

An ethical evaluation
of the israeli
palestinian conflict
religion essay



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The Middle East is perhaps the most important region in the world. For followers of the three monotheistic faiths, it contains several holy cities, with the most important being Jerusalem. The violence in the region, specifically in Israel-Palestine, makes it difficult for observers of these religions to worship as they please. There have been many efforts to resolve the conflict begun in the first half of the twentieth century, from peace talks to international laws. However, nothing seems to have helped. The solution needs to be one that benefits all in the region and is ethical. It is impossible, however, to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the current definition of ethics being used - ethics of obligations, rights, and claims. Instead, a new ethics of fairness and forgiveness needs to be followed. Memory also needs to experience a shift from a focus on vengeance to a focus on remembering justly.

Terms Defined

In order to better understand the terms used by different groups examined within this paper, it is necessary to define basic terms and indicate in which ways they will be used.

Israel will be used when referring to the present country of Israel. This does not include the occupied territories and is limited to the present day land.

Eretz Israel will be used when necessary to describe the historically Biblical land of Israel. Any other forms of Israel discussed will be defined by the year or another trait.

The occupied territories (OT) as a term will be used when discussing both the West Bank and Gaza Strip or, in different time periods, any of the lands

Israeli forces occupied. If this is the case, the year will be given as well as a geographical description. During the Six Day War in 1967, for example, the Sinai Peninsula would also be an occupied territory. The West Bank was conquered by Israeli forces during the 1967 Six Day War and have been in relative control of the territory ever since. Current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is planning yet more Israeli settlements within the West Bank. However, international organizations such as the United Nations believe the continued settlements to be illegal.[1]The Gaza Strip was controlled by Egypt until the 1967 war, when Israeli forces invaded and conquered it. In 1994, the Palestinian Authority (the governing body of the occupied territories) took political control of lands in the strip not being used by Israeli armed forces or settlers. East Jerusalem was taken over by Israeli forces during the Six Day War. According to UN Resolution 181, Jerusalem is supposed to be an international city, with a “ special international regime” which “ shall be administered by the United Nations.”[2]

Fundamentalism is defined by the Encyclopedia Britannica as a “ type of militantly conservative religious [and/or political] movement characterized by the advocacy of strict conformity to sacred texts.”[3]To the American public, this term generally is associated with Islamic fundamentalists. Within any religion, however, there can be different groups of fundamentalists.

Islamic fundamentalists often restrict themselves to very literal interpretations of the Qur’an, their main holy text, and the Hadith, a book about the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Islamic fundamentalists are often associated with Islamism. Not all Islamic fundamentalists are Islamists, but generally speaking, all Islamists are Islamic fundamentalists. Islamists want a <https://assignbuster.com/an-ethical-evaluation-of-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict-religion-essay/>

religious state, with Islamic law, or Shari'a, replacing secular laws. Islamists also promote the notion of pan-Islamism, or the unity of all Muslims, and the elimination of non-Islamic influences, such as western ideals, practices, and more.[4]For many, this means waging a holy war against outsiders, known as a lesser jihad in mainstream Islam.

Jewish fundamentalism is a little more difficult to explain. Gush Emunim is an example of one such group. Zionism is the notion that the Jewish people need to reestablish their homeland in Israel. After the founding of Israel, Zionism evolved into the thought that the Israelis have the right to occupy the entire land of Israel. For some, this means Eretz Israel. There are Zionists who support the state of Israel without religious views coming into play. These are not usually fundamentalists. Zionist fundamentalists are those who use religious viewpoints to support an extreme Zionist cause - one that usually involves the occupation of lands in Eretz Israel and the expulsion of all non-Jewish people from Israel, specifically Muslims.

The Current Problem with Ethics in the Middle East

The area of ethics is difficult to define. The average person tends to believe that it involves laws and/or religions. However, ethics can be better defined as " standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues." [5]Religions and philosophies do serve as moral compasses for many individuals, but people who do not subscribe to any particular religion still can be ethical and moral. Ethics can be situational or static, and, like other values, can be compromised. Ethics is also involved in notions of

justice. While ethics deals with notions of right and wrong, justice utilizes ethics and law in order to come to a fair conclusion regarding specific cases.

Highly publicized viewpoints on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as those presented by groups like Hamas, often cite a problem of retribution and justice when discussing relations with groups on the other side. There is too much of a focus on achieving justice, or retribution, for past actions. For many, this 'justice' is a requirement for future peace negotiations. However, retribution is not always the right way to achieve a just end nor is it always an available option.

There is also a problem with the use of rights. Each group to be evaluated claims the other has no right to exist, whether it is through their actions or ideologies. Israel should not exist, say those who agree with Hamas and Hezbollah, because the inhabitants had no right to occupy the land held by the Palestinians. They believe that they are defending their homelands against Israeli invaders and use this to justify their actions. Many Israelis believe that groups such as Hamas have no right to exist because of their ideological and physical attacks against Israel. These groups create a security problem for Israeli citizens, so Israelis believe any actions against the Palestinians are justified. The problem with claiming that one group has more of a right to exist in an area than another is that rights are very tricky: "Rights are, in the words of the legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin, "trumps" over all other claims. They can also become barriers to compromise and to peace, since it is more difficult - sometimes impossible - to give up rights than to give up mere preferences of other claims." [6]

Current peace-seeking groups do try to address some of these problems. Gush Shalom, for example supports a Right of Return for Palestinian refugees where the Israeli government will help to set the Palestinians up in Israel, or even another country. Palestinians can also choose another method of compensation. However, until the work of groups like Gush Shalom can become more mainstream, it does not seem like the above problems can be rightly addressed.

From the current ethical standpoint, no one can 'win.' The Middle East has been in turmoil for many years and, as a result, thousands of lives have been lost in the violence. There can be no justice, in the traditional sense of the word, for these victims. There is no way to muddle through the claims on all sides to determine exactly who started what first, or to get retribution for all those who have hurt and suffered. Justice can only occur once we alter our current stance on justice.

Presentation and Evaluation of Group Ideologies

Each of the following groups has been chosen because of their fundamentalist ideologies and their popularity among the common people within their countries. Hamas has gained political power in the Gaza Strip, giving them legitimacy amongst people residing there. However, their link to terrorism as a result of their ideological beliefs has limited the ability of other countries to recognize Hamas' right to lead. Hezbollah faces a similar problem within Lebanon, on a more violent scale. Gush Emunim is the only group to have virtually ceased to exist, except in acceptance of ideology. The beliefs of this group have now become the norm for many living within Israel.

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Hamas was founded in 1987 and grew out of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. The next year, however, Hamas published their charter - one that began to separate itself from the nonviolent message of the Muslim Brotherhood. [7]The group slowly turned into a combination of Islamic fundamentalism and Palestinian nationalism.[8]The organization gained power through its extensive social programs. The bulk of their current budget goes to schools, healthcare, soup kitchens, and other social services.

Since coming to power in the Gaza Strip in 2006, Hamas has consistently attacked Israel and other Palestinian groups who recognize Israel's right to exist through media and physical means. Hamas' charter calls for the destruction of Israel and the creation of an Islamist state in its place.[9]It is only this, they believe, that will cease the colonization and western influences in Middle Eastern lands. Hamas refuses to recognize the right of Israel to exist. This combined with terrorist links have caused several countries to refuse to recognize the right of Hamas to lead. These countries have since ceased all funding and support.

Hezbollah is a Shiite Muslim political group in Lebanon created as a result of the 1982 invasion of Lebanese lands by Israeli forces. Hezbollah won popularity within Lebanon through their social programs. Their political leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has a very religious background, but does not serve as the religious leader.[10]Hezbollah sees the destruction of the Israeli state and the replacement of Israel with an Islamic state as a long-term goal.

[11]More immediate goals include the establishment of an Islamist state within Lebanon and the expulsion of western powers and influences.[12]The main idea is that an Islamist state is the only one which an outside western <https://assignbuster.com/an-ethical-evaluation-of-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict-religion-essay/>

force will not be able to invade and take over.[13] Hezbollah sees violence as a method to bring about the change that they seek. The group itself is quick to point out, though, that they have moved to a less violent and imposing platform based on political action instead of terrorism.[14] Hezbollah has indeed taken to involvement in political life within Lebanon. It remains a minority group within the Lebanese Parliament. In August of 2008, the Lebanese Parliament approved a national unity cabinet, giving Hezbollah veto power with eleven of thirty seats.[15]

Both Hamas and Hezbollah have taken extreme positions against Israel. These groups have resorted to violent means in order to get their point across in the past, and continue to do so today. Ironically, these actions have only gotten these groups condemned by international organizations. Violence causes more problems for the people they are trying to help as well as harming others unnecessarily. Hamas has focused too much on their claim to the land which now makes up Israel. From a logical standpoint, there is no way to de-establish Israel and give what Hamas would consider ample justice or retribution.

Founded in 1974, Gush Emunim subscribes to an extreme form of Zionism, which calls for Israeli control over Eretz Israel. The group is theological in nature, though this does not make it exclusively religious. The Jewish people have been 'chosen' by God, according to the Bible. The goal of Gush Emunim is to establish settlements in the Palestinian territories in order to eventually regain control of the lands given by God, as well as to promote this goal among others. For members of this group, there is no room for

compromise, and to give up the control of any part of Eretz Israel would be blasphemy and a sin against God.[16]

Gush Emunim began to set up settlements in the occupied territories in the mid to late 1970s. Due mainly to ideological issues, the settlements ended up facing a large amount of resentment and problems with the nearby Arab settlers. They asked for the Israeli government to step in and, eventually, the government felt as though it was forced to do so due to public opinion and violence around the settlements.[17]Gush Emunim then set up more settlements in order to reach its goal. To further complicate peace talks and other negotiations in recent years, former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has been purported to be a big supporter of Gush Emunim.[18]

Gush Emunim focused too much on the right of the Israeli people to rule over all of Eretz Israel and not enough on the possible consequences of their actions. While they did come close to achieving their goal, supporters of Gush Emunim forced the government into an awkward position and ended up alienating Palestinians. Using religiously-related rights to these lands also put outside groups in an awkward position. Who is the United Nations to say that God did not give all of Biblical Israel to the Jews?

Movements for Peace

The following groups have been chosen for their peace-achieving efforts in the Middle East. Gush Shalom is a predominantly Jewish organization, having starting in Israel. The International Solidarity Movement is Palestinian-based. However, like other peace-seeking groups, members of both organizations come from a variety of places. Both groups support the Palestinian struggle.

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However, the connections between the International Solidarity Movement and possible terrorism are pushing people with the potential to make a difference away.

Founded in 1993, Gush Shalom is a very well known peace movement group active within Israel.[19]The group is extremely concerned with the treatment of the Palestinian people. They recognize the problems caused by Israeli forces and focus on creating a partnership between the two countries in order to have a more prosperous future. The group's main goals are related to ending the occupation and bringing peace to the region. Unlike other groups, Gush Shalom recognizes the " Right of Return of the Palestinian refugees, allowing each refugee to choose freely between compensation and repatriation to Palestine and Israel, and fixing by mutual agreement the number of refugees who will be able to return to Israel in annual quotas." [20]Even more than that, Gush Shalom has proposed that Israel could help set up Palestinian refugees in another country.[21]No one within the organization is paid for their work, as all involvement with Gush Shalom is voluntary.[22]The organization has won several awards for its efforts to bring peace to the region.

The group also works closely with the Palestinian Liberation Organization. This relationship even led to a draft of a peace agreement between the two organizations.[23]In this agreement, a two-state solution was discussed, wherein the border of the Palestinian state was defined as the " lines of the cease-fire agreement of June 4, 1967." [24]A council would be established for Israelis and Palestinians to rule Jerusalem, the capital of both states, together.[25]This was first brought up by the United Nations.[26]The most <https://assignbuster.com/an-ethical-evaluation-of-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict-religion-essay/>

interesting part of this document is how Gush Shalom handles the refugee problem. As mentioned before, Palestinian refugees have a choice between staying in Palestine, moving to Israel, or establishing lives in another country.[27]A “ truth commission of historians” would be established, whose report on the major problems in Israel and the occupied territories would eventually placed in “ the textbooks of both countries.”[28]

From an ethical standpoint, Gush Shalom is pushing a new, ‘ radical’ point of view. Other peace groups advocate for the equality of Palestinian peoples and the establishment of a two-state solution. However, this is the only public organization that has made it a priority to investigate the problems inherent in the Middle Eastern conflict and publish them for future Israelis and Palestinians to read about and learn from. Gush Shalom is also one of the only Israeli-based groups petitioning for a Right of Return for the Palestinian people. They recognize the need for massive negotiations and compromise in order to achieve peace. If political groups can take the ideas and positions given here by Gush Shalom, peace could be possible. The biggest problem standing in the way of politicians and groups is how to get elected in Israel while running on this kind of platform.

The International Solidarity Movement (ISM) was founded in 2001, with the express mission of assisting the Palestinian people in gaining support for their cause, as well as offering a degree of protection and a way to voice their opinions.[29]The ISM promotes nonviolent forms of fighting the occupation, like protesting, marching, and documenting problems between Palestinians and Israeli armed forces (IDF).[30]Perhaps the most important

part ISM plays is the assistance they give to Palestinians during emergencies, like “ escorting ambulances through checkpoints.”[31]

In recent years, there has been some controversy over ISM’s possible support for suicide bombings. There have been several poorly worded documents in which ISM leaders and other ISM-related people have seemingly supported suicide bombings carried out by Palestinians.[32]There have also been some connections to terrorists.[33]However, ISM states that they

oppose the tactic of suicide bombings, especially those that have been carried out against civilian targets. We don’t however think that it is a more brutal tactic than dropping a bomb from a fighter plane on a civilian-occupied apartment building, firing a tank shell down a crowded city street, or placing dynamite in a family home. They are all brutal and repulsive acts. [34]

ISM also goes on to say that suicide bombings are simply weapons of desperate people who just do not have access to other weapons. While they believe these bombings are reprehensible, it is, in their opinion, an understandable move by an oppressed people fighting for their basic rights. [35]

While this group is doing very real things to help the Palestinian people within the occupied territories, it is also far too focused on being anti-Israel. There are not a lot of occasions where the ISM and Israeli groups can work together, because of the problems within the ISM handling publicity issues.

The poorly worded documents and possible ties to terrorism referred to <https://assignbuster.com/an-ethical-evaluation-of-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict-religion-essay/>

above have a lot to do that. Despite ISM issuing statements to counter these claims, there are still a lot of concerned people and organizations who are leery of being involved with ISM. ISM workers also face a lot of danger, and many have been killed as a result of their work - mostly by the IDF.

[36]Because of these problems, it is also difficult to say, from an ethical standpoint, how helpful this organization is. It does provide helpful services to Palestinian farmers, like help with harvesting and protection from the IDF. However, there are just too many warning signs for this group to be fully embraced.

A Change in Ethics

Evaluating the situation in Israel-Palestine using the current system of ethics does not work. The ethics of rights, obligations, and duties, brings with it too many questions and too many opportunities for disagreement and exclusion. Rights bring up claims which cannot necessarily be disputed or worked with. Obligations and duties require more of a direct acknowledgement of wrongs one group has perpetrated against the other. Unfortunately, in this conflict, there just is no way to keep score. Details of conflicts are too murky in most cases to concretely say which party started what problem. With that in mind, how can it be determined which party owes the other more? This task would be so time-consuming and tedious that there is no way it would benefit those currently in the situation. And so, the world must find a different way of viewing the ethics of this conflict.

In his book, *The Prophets*, Abraham Heschel comes to the realization that there is a better form of ethics, one based not on obligations but instead on fairness. This is based on his unique understanding of the link between <https://assignbuster.com/an-ethical-evaluation-of-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict-religion-essay/>

justice and righteousness. In essence, they are separate ideals, though they are linked:

Righteousness goes beyond justice. Justice is strict and exact, giving each person his due. Righteousness implies benevolence, kindness, generosity. Justice is form, a state of equilibrium; righteousness has a substantive associated meaning. Justice may be legal, righteousness is associated with a burning compassion for the oppressed.[37]

Justice, then, is more concrete and straightforward. It is something that is currently rewarded, but instead should be automatic.[38] However, it can be misused and corrupted.[39] This corruption can lead to a perversion of justice, where oppression is rampant.[40] Righteousness is needed to help keep justice pure. It involves the quality of a person's character.

[41] Righteousness is what helps to give justice a more personal touch, moving from a notion of retribution to one of satisfaction and assistance.

Justice involves the claims of one person or group and the responsibility of another person or group to answer that claim.[42] This works because of the sense that each person in a community is tied together.[43] What one person or group does to help another also helps the community as a whole.

Righteousness is what helps people to give to the community and to assist each other.

In the traditional sense of the word, justice requires retribution - jail time, fines, or other punishment to fit a crime or wrong-doing. However, there are situations in which the classic notion of retribution is unthinkable or

improper. If one of the parties has died, it becomes more difficult to seek
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justice for him or her. It is also difficult to handle justice when there are too many conflicting stories to produce proper retribution. Both of the above occur in the Middle Eastern conflict. As exemplified in the story of Cain and Abel, sometimes options other than punishment must be explored: “ Cain, slaying his brother, does not receive the punishment he deserves. Though justice would require that Abel’s blood be avenged, Cain is granted divine pardon and protection.”[44] Here, in a situation where retribution may have been understandable, God instead decides to forgo this form of justice for one of protection and forgiveness. Forgiveness does not dictate that retribution be given for an action, but instead requires a surrendering of grudges and anger. It should be personal and conditional:

We may forgive the criminal; is it right to forgive the crime? I may forgive a wrong done to me; but do I have the right to forgive a wrong done to others? Unconditional forgiveness may be found in Pandora’s box, a fine incentive to vice. Anger is a reminder that man is in need of forgiveness, and that forgiveness must not be taken for granted.[45]

When this is applied to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the real importance of this distinction takes shape. An outside entity cannot ‘ fix’ the conflict, or bring it to an end. It is not the place of the United Nations or other countries to forgive the Israelis and/or the Palestinians. In order for peace to occur, a Palestinian may have to forgive the Israeli people as a whole for wrongs done to them in the past, just as an Israeli may have to forgive the Palestinian people. Does this forgive the crimes themselves? Absolutely not. Does this justify what has occurred between the two parties? Again, the answer is no.

However, it is only with this mindset of starting anew that the people
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involved in this conflict can move beyond past actions and start to look ahead into the future.

According to Heschel, then, justice does not have to involve retribution. His ethics of justice involve fairness, righteousness, and forgiveness instead. Using righteousness, Heschel acknowledges the necessity for a personal touch to how justice is carried out. Forgiveness gives us the idea that it is acceptable to forgive a wrong instead of seeking retribution, and that it is a God-like quality. Forgiveness does not dismiss the wrongs committed, but simply clears both the aggressor and victim of some level of guilt and pain.

Heschel worries a lot about the misuse of justice. When the human factor is removed from consideration, the compassion that righteousness brings into the equation is gone and no real justice can be had.[46] Righteousness must accompany any form of justice, because

There are many ways of evading the law and escaping the arm of justice. Only a few acts of violence are brought to the attention of the courts. As a rule, those who know how to exploit are endowed with the skill to justify their acts, while those who are easily exploited possess no skill in pleading their own cause. Those who neither exploit nor are exploited are ready to fight when their own interests are harmed; they will not be involved when not personally affected. Who shall plead for the helpless? Who shall prevent the epidemic of injustice that no court of justice is capable of stopping?[47]

Israelis, then, can be seen to be the skilled exploiters, while the Palestinians do not possess a real ability to fight for themselves. The international community does not help out, unless their well-being is threatened. The <https://assignbuster.com/an-ethical-evaluation-of-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict-religion-essay/>

United States will hold peace talks, but beyond that, little governmental help is offered to the Palestinians. What the Palestinians need is a prophet of sorts, someone to voice the problems they face.

Where Can the Alternate Understanding Be Seen Today?

Former President Jimmy Carter could be the Palestinians prophet. He was instrumental in bringing about a more peaceful period in the Middle East when he hosted the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel in 1978. In the end, three different conclusions were made. The Gaza Strip and the West Bank were to be given the opportunity to rule themselv