A Conflicted State

Abstract

This paper examines the cultural and religious conflicts within the state of Israel as well as the ways in which Israelis interpret and react to the threats they receive from the international community. The paper first examines the breadth of conflicts within Israel. It demonstrates how conflict exists on many levels. Jews and Arabs disagree, Jews and Jews disagree, and Arabs and Arabs disagree. The focus is then turned to the threats Israel faces from abroad such as the well-known threat of Iran and the less well-known threat from Syria and the 2011 Arab Spring. An in depth look is taken at the religious and cultural threats from within, specifically pertaining to education, the Israeli Defense Force, political leadership, and immigration. The creation of the State of Israel and the United Nations mandate for Israel is also focused on, as well as the conflicts that the mandate creates for the present day. The paper does not offer a conclusion to which issue or conflict is most threatening to Israel, nor does it offer a solution to any of the problems stated. Rather, this paper’s goal is to make the reader think critically about the issues that Israel faces today, and understand that a conflict is only as difficult as the perspective that someone brings to it.
A Conflicted State

Israel has been the epicenter of international attention since its creation. It is the only country in the world where Muslims, Christians, and Jews live, work, and worship together within one square kilometer of each other. There are conflicts within Israel and conflicts concerning that state of Israel from the international community. Israeli’s opinions on issues are endless and everyone has a different perception of the tensions. To discern what issue divides the state of Israel the most is not a question that any one person can answer. Every person has their own opinion which has been developed by their upbringing and experiences in life that are unique to them. What a visitor to Israel may consider to be bigoted, abusive, or rude is what a resident of Israel may view as right, just, and beautiful. The notion of a universal moral standard depends on each person’s perception of what just and unjust should mean. In Israel, each group views their actions as just and in some cases ordained by God, while viewing other groups actions as a disgrace and abominable. However, each sect maintains that there is a right and wrong, their notions of what right and wrong mean are simply different.

At the onset of this project the goal was to discover whether or not Israelis felt that the cultural and religious issues within Israel or the international threats they face from abroad were more of a concern. This question was developed through studying books such as *Sleeping on a Wire* by David Grossman, which shed light on the powerful
force of local issues between the Jewish and Arab community. For example, Grossman’s work starts by giving a story of a Jewish boy who ran away from a camp that he was attending in which Jews and Arabs were intermixed. He said he had done it because he was more afraid of sleeping in the same tent with Arabs than he was of wandering through a forest alone in an attempt to escape (Grossman, 6-8). The media and documentaries by PBS Frontline and 60 Minutes demonstrate the acute threat Israel faces from other nations, currently and most prominently Iran. Further insight can be found in Mosab Yousef’s book Son of Hamas in which the inner workings of terrorist organizations working against Israel are exposed. At the project’s onset this question seemed fairly black and white, however, like everything in Israel it only became more blurred.

As I began my research I thought I would find a general consensus between the Jewish community as a whole and the Arab community as a whole. I believed the disagreement would occur mostly between these two communities. As my research progressed I was struck by the fact that the majority of uncertainty developed within these two communities. It was clear that the majority of Arabs and Jews disagreed, but what they disagreed about was different for every person. Furthermore, a handful of disagreement occurred within the Jewish community. From my conversations with the Jewish population I discovered that the ultra-orthodox community and secular Jewish community were very much at odds. The ultra orthodox Jews do not even believe that the state of Israel should exist. They argue that since the Messiah has not yet come, having a state of Israel is an abomination. The secular Jews disagree with the lifestyle of the orthodox which encourages the abandonment of all media, segregation of women, and a
dress code. The secular Jewish community is also upset by the ultra-orthodox’s refusal to be conscripted into the military based on their religious principles. They do not like the fact that the orthodox receive benefits from a state they refuse to defend. The Arab community is more homogenous, yet still disagrees. The majority of Arabs in Israel are Muslim, with the second largest group being Christian prompting conflict on a religious level. Many of these Muslims have strong desires for a Palestinian state, but differ on whether Israel should exist at all. Christian Arabs tend to side more with the Jewish position in terms of the existence of the State of Israel, but tend to favor a two-state solution as well.

As I conducted my interviews the primary concern of my first few subjects was the state of Iran and its development of a nuclear weapon. Iran has stated that they do not think the state of Israel should exist, which significantly raises Israel’s awareness and concern over a nuclear Iran (The Israeli Air Force). At first I thought my research to be quite dull, due to the simple answer I received of “Iran” with no further elaboration. I quickly discovered though that the Jewish community is quite divided within Israel on this issue. On an observation within Jerusalem’s Old City I had conservations with a number of ultra-orthodox Jews. These conversations focused almost exclusively on the Jewish religion and when I asked about Iran, the subject would be dismissed. One conversation in particular I had with an ultra-orthodox man distributing tefllan in the Old City was of particular interest. This man told me that the biggest issue in Israel was the need for the promotion of Judaism. He stated that because the state of Israel has been restored we are on the brink of the Messiah’s coming. He emphasized the promotion of Judaism to the non-Jews as well as the Jews. Traditional Jewish teaching promotes
Jewish mission work only towards secular Jews, so this mention of the non-Jewish population was a surprise (Professor Kedem, 12/20/11 class). This response was also his answer to a question specifically about Iran which shows that he did not regard the issue as having much importance compared to Judaism. Another perspective I received was from a young sales clerk in Ashod who told me that although Israelis are concerned about Iran, this situation is no different than any other time in Israel’s history. If Iran attempts to make good on its desires he said that “the reserves will be called up and Israel will go to war like it always has.” He told me that if you live in Israel, you expect war to occur.

The Arab perspective on possible war with Iran was much more complicated. Although many Arabs dislike the Jewish Israeli state and wish for the creation of a Palestinian state, like Iran does, they are also fearful. Fearful because nuclear weapons and bombs cannot differentiate between who is a Jew and who is an Arab. I was not able to have quite as many conversations with the Arab residents due to their minority population and the places in which I visited were predominantly Jewish. However, from the research I was able to gather I discovered that many believe the creation of a Palestinian state to be the biggest issue facing Israel today. On the prospects of a war with Iran there seemed to be just as much worry as that of the Jewish community, at least concerning the possibility of bombs, injury, or death.

While Iran is the nation that many Israelis seem concerned about, the current threat against Israel is much broader. On a visit to the Israel’s parliament, The Knesset, I had the chance to meet with one of Israel’s Deputy Prime Ministers. From this visit I discovered the role that Syria plays in conjunction with Iran. Syria is a primary supporter of Iran and aids their agenda by waging a war against Israel in Lebanon, through the
terrorist organization Hezbollah. The current turmoil that Syria is facing within their own borders is making the future of the Syrian and Iranian alliance uncertain. The Israeli government believes that if the Syrian leadership falls as a result of the 2011 Arab Spring, Iran will fall in power and in their ability to attack Israel. This is based on statements by the Syrian rebels that “they will never cooperate with Iran and never attack Israel”. However, this is speculative because it is not certain if the current Syrian regime does fall, that the majority of Syrians will accept this ideology. The potential crumbling of the current Syrian leadership is one way in which the Israeli government is hoping that a future war with Iran might be averted.

Amidst the many international threats that Israel faces they face just as many threats from their own people. As many of the people I interviewed told me, the issue that is most concerning is inner turmoil. At the onset of my research I expected to find inner turmoil in the form of religious conflicts within Israel. However, I found that in regards to religion many people are fairly accepting of each other as long as the status quo remains. There are extremists on both sides who refuse to accept anything less than a state based solely on their version of their religious beliefs. Extremists are present in any conflict though, whereas the general population of Israel demonstrated to me that as long as no one oversteps their bounds, they will tolerate each other’s faiths.

While religion may not create much inner turmoil, cultural conflicts have become ingrained in the state of Israel. Israel has fought wars to defend itself for many years and although war with a potentially nuclear Iran strikes fear in the hearts of many, war is simply a part of life in Israel. However, if the country is falling apart from the inside, or if there is any type of civil war in which Israelis are fighting Israelis, the nation will become
extremely vulnerable. If the country is not united within, they will not be able to effectively fight against threats from abroad. When the United Nations mandated that Israel become a state they set certain statues, laws, and requests that they wanted the state, Jews, and Palestinians to abide by. The mandate requests that all Arabs living in Israel preserve the ways of peace, and play their part in development (State of Israel). However, besides for a mention of equal citizenship, there was nothing mentioned on how Israelis should treat Palestinian Arabs. This is one point of potential inner turmoil and perhaps the most well-known issue internationally. As I have seen by visits to the PISGA Teacher Training Institute for Eastern Jerusalem and The Triangle Research and Development Regional Center, there is a large disparity in the educational, socioeconomic, and welfare of Arabs who are Israeli citizens versus Jews who are Israeli citizens. A fictional work by Sami Michael called *A Trumpet in the Wadi* also demonstrates the way in which Arabs and Jews relate and how each side looks down on those who interact with the other side. The book demonstrates that when war occurs in Israel, the Jewish population disregards any previous tolerance for the Arabs and sees them all as terrorists. Similarly, when an Arab dies in Israel from the result of war, Arabs lose their tolerance for Jews and view them all as murderers and infidels. As mentioned earlier the other major issue of tension is the disagreement between the Jewish populations. This issue is less well-known internationally, but probably more dangerous. The Jewish population of Israel supplies most of the soldiers who are conscripted. Arabs are banned from joining due to security concerns, and many would likely not want to join anyhow. If Jewish tensions erupt in Israel, the Israeli Defense Force will be affected, whereas with other internal conflicts, they would stay relatively stable. Furthermore,
Israel will have to use their military to quell the tensions and battles within their country, leaving them less of a force to deflect an enemy from abroad.

In addition to the inner threats and conflicts I was interested in, I found that a number of people were concerned about political threats. They saw their leadership as uninterested in wanting to resolve the conflicts within the country, while only focusing on external or international conflicts. In an interview with a school teacher at a market in central Jerusalem I was told that the politicians were not addressing pressing issues at hand within Israel. She did not like the way in which they handled the education system and was upset by the massive waves of illegal immigration that have been pouring into Israel from Africa recently, primarily Southern Sudan. She did not want Israel to simply deport these immigrants because they were poor and refugees, but insisted that something more needed to be done. The deportation of these immigrants is unlikely since there is a United Nations mandate that makes it illegal to deport refugees. However, allowing these people to roam aimlessly around the streets of Israel, primarily Tel Aviv, is not the best option either. These opinions need to be taken in perspective since political opinions are very diverse, and there are always a handful of people who are never satisfied with politicians. However, through my research I can attest to the issue of illegal immigration. On a visit to Tel Aviv I walked through what was essentially a slum where thousands of African immigrants were living. The living conditions were terrible and everyone is waiting for someone to pick them up and give them some type of work for the day. Deporting the immigrants is not an option as previously mentioned, but allowing these refugees to stay presents a problematic issue for the State of Israel. Israel is a Jewish state meant only to accept Jewish immigrants, but for a state built on creating a refuge for a
persecuted people it seems contradictory to send these immigrants away (Professor Kedem, 1/6/12). In addition, Israel has begun the process of building camps to put the immigrants in so that they can give them refuge, but demonstrate to them that they will not be able to stay in Israel forever (Professor Kedem, 1/6/12). This also presents a problem, because it is reminiscent of the way in which Jews were put in concentration camps during the Holocaust. Granted these camps are nothing like the Holocaust and are humanitarian, however, Israel was a safe haven for the Jews who had survived the concentration camps of the Holocaust, which makes their implementation of camps for immigrants contentious. Politics is all about perspectives, but in forming perspectives there are some realities that cannot be ignored.

Israelis have many different opinions about the issues at hand; however very few seemed to be well versed or interested in possible solutions to the matters that they see as most pressing. At the heart of Israel’s problem is an unwillingness to live in harmony with one another. Multiple groups claim that they have a right to the land of Israel based on a divine mandate from God, and the extremists on both sides preach a refusal to comprise. As part of my research I traveled to the Wadi Ara in the northern part of Israel. Within the Wadi I visited the Geshar al Hawadi School. This school is one of four Jewish-Arab schools in the whole country of Israel, and the only school in the world where Jewish children go to an Arab village to learn (Principle at Geshar al Hawadi, 1/5/12). The purpose of this school and the three others like it is to promote cooperation amongst the children who attend and their families as well as respect for each other’s traditions. When the United Nations instituted the mandate for the creation of Israel they stated that Israel shall guarantee political equality and freedom of education for all people
The United Nations mandate also stated that there should be adequate primary and secondary schools for Arab and Jewish minorities in their own language and cultural traditions (UN general assembly). As seen in my visit to the PISGA Teacher Training Institute for Eastern Jerusalem, the state of Israel has failed miserably at instituting this mandate for the Arab schools, particularly of East Jerusalem. Arab schools have buildings that are falling apart, few computers, overcrowding, and a lack of teacher training. With these issues in mind, accomplishing the task that the Gesher Al Hawadi School does is a remarkable feat. They teach every course in both Hebrew and Arabic, they must observe both Jewish and Arabic holidays and be respectful of each group’s traditions. The school uses the state’s curriculum but also uses their own curriculum to address problems and conflicts. In its seven year existence this school has seen great progress within their community. At recess I played football (American soccer) with the children and had a hard time distinguishing the differences between the Arab children and Jewish children because they were all intermingled. The principal told us that Jewish and Arab families get together outside of school regularly and regard each other as friends. When talking with three girls who attended the school they told me that they “hate” Israel and wished they lived in America. This was not a comment I expected to hear from these girls. I had to reflect upon their unique position within the school system and State of Israel. Society tells these girls that their friendships are wrong and a disgrace to their people. During the 2008 Gaza conflict the Geshar school came close to being shut down. This was not because the Arab and Jewish parents did not like each other but because the Arab parents were being shunned by their community for interacting with the Jews who were “responsible for killing their brothers.” Similarly, the Jewish community
received flack for interacting with people who supported a State of Palestine. It is ironic
that many people in Israel desire peace, yet they try to stop the advancement of one of the
few places where peace is being made.

The question of whether Israelis are more concerned about religious conflicts,
cultural conflicts, or international threats is not a question that can be answered. The only
definite conclusion that I have drawn from my research in Israel is that people cannot be
defined by what people group they belong to. I have used generalizations in my research
only for the sake of clarity, but that does not mean that the research I have gathered
represents every person in each faction I described. There is no such thing as Jewish
people, Arab people, or any other label that is given to a group of people. There is only a
Jewish person with his own perspectives, opinions, and beliefs that reflect his unique
experience in this world. There is an Arab man with his own unique upbringing that has
shaped the way he looks at life. People need to try to see the world from someone else’s
perspective before they pass judgment on their actions, and try to look within themselves
for the source of conflict before they assume another is to blame. There is no easy
solution to the conflicts and problems that face Israel and are within Israel. However,
progress can be made by examining and trying to figure out the perspective that someone
brings to a conflict. Everyone looks for enemies on the outside, while the real enemy may
be from within.
Works Cited


