

The Epistemic Logic of the Israel-Palestinian Conflict

The escalation of the military violence in Gaza has once again accelerated the international debate about the Middle East conflict. The question is, to put it mildly, polarized. Supporters of the warring parties consistently demonize their opponents and deliver uncritical backing of the side they support. It should be obvious that these strategies are fundamentally counter-productive when it comes to finding a solution to this strangely persistent and seemingly unresolvable conflict. The reason is that if there is ever going to be a lasting peaceful settlement, both parties must agree to very extensive and partly painful compromises. However, the more they perceive that they have an unquestioned support or are demonized in the international community the harder it will be for them to ever make the concessions necessary to guarantee a lasting peaceful solution. Each concession will be regarded as a betrayal, every compromise as a sell-off of their own party's fundamental interests. The strategy of wholehearted support that most commentators are engaged in is therefore from an epistemic perspective fundamentally destructive.

The second mistake in this discussion is a general avoidance discussing the epistemic logic on which this particular conflict is based. What we have are two people believing that they, by divine powers, have been given right to the same territory. The Palestinians believe that the principle of their right to return to the areas from which they were expelled or fled from in 1948 is sacred. Similarly, the Israeli settlers argue that their right to land on the West Bank is that divine powers have promised this territory to the Jewish people. We also know that these two issues, the Palestinians' demands for a right of return and Israel's settlement policy, has been the biggest obstacles in the efforts to reach a peace agreement.

As documented by several historians, the expulsion of some 450,000 Palestinians in 1948 was in many ways a horrible tragedy. However, it should be remembered that at this time, this form of expulsion of large ethnic groups following a defeat in war was very common in Europe. Around 12 million ethnic Germans were driven from their homes in Eastern Europe after 1945, almost 1.5 million Poles were forced to leave what became the Soviet Union, half a million Ukrainians were driven out of Poland, approximately 350,000 Italians from what was to become Yugoslavia, and some 450 000 Finns were forced leave Karelia at the same time. None of these major refugee disasters from this period are today causing any serious conflicts, let alone war. What sets the Israel-Palestine conflict aside and makes it unique among these refugee catastrophes is therefore the principle of "holy land". The problem with such a principle is that that the conflict becomes an "indivisible absolute" because it prevents every compromise since you cannot compromise on something that you see as having a divine value. Moreover, (as known all the way back to King Salomon) something that is framed as sacred cannot be divided so if one side wins (loses), it wins (loses) it all.

However, if one examines the epistemic logic of this principle, one finds that it must rest on pure fiction. The reason is simple, namely that both parties historically have proved willing to buy and sell significant bits of their "holy" land. Prior to 1948, many Palestinians sold their land to Jewish settlers and as we speak, land in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank is being bought and sold. Logically, from an epistemic point of view, something that one is prepared to buy and sell and haggle about the price

for can by definition not have divine status. Thus, it is a pure fiction, an epistemologically untenable principle that is the basis for why this particular refugee catastrophe has proved impossible to resolve. The land that Palestinians lost in 1948 is a commodity, not something granted by a divine power. Likewise, the Israeli settlements in the West Bank are built on this genuinely false principle.

The advantage of desacralizing the conflict in this way is that it can be reframed from a conflict about “sacred values” to what it really is, namely a conflict over something as prosaic as a commodity. If the conflict can be reframed to what it in reality is, a conflict about a commodity, the Palestinian refugees (and their dependents) are entitled to financial compensation for the land and other assets they lost in 1948 and for the revenue they would have gained since then from this property. The pieces of land currently have a market price and, given today's land prices in Israel, an estimation of such compensation would be significant. This may, in the current situation, sound unrealistic but such an approach has recently been proposed by the EU Ambassador to Israel. Through him, the European Union has declared that it is willing contribute to a fund to finance compensation to Palestinian refugees granted that those who receive such compensations decline their right of return. An Israeli counter-argument that is often put forward is that Jews who had to leave many Arab countries should also be given compensation. Maybe so, but that countries like Yemen do not want to agree to this is no reason for the state of Israel not to do so. An evil thing cannot be made good if the evil is doubled, an erroneous action is not acceptable because someone else also has erred.

Today's Israeli government would surely reject such a proposal but this has not always been the case. At the failed peace talks at Camp David in 2000, the then Israeli government offered to contribute to such a form of compensation. Would the Palestinians agree to this? This obviously depends on the size of the compensation. Interestingly, there is an empirical study of this particular conflict (by political scientists Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod) showing that economic compensation plus a sincere apology for what happened could function. Those who support the Palestinian refugees' right of return must consider that an incorporation of 4-5 million Palestinians in central Israel in all likelihood is a recipe for a large-scale civil war. To summarize, unlike many other large-scale refugee catastrophes in the period after World War II, the Palestinian has not been possible to solve. What distinguishes this conflict is its absolute nature, based on the principle of "holy land". It is only when this epistemologically false principle is abandoned that the conflict can be transformed into what it really is, namely a conflict over an economic asset. Such conflicts, history shows, can be solved.

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