach this conflict. It is cognizant of the painful history in the area and this aligns with the historical narratives that each community in the area has constructed. It also recognizes the limited desire and difficulty of negotiations. This helps to understand why no solution has been found to date. Finally, it recognizes the continued pain in the region felt by both sides, and each community believes that they are experiencing pain. Through using this theory solutions can be implemented to prevent more pain from occurring, and begin the reconciliation process. The Greek Tragedy theory understands that peace is not easy to achieve, and it will not be achieved quickly. However, by redefining both historical pain and current pain in this conflict, understandings of it can be revised and a movement towards reconciliation can begin.

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