The Israeli-Palestinian Impasse and Theories of Peace in International Relations

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Scholars of international relations (IR) have been confronted with ideas and concepts from a wealth of theoretical camps within the discipline. Each of these theories consists of their own notions of peace and war, while offering recommendations as to how nations can best create harmony with one another. Outside of the field of IR, there exists a more general field of "peace and conflict studies", one that is interdisciplinary in nature and fits rather easily within the realm of the social sciences. What is surprising, however, is that the field of IR does not encompass its own separate field of peace studies, for students and scholars who are drawn to learning particularly about peace in IR.

This article will consider theories of IR, mainly from the realist and liberal theoretical camps, by analyzing the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in answering two specific questions: First, how does IR theory account for peace and can these theories be applied to the case at hand?; and, second, does this literature lead us to believe that peace is possible between Israelis and Palestinians? This article will seek to answer the questions presented above by arguing that IR literature does not sufficiently account for peace and differing theories of peace IR do not present a cohesive approach to peace.

How is Peace Defined/Understood in Academic Literature?

Peace is sought out and desired by leaders of nations as an alternative to war and conflict. However, defining what peace entails is often challenging. It is easier to recognize what peace is not rather than what it ought to be. So, as scholars of international relations we may ask ourselves, how do we recognize when peace exists among nations? This phenomenon may not be completely obvious and a closer look into the current academic literature can shed some light on understanding peace.

Within IR, peace research has been a trending topic although it continues to be marginalized (Neufeld 165). One scholar argues that "part of peace research's self-marginalisation involved an avoidance of defining peace, and even (to an extent) peace research" (Neufeld 177). Perhaps this avoidance comes from the fact that peace is often difficult to identify and recognize; further, absolute peace may not be fully achievable. For example, the fine line between lasting peace and temporary peace, such as a ceasefire, is often muddled as there may be a lack of conditions as to what such peace involves and who is the proper authority, if there is one, to enforce peace. Regardless, such an occurrence does not mean that peace is impossible. Therefore, it is important to define the concept of peace so that its place within IR can be more easily identified and better applied to a case of ongoing ethno-political turmoil and violence, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

For the purposes of this article, this author defines "peace" as, "The successful implementation of agreeable conditions for preventing conflict between nations." These conditions are often approved upon in advance and implemented by the nations in question and may at certain times be brought on or negotiated with the assistance of a

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third party. Such an example may be seen with the Camp David Accords, which were signed in 1978 between Israel and Egypt with a framework implemented with the assistance of the U.S. Although this author's definition of peace evidently offers a simplistic view, it is perhaps one that can largely be agreed upon. Peace, to a large extent, does not currently exist in Israel/Palestine because conflict can, and continues to, erupt at any time. Despite this fact, several measures have been taken to bring peace to the region.

Peace between nations may be reached through several means and there is no "right" way to achieving peace, although there can be many "wrong" ways that can lead to further disagreements and animosity between parties. For example, peace treaties, such as the Camp David Accords mentioned above, are a positive step towards peace although they do not prevent conflict from erupting between states. They merely commit states to refraining from conflict through negotiated conditions, although violence may still occur without a lack of severe penalties imposed on the offending nation. In essence, ceasefires are another method of securing temporary peace between nations. Israeli and Palestinian leaders have both agreed to temporary ceasefires on numerous occasions although violence has endured. For example, in 2008, Israel and Hamas agreed to a ceasefire that was evidently a failure as a result of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza several months later (Milton-Edwards 225). Both peace treaties and ceasefires do not permanently halt nor prevent conflict, particularly in the Middle Eastern region. This is likely as a result of low stakes and a lack of genuine commitment from those involved to agree to the proposed terms. Moreover, there is little that can be done when a state violates a peace treaty or ceasefire.

Peace evidently means different things to different people, particularly within a heated conflict such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One scholar argues, "Palestinians and Israelis experience the conflict in different ways, which affects their definition of peace" (Hallward). For Israelis, relative peace may be a period without rockets launched from the Gaza Strip or suicide bombings in Israeli cities, which in principle resembles a ceasefire. On the contrary, for Palestinians, peace may merely be perceived as freedom from Israeli occupation, which goes beyond the notion of cessation of violence and also comprises a psychological component of autonomy and recognition. Further, both sides do not only have different views regarding the notion of peace, but often view it as a "dirty" word given the failures of the Oslo peace process (Hallward). Many Israelis and Palestinians were optimistic about the potential for harmony between both sides as a result of the Accords; however, like many peace treaties both before and after their time, Israelis and Palestinians ultimately failed to see eye to eye on many issues. In some ways, peace in the region may not appear to be realistic given past events. Therefore, proper political and social conditions may be necessary to ensure the implementation of a long-lasting peace.

Benjamin Miller, Professor of International Relations at the University of Haifa, distinguishes between two kinds of peace and two kinds of war – "hot war" and "cold war" and "cold peace" and "warm peace" (163-164). According to Miller's definition, a conflict between nations will generally fit within one of these categories for the most part. Israel and Palestine can be characterized as being situated between a hot and cold war because violence between both sides is a necessary occurrence although actual wars are not as frequent. Whereas a hot war is a situation involving the actual use of force, a cold war is one where hostilities can break out at any moment, though there is no actual shooting (Miller 163-164). Warm peace might be considered an ideal category because it is the only condition in which a certain degree of disarmament is considered (Miller 164). This article will now turn to addressing the two questions posed earlier.

Question 1: Does IR Theory Account for Peace?

Although peace is an increasingly relevant topic, not only within IR but academia itself, it does not have clearly demarcated borders within the field. For example, "peace studies" does not occupy a distinct area of study in IR in the same manner as "security studies". Instead, it is an interdisciplinary field within the social sciences that draws on political science, sociology, history, anthropology, theology, psychology and philosophy (*Kroc Institute)*. These fields may often be referred to by similar names such as "peace and conflict studies", "social justice", "conflict and human rights", all of which essentially have similar aims.

Perhaps the lack of a specific peace studies agenda in IR is due to the fact that the topic of peace can be found in almost any area within IR and political science more generally. On the contrary, theoretical approaches within IR can

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each be said to have their own perspectives on peace. Oliver P. Richmond, Research Professor of International Relations at the University of Manchester, argues that peace "has rarely been directly approached as an area of study within IR" (439). This may also be as a result of the fact that peace between states is difficult to achieve, and so scholars may tend to avoid providing prescriptions but instead seek to analyze and question the phenomenon of peace. It is surely less challenging to study and investigate a conflict such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than conjure up its prospects for peace, a term that a universal definition remains without.

Over the past few decades, IR has witnessed a trajectory from a discipline focused largely on the creation of peace to one in which the cessation of war has become paramount, which in many aspects does not imply peace. This shift in focus is quite diverse. IR scholars, for the most part, have moved many decades ago from a preoccupation with idealistic notions of peace to a world where "realist" tendencies have dominated. Although more critical theories, including post-colonialism, post-structuralism and feminism, which each differ in their own ways have made major headway in the discipline, a state-centric view in the field continues to linger. IR continues to be prejudiced and gendered despite this push. Therefore, regardless of efforts by many scholars who emphasize the significance of non-state actors, the state and international levels of analysis often continue to be privileged over the individual, the latter of which often appears to be a much weaker actor in IR.

The shift in adopting one theoretical perspective over another in the field of IR was not as a result of coincidence, but instead of a need. In a time when the global political climate was relatively quiet, the paradigm of liberalism was dominant. Liberalism enabled scholars and students alike to describe global events, offer explanations and apply the theory of liberalism, which happened to be most relevant at the time. Conversely, at the height of the Second World War, priorities and demands changed. Realism emerged as the most appropriate theory to explain why nations around the world broke out into a state of chaos. This shift in thinking went from a possible universe in which idealism reigned, to one where pessimism took over the minds of many and essentially erased the thought that peace was possible. Events such as the Cold War and the fall of communism across Europe further confirmed that realism was the theory best suited to explain international events. Although the popularity of realism continues today, it is no longer the dominant theory as it once was. Global events have changed drastically and although wars have continued to break out, they are sporadic and to a lesser extent than they once were.

Based upon what has been mentioned in this article regarding the topic of peace in IR, it is evident that IR theory does account for peace to an extent, although much more work is necessary to bridge a gap that leaves many questions unanswered. Peace literature is evident through the wealth of theoretical perspectives within the field, each possessing their own viewpoints as to what peace entails and if, as well as how, it may be realistically implemented. One issue of concern is the fact that there is not one overarching theory of peace in IR and one's approach to peace depends upon which lens, and theory, one is utilizing. Human beings by nature possess their own biases and prejudices, ultimately influencing their thoughts and actions. Liberal views of peace are often directly opposed to realist ideas, with other approaches falling somewhere in-between, and so the question becomes how to best integrate theories of peace so that there can be a common understanding in IR. This task may appear ambitious and unrealistic, since attempting to bridge diverse viewpoints together will likely prove challenging. However, the common goal of peace is relatively the same.

One reason as to why IR might not have an overarching theory of peace is because it may be viewed as largely theoretical and not practical. Therefore, it is not expected that a scholar will successfully implement a peace theory in solving a global ethnic conflict. As Richmond argues, "Peace is seen to be something to aspire to though it is perhaps not achievable. This failure rests on human nature for realists, or the failure of institutions for liberals and idealists" (449). Perhaps realists, liberals, and thinkers alike, should focus less on the ultimate goal of peace and instead work towards greater empathy that can hopefully lead to a better understanding between individuals and groups. Empathy is another area of IR that is not sufficiently theorized as one scholar notes (Head 95). This leads us to tackle the second question posed in this article in considering whether peace is possible between Israelis and Palestinians based upon IR literature.

Question 2: Is Peace Possible Between Israelis and Palestinians?

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Traditional IR literature does lead us to believe that peace between Israelis and Palestinians is a viable prospect although, as previously mentioned, the current material is not sufficient to assess the application of concepts of peace to conflict. Regardless of the lens utilized by IR scholars, almost every theory within the discipline deals with the topic of peace in one form or another. For example, realists are pessimistic in regards to the potential for peace and view peace as the period between two wars. In other words, they believe in the inevitability of the return to a state of war given the anarchical international arena and seek to prolong this period between wars. Thus, realists essentially argue that peace is possible in some instances although it is likely not permanent. Liberals, on the other hand, have traditionally been criticized for adopting a utopian point of view, with many of them believing that permanent peace is both viable and realistic.

Any theoretical perspective, both within and outside of the field of IR, possesses its own strengths as well as weaknesses, and liberalism and realism are no different. Merely adopting one approach over the other is unnecessary and impractical. On the one hand, although individuals and states can compromise and conflict can be avoided in many situations, depending on the circumstances or context, it cannot completely disappear. On the other hand, human beings have wants, needs and desires, which are often at odds with one another and often lead to disputes and even violence. Liberals are more likely to perceive mankind positively, whereas realists view individuals as selfish beings who will always act in their own self-interest.

Any student or scholar of IR will at some point come across the works of Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant. In the mid-1600s, Hobbes's *Leviathan* advanced the need for a social contract in order to develop rules within a society between government and those who are subsequently governed. Without such a contract, Hobbes argued, humans would be caught up in a state of nature in which the life of man remained "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (1651). One can only imagine the state of the world today if it were not for these social contracts, which bind individuals together under a common rule – the nation-state. Essentially, a social contract includes a provision of norms that have resulted in rules and regulations for what is morally acceptable and unacceptable within a society. All citizens are expected to follow these laws or else be subject to punishment. Nevertheless, assuming that human beings will always resort to violence in one form of another is a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is a criticism that has been levied on realists many times.

Approximately a hundred years later, the world was introduced to Kant, one of the founders of idealism, and his theory of "perpetual peace" in 1795. This theory largely introduced the liberal approach in IR that many scholars have come to adopt and defend. His writings paved the way for thinking how peace could be realistically implemented, even in a time of incessant conflict. Although he argued, similar to Hobbes, that the natural state of man was one of war, he believed that the cessation of violence between states was possible. More specifically, Kant argued:

A state of peace among men who live side by side is not the natural state, which is rather to be described as a state of war: that is to say, although there is not perhaps always actual open hostility, yet there is a constant threatening that an outbreak may occur. Thus the state of peace must be established (Kant 9).

Therefore, Kant argued that conditions for peace did not naturally occur and had to instead be created by individuals. Kant's ideas lay in contrast to Hobbes, the latter of whom was more pessimistic about man and believed that the social contract would not result in permanent peace, but instead would assist in preventing further conflict and protect man from his own state of nature.

Kant's ideas heavily influenced the subsequent notion of the "democratic peace theory", which argues that democracies are less likely to go to war together (Kauppi and Viotti 154). The central premise behind this theory is that because democracies possess similar values and beliefs about governance, rights and liberties, they are less likely to engage in violence with like-minded states. In considering whether democratic peace theory is still applicable today, one can look to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as two nations with opposing styles of government and rule, where religions, cultures, ideologies, values, and beliefs constantly clash. Israel is largely considered a democratic state since it fulfills many of the criteria of what a democracy should entail, although it has been harshly and routinely criticized for its treatment of Palestinians. On the other hand, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the West Bank is seemingly undemocratic and Hamas in Gaza is categorically authoritarian. According to the central

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premise of the democratic peace theory, both nations would need to be liberal democracies in order for future conflict to be avoided.

Although IR theory does lead us to believe that some form of peace between Israelis and Palestinians is a viable prospect, the steps or methods necessary to implement peace are generally not offered. Since each theory of IR offers its own perspective on peace, therefore, there is no proper way to approach the literature of peace, which is subjective in many ways. Subjectiveness arises out of various perspectives describing what peace entails and how it is best understood by various individuals whether they lie within or outside of academia. Although realists tend to believe in a temporary peace and liberals imagine one that is longer term, some form of peace beyond a ceasefire may be possible to envision depending on one's theoretical inclinations. This article does not aim to offer solutions to the conflict, but instead to open a wider discussion as to how peace may be possible between Israelis and Palestinians. Such a discussion can illustrate that peace might arise in different ways and through different means, even though the current literature on peace in IR remains unsatisfactory for the reasons stated earlier in this article.

Taking these issues into consideration, scholars, however, should not be penalized for a lack of solutions in achieving peace since they are not expected to solve global crises. Instead, as producers of academic knowledge, scholars can offer significant contributions to their respective fields through a process of questioning current theories all the while incorporating their own ideas based upon individual beliefs as well as intellectual backgrounds. Further, those involved in influencing decisions at a state level may be skeptical of academics and may not welcome their analysis and explanations, by naively implying that they may not know enough about the issues at hand. In this sense, there is a level of distrust between policy makers and academics, consequently influencing how academic knowledge is used in the broader political arena. Several authors argue, "While policymakers do use theory (what they refer to as background and frameworks), they are skeptical of much of academic social science which they see as jargon-ridden and overly focused on technique, at the expense of substantive findings" (Avey and Desch 228). Skepticism towards scholars does not indicate that they cannot, and should not, write about important issues and offer recommendations as intellectuals. In fact, greater awareness and enhanced discussion between academics and policy makers can lead to a more positive outcome for all involved and greater enhancement of knowledge.

Concluding Thoughts

This article has put forth two vital questions in offering a unique perspective in addressing the field of peace in international relations and has argued that although IR does include the topic of peace in many forms, which are evident through many of its theories, further research is necessary. Merely examining the extent of academic conferences and scholarly publications devoted to peace illustrates the importance in ensuring that peace research, particularly in IR, is enhanced in order to provide a better understanding of the issues along with the deep psychological and emotional impacts caused by war. As researchers, we cannot remain cynical in our hopes for peace, but instead must yearn for and work towards a better outcome through greater discussion and understanding.

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