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FINAL ESSAY

“The Role of Ethnicity as a Cause in the First Palestinian Intifada”

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MVZ489 Causes of Political Violence

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Introduction

The *First Intifada* – lasting from December 1987 through Madrid Conference in 1991, alternatively until Oslo Accords in 1993 – was a Palestinian uprising against Israel. It is also known as part of the Palestinian struggle for national self-determination. With Palestinians being part of the Arab minority¹ in Israel, living namely in the occupied territories seized after the Six-Day War of 1967, the Palestinian dissatisfaction and struggle for national self-determination was growing ever since the 1967 conflict, and it became even more apparent after the Jordanian king renounced his shielding of the Arabs living in the West Bank. The First Intifada then showed to the whole world how the dissatisfaction can exceed into an armed struggle, with the *Second Intifada* to follow not too long afterwards.

It is, however, questionable whether it is possible to understand the *Intifada* – in fact either of the two – as a purely ethnic matter or whether there are other factors that contributed or played part in the struggles. This essay shall argue that the ethnic factor only is not sufficient to explain the causes of the *Intifada*. Although it might have been one of the triggers – or rather a shared denominator for the minority in question – as the people in the occupied territories were to a smaller or bigger extent being treated differently from the general Israeli population, the matter is far more complex than just an ethnic struggle.

Thus, this essay shall look into the ethnic element of the *First Intifada*: how big of a role it played and whether the research theory will prove or disprove the above-mentioned statement that ethnicity alone *cannot* be seen as the only reason for the uprising. The author's initial hypothesis is that ethnicity alone cannot be seen as a sole source of the conflict. Due to the scope of the paper, only the *First Intifada* shall be examined, although it would surely be interesting to compare both of the *Intifadas*, namely in terms whether ethnicity played bigger role in either of them separately as well as in comparison to each other.

¹ There are also other Arabs minorities in Israel who, however, do not identify as Palestinians.

Methodology

This paper builds on a small-N method as only one case is being analyzed – it is a *single case study*. The applied theory is the theory of *primordialism* and especially Kaplan's interpretation of *ancient hatreds*. Based on this theory, differences between ethnicities – in this case between the Palestinians (Arabs) and Jews² in the area – should be perceived as:

“... ancestral, deep and irreconcilable (Esteban et al., 2012) and as such ethnic conflict stems naturally and inevitably from ‘ancient hatreds’ between ethnic groups (Weir, 2012).”³

Further, *primordialism* “explains the fear of domination, expulsion or even extinction that lies at the base of most ethnic conflicts (Glazer, 1986:429) and reveals the attachment to beliefs that provoke a depth of emotion and sheer intensity that drive the violent atrocities committed in these conflicts.”⁴

Although the theory of “pure” *primordialism* is now being widely overthrown⁵, there still are tendencies to oversimplify the Arab-Israeli conflict and its causes in terms of interpreting it as a result of mere ethnic differences – *ancient hatreds*. Aim of this paper is to show that the matter cannot be oversimplified in such a manner and interpreted only in terms of *ancient hatreds* and inter-group antagonism and that the causes also include national self-determination, political causes, and economic issues, to name a few, which are the areas that *primordialism* largely ignores as it sees the violent tendencies as genetically encoded⁶.

The two ethnicities that are being analyzed in this paper are Palestinians and the Israeli Jews. Since *Palestinians* were the minority that rebelled, it is necessary to explain how they are perceived from the ethnic point of view in the area of Israel. MAR project labels them as an

² Jews are an *ethnoreligious* group and shall be further in this essay treated as such.

³ Williams, Dodeye Uduak. (2015) “How Useful are the Main Existing Theories of Ethnic Conflict?” *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 4.01. Rome: MCSER Publishing. Retrieved from <http://www.mcser.org/journal/index.php/ajis/article/viewFile/5964/5735> on [June 14, 2016], p.147.

⁴ Ibid 147.

⁵ Ibid 147.

⁶ Ibid 148.

*ethnonationalist*⁷:

“These are regionally concentrated peoples with a history of organized political autonomy with their own state, traditional ruler, or regional government, who have supported political movements for autonomy at some time since 1945.”

Further, there are also other Arab minorities that live in the area of Israel, who, however, do not identify as Palestinians and therefore are not being part of the analyzed sample.

Last but not least, it is important to define how *ethnic conflict* is understood in this paper. It is interpreted based on the MAR definition as:

“Episodes of violent conflict between governments and national, ethnic, religious, or other communal minorities (ethnic challengers) in which the challengers seek major changes in their status.”

Moreover, it is expected that members of an *ethnic community* share common markers, such as religion, language, history, common origin or nationality, language, which creates a *common identity*, they, however, have to actively identify with and which should also be recognized externally⁸.

⁷ Minorities at Risk Project. (2009c) “Minorities at Risk Dataset.” College Park, MD: Center for International Development and Conflict Management. Retrieved from <http://www.mar.umd.edu/> on: [June 13, 2016].

⁸ Based on the lecture notes.

1. Palestinians in Israel

1.1. Overview of the Pre-Intifada History

First Zionists to settle in the area of Palestine came in the period of 1800 – 1900 AD⁹. Important move was the capture of Palestine from the Ottoman Empire during the WWI and approving of the British mandate – result of the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement¹⁰ and the 1917 Balfour Declaration¹¹ – over the territory by the League of Nations in 1920.

Key period in terms of modern Israeli-Palestinian history is 1947-1948 when the UN called for the partition of Palestine, 54% of which would become the Palestinian state and the remaining 46% would become a Jewish state. The IDF's "Plan D", however, forced some 300,000 Palestinians out of their homes, turning them into refugees, and helped to seize the areas of strategic value. Even after the 1948 Arab attack and war, Israel managed to acquire vast territories that were originally meant to be Arab lands. In result, some 725,000 more Palestinians "fled to Jordan and Lebanon where they constituted 50% and 10% of the population respectively."¹²

The PLO¹³ was formed in 1964. Then, during the Six-Day War of 1967, the West Bank, Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula were seized from Jordan, Egypt, and Syria respectively, with the seizure of Gaza Strip and the West Bank sending some 355,000 more Palestinian refugees to Jordan. Nonetheless, there was no resistance worth mentioning between this period until the First Intifada which erupted in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1987.

⁹ Unless stated otherwise, summary of the Palestinian history in Israel including direct quotes in this subchapter come from:

Minorities at Risk Project. (2009a) "Chronology for Palestinians in Israel." College Park, MD: Center for International Development and Conflict Management. Retrieved from <http://www.mar.umd.edu/> on: [June 13, 2016].

¹⁰ Sykes-Picot Agreement. (2016) "Sykes-Picot Agreement." N.p.: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. Retrieved from: <http://www.britannica.com/event/Sykes-Picot-Agreement>. on: [June 13, 2016].

¹¹ "What is Palestine and Palestinians?" (N.d.) N.p.: Israel Science and Technology Directory. Retrieved from: <http://www.science.co.il/History-Palestine.php> on [June 14, 2016].

¹² MAR Project (2009a)

¹³ Palestine Liberation Organization

1.2. Overview of the Ethnic Group Internal Dynamics

Palestinians who live in Israel in the areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip are the people who have not had a sovereign state for centuries.¹⁴ Though, there was no notion of the Palestinian Arab People as we know it today prior 1920¹⁵.

They share a common language – Arabic – and about 90% of them are Sunni Muslims. In fact, prior 1920, most of the people in the area identified as a group based on their religion; it was only after this period that the idea of nationalism and national formation was introduced in the area and to the peoples living there¹⁶. Most of these people are a second, third, or further generation of those Arabs, who fled or were forced to leave following the 1948 and 1967 wars.

They are still reported to live in poor conditions and suffer from social ills such as high unemployment risk, deteriorating health conditions, and rising birth rate. There are further issues being reported in the area especially from and around the time of the *Second Intifada* in 2000 which, however, is not subject of this paper and shall thus be not discussed any further.

¹⁴ Unless stated otherwise, summary of the Palestinian history in Israel including direct quotes in this subchapter come from:

Minorities at Risk Project. (2009b) “Assessment for Palestinians in Israel.” College Park, MD: Center for International Development and Conflict Management. Retrieved from <http://www.mar.umd.edu/> on: [June 13, 2016].

¹⁵ Pipes, Daniel. (N.d.) “Pre-State Israel: The Origins of the Palestinian Arabs.” N.p.: American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise. Retrieved from <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/History/palarabs.html> on: [June 14, 2016].

¹⁶ Ibid.

2. The First Intifada

The First Intifada began on December 9, 1987 after an Israeli truck hit two Palestinian cars, killing the workers inside. Palestinians understood it as retaliation for a murder of an Israeli tradesman in Gaza Strip on December 6 and the unrest broke out¹⁷. The *Intifada* is understood as a “popular Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem.¹⁸” It started as a spontaneous and organic incident in the Gaza refugee camp from where it then spread through the occupied territories; it was initially of a mostly non-violent character that however, after the first 18 months became fractioned and more frequent violence started occurring¹⁹. Nonetheless, there were also occurrences of violence prior the official *Intifada* eruption which are casting a shadow on the initially non-violent character, similarly as there were individual incidents of Palestinian violence; overall, though, the Palestinians are said to have managed to win the moral high ground for the first phase of the *First Intifada*, especially in comparison to the preceding PLO activities²⁰.

Although Yasser Arafat tried to present the *Intifada* as the PLO’s making, it was a spontaneous event characterized mainly by Palestinian demonstrations and unrests including stone-throwing, Molotov cocktails, and usage of light weapons. Heavy weaponry and suicide bombings were not characteristic for the *First Intifada*²¹. The numbers of Palestinians who were killed by the Israeli security forces in the occupied territories (including East Jerusalem) was by the end of 1993 1,100 people and 21 within the Green Line; the number of Israeli fatalities from the same time span and area equals 58 and 56 within the Green Line²². Some Palestinians were also killed by radicalized fellow Palestinians²³. Many of the killed Palestinians were children and youth which ignited sympathies for the Palestinians world-wide.

¹⁷ Čejka, Marek. (2011) “Dějiny moderního Izraele.” Praha: Grada publishing. Print.: 200

¹⁸ Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan. (2012) “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict.” N.p.: Columbia University Press. Ebook.: 278

¹⁹ Ibid 278.

²⁰ Ibid 279.

²¹ Čejka, Marek. (2005) “Izrael a Palestina.” Brno: Centrum strategických studií. Print.: 170

²² “Fatalities in the first Intifada.” (N.d.) Jerusalem: B'Tselem, The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. Retrieved from: http://www.btselem.org/statistics/first_intifada_tables on [June 15, 2016].

²³ Čejka (2005): 171.

2.1. Ethnic Dimension

It is often difficult to completely separate a purely ethnic dimension of the conflict from the political dimension, as many of the occurrences and issues are interwoven. Moreover, most of the issues that have ethnic background resulted in political measures or vice versa. Unless it is possible to clearly state that an issue is of purely ethnic character, it shall be discussed in section 2.2.

One of the roots of ethnic unrests was the issue of settlements in the occupied territories which became a phenomenon especially in the 1980s and which triggered creation of many radical groups between both Palestinians as well as Israelis in the area, some of which turned into terrorist groups; this was especially prominent in the 1980s with the anti-Arab groups²⁴. Moreover, one of such groups got elected into the Knesset in 1984.²⁵

Summer of 1987 foreshadowed events of the fall of 1987 – there were occurrences of mutual killings of members of the other ethnic group. In October, Israeli soldiers killed seven Palestinians from Gaza, assuming they were members of terrorist groups and then a Palestinian school girl was shot to death by a Jewish settler which was then answered by Palestinian unrests and violence; the last straw was the above mentioned truck incident of December 9.²⁶ Since the government was unsuccessful in handling the unrests, those Jewish settlers who were most impacted by the Intifada called for even more strict measures and kept forming their own armed militias²⁷.

Important moment from the ethnic point of view was how Yasser Arafat used the opportunities the Intifada provided him with to “regain control over his dispossessed people”: he used the media coverage as his platform to spread the explanation that “what was happening was the direct result of Israel’s policy of stealing Arab land” and he “urged every Arab to rally in support,” including Hamas as well as Lebanese leaders of Islamic Jihad; his cause managed something previously unthinkable: to unite Arabs “of all persuasions in a common cause.”²⁸

²⁴ Čejka (2005): 169

²⁵ Ibid 169.

²⁶ Ibid 170

²⁷ Ibid 171.

²⁸ Thomas, Gordon. (2008) “Gideon’s Spies.” London: JR Books. Print: 199-200

2.2. Political Dimension

The tension in the occupied territories between Palestinians and Israelis has been growing throughout 1987 after Yitzhak Shamir became the Prime Minister and with the upcoming 20th anniversary of the Six-Day War of 1967 when serious unrests erupted in Gaza and the West Bank²⁹. One of the contributing factors was also the inability of PLO as well as other Arab states to defend the Palestinian interests;³⁰ in other words, “Palestinians living in the occupied territories recognized that neither Arab armies nor the PLO would liberate them from Israeli occupation.³¹”

Moreover, life of those who lived in the West Bank and Gaza was plagued by complications such as free movement restrictions between Palestinian cities that also included waiting at checkpoints. Additionally, they often had to put up with dismissive behavior of Israeli soldiers and various forms of repressions such as mass arrests, house demolitions, deportations, and the like, provided there was a suspicion of terrorism³². Further, Shamir’s policy of settlement-building in the occupied territories additionally made life of Palestinians in the area complicated which became troublesome especially in the 1970s since it ignited the notion that the occupation is not only temporary³³.

When the unrests fully erupted in December 1987, Israel was unprepared for such an event and their reaction was conducted in an equally unprepared manner – without any unified plan and with the help of the army, since the police forces were not numerous enough. This all resulted in a rather tough reaction on the Israeli side, increasing number of losses on the side of Palestinians which, in return, caused more unrests, with the death toll being significantly higher for the Palestinians³⁴.

Although the Israeli intelligence community – especially Mossad and Shin Bet – were actively launching operations to stop the *Intifada*, not only had their operations “done nothing to daunt Arab determination” but also the guerillas were able to “outsmart the Israelis, whose only response seemed to be violence and more violence” which resulted in the world

²⁹ Čejka, Marek. (2005) “Izrael a Palestina.” Brno: Centrum strategických studií. Print.: 169

³⁰ Ibid 169

³¹ Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan. (2012): 287,5

³² Ibid 282,1

³³ Saleh (2002) in Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan. (2012): 283,4

³⁴ Gordon (2008): 198 & Čejka (2005): 171

watching Israel not only to fail to stop the *Intifada* “but also to lose the propaganda war”³⁵ as well as the moral high ground.

2.3. Economic Dimension

One of the first issues that contributed to the eruption of unrests that resulted in the *Intifada* breakout was the rising unemployment between the Palestinian population.³⁶ When the *Intifada* was in full swing, some of the Palestinian merchants started taking measures such as boycotting Israeli goods or refusal to pay Israeli taxes; the already weak Palestinian economics was further weakened by subsequent Israeli counter-measures³⁷. In fact, “every Arab community that was postered with instructions in Arabic on how to stage strikes, to close shops, boycott Israeli goods, refuse to recognize the civil administration.”³⁸ Reasons for such behavior was the fact that the occupied territories were “made entirely dependent, economically, on Israel [as] Palestinian products were denied entry into Israel, and nearly 90 percent of all goods imported into the territories came from Israel.”³⁹

The measures taken by Israel ignited disapproval in the international community including the UN and the economic help flowing to Israel started being conditioned by their behavior, which, however, is an interesting result of the Intifada, not its trigger⁴⁰.

2.4. Nationalist Dimension

Before the *First Intifada* broke out, according to the Israeli law at the time, “ ‘terrorist activities’ included everything from painting slogans and graffiti to singing national songs to making the victory sign, displaying the Palestinian flag, throwing stones, burning tires, demonstrating, and forming political gatherings” on top of which the “authorities arrested or detained close to half a million Palestinians for these reasons prior to and during the First Intifada⁴¹” which testifies for a strong pressure on Palestinians as a political and national entity.

³⁵ Gordon (2008): 199

³⁶ Čejka (2005): 169

³⁷ Ibid 171.

³⁸ Gordon (2008): 199

³⁹ Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan. (2012): 282,1

⁴⁰ Čejka (2005): 172.

⁴¹ Benvenisti 1987 in Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan. (2012): 282,1

3. Interpretation

The preceding passages clearly suggest that causes of the *Intifada* are far more complex than just a pure ethnic matter or a result of *ancient hatreds*. The final spark that ignited the conflict in full had ethnic connotations, though, was not purely ethnic, even though it initially started as retaliation for a putative attack on members of an ethnic group.

There had been an ongoing tension between the two ethnic groups in the area that has its historic roots dating back to 1948 and 1967 as well as it has its roots in animosity between Arabs and Jews that is generally typical for the area. Then, partially, especially due to the latter reason, can concept of *ancient hatreds* be seen as a contributing factor, however, not as the main reason for the unrest. The tension took forms of economic pressure, political pressure, and also of nationalist conflicts. These matters became so interwoven within the system that one case was influencing another and they were no longer possible to be separated or seen as pure ethnic matter.

Provided the hatred between Arabs and Jews would be irreconcilable, any peace between any of the Arab nations and Israel would not be possible. This had already been proven wrong based on historic experience – Israel made a peace treaty with Egypt in 1978 during the *Camp David Accords*. Thus, there is a precedent that can be seen as a disproof of the generalized assumption that no peace between the two ethnic groups is possible.

It is true that *primordialism* offers a partial explanation in terms of fear of *domination*, *extinction*, and *expulsion*, which was especially palpable due to Shamir's policy measures regarding the settlements in the occupied territories, anti-terrorist measures, and with the heavy pressure being put on many aspects of the Palestinian life, especially the restrictions on free movement and economic measures that made Palestinian life difficult.

Although many of the measures were targeted directly at Palestinians who represent a different ethnic group in the area, it is questionable to what extent was the pressure result of them being a different ethnicity and to what extent would similar pressure arise regardless of who lived in the areas in question, even if they were not a unified ethnic group. There are other Arabs in Israel and they were not subjected to the same form of pressure, even though they were technically members of the same ethnic class.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to show that Kaplan's theory of *ancient hatreds* and *primordialism* as such are insufficient as an explanation of causes of the *First Intifada*. The paper explained who Palestinians are and how they settled in the area as well as when and how the problems leading to the *Intifada* started.

These problems are related to the 1948 and 1967 wars and subsequent seizure of areas where there lived Arabs who started calling themselves Palestinians. The paper also explained that their nationalist feeling as an "ethnic group" was built gradually due to external European encroachment in and around 1920. Thus, the idea of *ancient hatreds* can be hardly fully used as an explanation, as the ethnicity in question was fairly young.

The paper also showed how complicated and interwoven the causes were and that they concern areas of ethnicity as well as politics, economics, and nationalism, all of which also had its own dimensions and sub-dimensions of influence on the situation in question. Thus, ethnicity alone cannot, once again, be seen as *the one* single cause of the uprising. Interestingly, though, the *Intifada* helped to strengthen Palestinian national identity and self-awareness, decreased the dependence on neighboring Arab states (especially Jordan) and also led to strengthening the demands on their own statehood⁴².

To sum up, although it is true that the differences – discrimination and well as exclusion – of Palestinians from the Israeli society can be attributed to ethnicity, it is, however, not possible to prove that ethnicity was *the one* single reason of the outbreak of the *Intifada*. Therefore, the initial hypothesis that ethnic factor alone cannot constitute the sole reason for the uprising was proven correct.

⁴² Čejka (2005): 172

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<http://www.mcser.org/journal/index.php/ajis/article/viewFile/5964/5735> on [June 14, 2016].