For over a thousand years there has been great conflict between two parties over a specific piece of land, in a specific place, with emotional and life-threatening decisions being made over concerns of religion, economics, race, culture, historical ownership rights, and colonial ambitions. The two parties, each feeling legitimate in their rights and grievances, and driven by a fanatical desire to win, have met violently on many occasions. Both parties fall within the national borders of the larger and stronger power, yet both have been unwilling to stop the conflict. This place of course, is Northern Ireland. This paper will show a possible way ahead for Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution through societal dialogue and understanding, by showing the benefits of comprehensive opinion polling of both sides in the conflict, by showing that each society must acknowledge and understand the seriousness of the other side’s priorities, and by each society appreciating the sequence in which they believe the issues should be addressed.

**Context**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has frequently been compared to the Northern Ireland dispute and some have referenced the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 as a model for Israelis and Palestinians to follow. While the two conflicts are distinct in many ways, there are important lessons that can be taken from the Northern Ireland experience and applied to Israelis and Palestinians.

One feature that parallels with the Israel-Palestine dispute are the roles of the communities’ conflicting identities and denial of legitimacy towards the other side. For instance, many Republican Nationalists in Northern Ireland sought, and some still do seek, a liberated and united Ireland where the Protestants would be allowed to remain in the land as a religious community with Irish citizenship, but not as Unionists with British citizenship or national representation. Similarly, many Unionists may have also considered the Catholics to be only a religious community who may live under Great Britain’s sovereignty with British citizenship, but not with Irish national status.[[1]](#footnote--1)

Palestinian and Israeli citizens also seem to find themselves in a cycle of denial and zero-sum mentality. For example, Palestinians who seek a greater Palestine, incorporating both the area of the West Bank and the parts of Israel that had formerly been ‘Palestinian’, would subject Israelis to very limited rights (and limited citizenship) in a way that is similar to the current state of affairs but with a Palestinian majority rule. There has also been denial of Palestinian national identity on the Israeli side, such as when Golda Meir provocatively stated that “there are no Palestinians” back in 1969, rather that Palestinians are simply “Arabs” who already have 22 other states. This seemed to change slightly within Israeli thinking during the Rabin years and the Oslo Accords, but the denial has persisted on the Israeli right and may have reflected broader Israeli society.[[2]](#footnote-0) Israel’s continued control of the West Bank (and until 2005, Gaza Strip) and increase in settlements within only emboldens those who would see those territories as just another part of Israel.

Despite these similarities, the conflicting identities between Israelis and Palestinians probably cannot be reconciled through the same political structure as exists in Northern Ireland today. Instead, Israelis’ and Palestinians’ conflicting narratives and identities only affirm the need for a two-state solution. In the Northern Ireland Assembly, coalition quotas ensure that the largest Republican and Unionist parties are always part of the same government. Such power sharing may be acceptable to both communities because they have sovereign states to represent their conflicting identities (the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain). In comparison, Israelis and Palestinians will not simultaneously share one territory and have other states represent their core identities.[[3]](#footnote-1)  Both peoples care about how the state represents their identity and their narrative, and one state probably will not be able to reconcile their conflicting attributes.

Effective peace building requires the reestablishment of all those elements of a society that make it a functioning success. In the first instance an absence of dialogue between the conflicting parties must be replaced with reliable means of communication that can open an honest dialogue on all the issues that lie at the center of the conflict. Secondly, once the talking has begun for real, discussion must lead to serious negotiations and decision-making on each element of an agreement that provides answers for every failed social practice and dysfunctional (or lacking) political institution. Finally, once the agreement is reached it must be implemented in full, with as much energy, concern and attention to detail as the negotiations themselves.[[4]](#footnote-2) Peace requires both diligence and patience and in this the support of all of the elements of the society must be encouraged to play a constructive role if a return to violence and war is to be avoided.

**Opinion Polling**

In Northern Ireland public opinion polls were used to enhance all of these essential processes by helping to establish real dialogue and effective communications; explore problems and their solutions; define the critical issues and associated questions and last, but by no means least, help to keep the peace process on track by facilitating a discourse in which the society as a whole could play a part in the decision making process. Many times political parties find they have to align themselves with different sections of society and communities to get elected. In deeply divided societies this reality has led to the increased polarization of party policies and their associated electorate when most people, most of the time, would prefer accommodation, peace and the prosperity that flows from political stability.[[5]](#footnote-3)

There are also things that public opinion polls should not be used for in peace processes. They can be designed to undermine the efforts of peace builders when polls are used by one party in a conflict to advance their own agenda while ignoring the concerns of the other. Questions can also be designed to create animosity and even a lack of hope by addressing just the problems and not their solutions or by showing just the fears and biases of each community while ignoring the hopes and goals of the society to move beyond past failures. Those who have a large interest in a continuation of the status quo can also use public opinion polls to do harm by attempting to undermine agreements by selectively revisiting the concessions that only one side, their side, has made.[[6]](#footnote-4) The media and academics should avoid these temptations to grab a headline and create disagreement in an effort to ratings or to gain notoriety, but this is unfortunately not always the case.

The political parties elected to participate in the negotiations on the future of Northern Ireland were invited (and agreed) to participate in the drafting of a new poll designed to address all the issues presently holding up progress in the negotiations. Public opinion polls were used in Northern Ireland to create a form of inter-track diplomacy through an on-going process of questionnaire design with the politicians, interviews with their electorate and publication of survey results in the local press. This did not happen over night by way of some carefully designed diplomatic strategy but over a period of months and years during which time all the elements of this peace building exercise were put into place. The political consultations, interviews, analysis, writing and publication were genuinely independent, from beginning to end, across all three tracks of the process. Consequently the parties had confidence in the process and took the results of the research seriously.[[7]](#footnote-5)

Due to security concerns the Israeli government has erected both legal and physical barriers that make simple dialogue between the peacemakers on both sides very difficult and sometimes not possible. Informal interactions between academics, journalists, academics, researchers and politicians are restricted between the two communities. As a consequence of these policies the polling work in Israel and Palestine is often dominated by partisan agendas that emphasize problems rather than solutions. Without the right to the freedom of association and communication between those who would be peacemakers on both sides and earnest encouragement for them to exercise that right, society can never become an effective partner in the peace.

**Understanding the Seriousness of the Other Team**

A significant problem in each of these conflicts is each side not taking the issues and concerns of other party seriously. Specifically, each group believes that the complaints put forward by other party - particularly those directed at themselves - are not more than political rhetoric designed to create internal disunity and distrust between their respective communities. The issues of the other party therefore, concerns and complaints are viewed as not genuine and therefore do not need to be addressed as part of the settlement. To move forward, societies must get all the parties to a conflict to list the elements of the conflict, as seen from their point of view, in acceptable neutral terms and test them against public opinion to see which issues are genuine concerns of the respective communities and which are not.

In Northern Ireland, once polling was done within each community, the combined ‘answers’ were polled across all communities, and while the level of priority or support given to topics from the other side were never viewed with concurrent and overwhelming support, there was a full understanding by both parts of Northern Irish society as to what grievances were held by each other and in what order they must be addressed.[[8]](#footnote-6)

Much of the polling done on the Israel-Palestine conflict is done in one community or state or another for the consumption of the people and politicians in those communities or states. The polling is not generally done to inform Israeli and Palestinian citizens exactly what each other’s priorities are for peace and how best to get there. It is not an on-going dialogue between the conflicting parties but more frequently a statement of their respective negotiating positions. Israelis and Palestinians live in their separate worlds maintained through the barriers of security walls, checkpoints, media, etc. A successful peace process must necessarily bridge these gaps and past polls have attempted to do this. The specific problems of each community had been prioritized but unlike Northern Ireland this program of public opinion polling, data collection, and in essence, diplomacy was terminated, the problems were not addressed, and the peace process failed.[[9]](#footnote-7) The reinvigoration of such neutral party polling would be vital to the discovery of each groups concerns, and the ability to have a common sense of understanding of the priority of all issues from both sides.

**Understanding the Sequence of Their Agenda**

Each party to a conflict want their particular agenda dealt with first, preferably as a precondition to the negotiations proper. Such rigidity can stop negotiations in the pre-negotiation phase so no negotiations can even begin to occur in a real or meaningful way. The solution to this is to test proposals for certain preconditions against public opinion and willingness to stop or start negotiations. When we do not want the other side’s issues dealt with before ours and vice-versa, this will stop any negotiation before they even begin. However, on many occasions, both communities may actually prefer negotiations to go ahead without any preconditions or delays at all, particularly if the issue is not critical to their safety or security.

 In Northern Ireland, the Unionists took the view that several of the issues that were part of the agenda for peace talks should not be items for negotiation at all because they were in breach of domestic UK or international European law. Particularly, the Unionists believed removing para-military weapons belonging to the IRA, and the removal of the Irish claim over the territory of Northern Ireland, as written in the Irish constitution, were not matters for negotiation. Rather they felt these issues should be settled to the satisfaction of Unionists before the

main negotiations begin. Republicans and Nationalists accepted none of

this, as they believed Unionists would not continue to negotiate once they had got what they wanted on these Unionist points. Public polling questions were developed that discovered that only a small minority considered it unacceptable not to continue on with talks and to let particular, side specific conditions and issues be dealt with as negotiations were ongoing.[[10]](#footnote-8)

One of the main reasons negotiations between Israel and Palestine are not getting past the start line because of the settlement issue. Palestinians are asking for no more settlement expansion during negotiations. Israelis want an end the frequent rocket attacks from Gaza and attacks on Israeli citizens inside the West Bank. The Palestinians have been able to arrange such ceasefires in the past (although limited in duration and perhaps no agreed upon by all Palestinian groups) so a poll that looks at possibilities of limiting attacks and Israeli settlement expansion in a balanced way should produce a positive result. Such a poll that examines every conceivable precondition from both a Palestinian and Israeli point of view, however extreme and unreasonable, has never been run because, in a peace poll, the complete reasonableness of balanced accommodations tied only to negotiations would inevitably come through as the logical choice, and this is not necessarily the popular societal or political choice.[[11]](#footnote-9)

**Conclusion**

While understanding the other side’s grievances and aspirations does help in creating a more peaceful environment, there does not necessarily need to be genuine peace between rival groups before a sustainable peace accord can be implemented. Decades after the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland there is still a great deal of tension between the communities and they rarely come into contact with each other. However, though the accord was not a perfect peace, the vast majority of both groups still support it because it resulted in an end of violence. If there was one thing Unionists and Irish nationalists agreed on it was that they wanted the violence to stop, and many Israelis and Palestinians feel the same way. Perhaps one of the most important lessons Northern Ireland has for the Middle East is that Israelis and Palestinians probably will not and do not need to have genuinely peaceful relations before a final status solution can be implemented. Rather, a peace agreement will only be the next step in the process towards reconciliation.

Of course, if there are not going to be friendly relations between most Israelis and Palestinians before a final agreement, it is the leaders who will need to prepare the societies to make the sacrifices necessary for peace. Just days before the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, 83 percent of those in Northern Ireland did not think such an agreement was possible. Yet, when the British and Irish leaders signed the accord, over 70 percent of people in Northern Ireland supported it. Even though the Good Friday Agreement may be dated at this point, it still shows how leaders can develop the societies for a peace agreement by taking an initiative and preparing the people to make sacrifices that are necessary for the better good of future generations. “Both societies [Israelis and Palestinians] need leaders who are able to convince their people that compromise is not a weakness but a virtue necessary to secure the well-being of future generations; leaders who will act boldly to halt and reverse the descent into a new round of violence that will be terribly harmful to both societies.”[[12]](#footnote-10)

Since the Good Friday Agreement, the Republican Nationalists and Unionists still find themselves some distance away from a perfect peace, but they are in a far more peaceful state than they were during the Troubles. If Israelis and Palestinians want a similarly bright future, they will need to slightly change their tone and acknowledge that there is another side. Israelis do not need to wait for the Palestinians to become Zionists before they can reach a two-state agreement that ensures their security. Palestinians shouldn’t wait on Israelis to adopt every part of their narrative. Simple shows of basic respect for each other’s society can go a long way in laying the foundation for the sacrifices necessary for a more peaceful future.[[13]](#footnote-11)

By using neutral and cross-community polling to involve both societies in the peace negotiations, by acknowledging the seriousness of the other party’s priorities, and by appreciating the sequence in which the other side believes the issues should be addressed, there is a possible way ahead in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. As Northern Island has shown, the dialogue and common ground (even if only in the speed in which both sides want negotiations conducted) between two peoples is the critical foundation of any successful peace.

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