SOCIOLOGY OF THE ISRAELI-
PALESTINIAN CONFRONTATION

A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He [sic] experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Albert Einstein

When our models of who we are fall away, we are free simply to meet and be together.

Baba Ram Dass and Paul Gorman

OVERVIEW

With the Cold War over and the desperate need to safeguard the fragile ecosystems of the planet, the time could be ripe for war to wind down. Openings to peace and restructuring—not without pain and not without violence—have manifested themselves in Ireland, the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, South Africa, and other places, including the Middle East. Yet with the collapse of the Post War ideological confrontation (between the so-called capitalist countries and the so-called socialist or communist ones), religious and ethnic strife, those archaic structures positively expressing identity and group affirmation and, as well, hatred, self-righteousness, and opposition, are renewing themselves.

However different their histories and present contexts, inter-communal conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, several parts of the former Soviet Union, Somalia, Rwanda, Lebanon, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Canada, China and environs, Sudan, and many other places are strikingly similar. They are all studies in national rivalries, sometimes mitigated by ideologies of democracy, inclusiveness, equality, and human rights, yet often exacerbated by ancient hatreds and associated absolutist systems of political and/or religious thought.

The conflict that for a very long time has appeared most intractable and a threat to the entire world is the Israeli-Palestinian antagonism, which even now, with yet another iteration of the “peace process,” is in a very precarious or non-existent state that could lead to further war—
even, conceivably, to one final nuclear conflagration. It is, then, especially fascinating and urgent to understand the terms of the tenacity of that confrontation (as well as that between Israel and its other Arab neighbors).

The conflict took a major turn in 1978 with the Camp David accords which established a peace, which has held, between Israel and Egypt, and in 1993 with the signing of the Declaration of Principles by both parties and the historic handshake between Rabin and Arafat on the White House lawn. In November 1995, Israeli Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated. Benjamin Netanyahu, who has not puedsh the peace process along, succeeded him as Prime Minister. Netanyahu gave way to Ehud Barak, who tried to broker peace but failed. Arik Sharon, Barak’s successor, followed. He gambled on Israeli withdrawal from Gaza playing a major part in ending violence between the two contending parties. But he became medically incapacitated before he could carry out what may have been his full plan. His successor, Ehud Olmert, seemed to be moving toward a viable two state solution but left office, under a cloud of scandal, before he could proceed fully toward that end. Under Olmert, Israel went to war with Lebanon and to its surprise and puzzlement, did not win. Sporadic decisions by Hamas to shell Israeli towns and villages from Gaza, and Israeli responses of massive force against Hamas in Gaza because of this, seems to go through cycles. From time to time, then, one side pursues its goals by way of guerrilla war, and the other, full state military war.

Some see the death of Arafat and his succession by Abu Abbas as steps that could move the parties toward peace at last. Yet violence in both directions grew under Arafat’s and Sharon’s leadership and although toned down now, have not ended. Israeli and Palestinian economies and morale have suffered mighty. Although by now Israel and the PA recognize each other’s national rights, and although a majority of Israelis and Palestinians accept what has appeared to many people as the eventuality of a Palestinian state alongside the Israeli state, the prospect of a renewed peace process looks uncertain, to say the least. And the two state solution itself is in doubt. Not fully coherent one-state solution are proposed increasingly frequently.

Meanwhile, world pressures on Israel to end the occupation of the West Bank (also known as Judea and Samaria) and to respect the separateness and independence of Gaza, grow. A BDS (boycott, divest, sanction) movement, called for by Palestinians (and somewhat parallel to the divestment movement called for years earlier by the African National Congress, the heart of anti-Apartheid opposition, does not seem to pose a major threat to Israel but is growing quickly enough that its effectiveness, if any, is not yet clear.

On both sides, rejectionists appear dedicated to preventing or destroying negotiations and remaining at the state of undeclared war. Indeed, although for some years, it has appeared that the contest was no longer between Israel and the Palestinians so much as between advocates of compromise and peace on the one hand and people committed to a zero-sum outcome of the conflict on the other, rejectionists on both sides seem in recent times to have tried to return it to a battle between Israeli Jews and Palestinians of Israel as well as the West Bank and Gaza.

It is well to learn of both parties from their own representatives and also from authors not directly involved. Throughout, the emphasis of the course will be on sociological analysis and
interpretation: what religious, ethnic, demographic, and personality characteristics define parties, the terms of conflict, and possibilities of resolutions? There will be special emphasis on the social psychology of nationalism, national identification, and adversary relationships.

The course accepts serious interest in its topic and does not suppose any background in the subject, sociology, or social psychology. The premium is on understanding and working with the concepts and readings of the course and on thinking creatively with them. It is assumed that real learning involves risk and re-thinking assumptions and familiar paradigms (with no preordained or “right” or “wrong” outcome of this process) as well as learning new information, concepts, and interpretations. We will pay attention to such matters as intellectual involvement, keeping up with the reading, attendance, and particularly in discussion sections, participation. All students are encouraged to take active part in the larger class, but we respect that some people are reluctant to do so.

Students are urged to follow the conflict in at least one daily newspaper and/or other periodicals and/or web sites and are encouraged to monitor a variety of views from various Jewish and Palestinian perspectives. An early task of the course will be for the class to compile a listing of such publications and to apportion responsibility for following them.

**FORMAT**

The course is designed to operate more as a seminar than a straight lecture class. We will meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2:00-3:20. There will be occasional lecturing by the professor; but for the most part, this will be a discussion class, with students asked to present problems, issues, difficulties with many of the readings. Our goal will be for professor, TAs, and students to learn from and with each other.

The course will proceed along the lines of “cooperative learning.” Students will be asked to work in groups of two or three for class presentations and for most of the written work. The three class hours will be supplanted by a weekly hour-long discussion section headed by course teaching assistants. Each group may be asked to work out positions as Jewish and Palestinian accommodationists and rejectionists for class role-playing exercises.

There are other resources available to us, such as videos, slide shows, visiting speakers, etc. While it will be possible and desirable to schedule some of this during class time, we may find it convenient sometimes to meet in the evening for such presentations. Some of these events might as well be open to the entire Brandeis community.

**WORK IN CLASS**

A. **Response Papers**

One of our goals in this course is to have a conversation going among all of us---students, TA, and professor. One way to do this is through written responses to readings and
other course materials. Toward that end, we will ask you to work together in pairs or threes in writing 3-5 page papers three times during the semester. The papers are to cover readings and may also include class discussions, outside materials, struggles engaged in, whatever, as long as it is germane to the course and as long as it shows you are grappling with the main issues of the course. Here are more specific guidelines:

1. It is well to learn to write very succinctly. Practice getting to the point quickly and saying what you mean. The papers should be held to three to five pages.

2. If you find the reading difficult, summarizing it to get a hold of it can be useful. The point of this part of a response paper is to ask if your interpretation of what the author said makes sense to the reader. But do not limit the paper to this. We know you can write book reports. Response papers are meant to be much more than that. *Do not restate* what the author said in the author’s terms. Quotations may be used to illustrate a point or ask a question, but do not repeat the author without interpreting in your words, and do not write a paper that is mostly quotations.

3. Remember that all reading is interpretation. We never focus on it all, we never comprehend it all, and we do not know exactly what the author had in mind. Nor does that matter. What matters is what the reader makes of what is read.

4. Once you become pretty comfortable with your understanding of the reading, then go into your own questions about it, your own critical reactions to it, your own hesitations, reservations, etc. *And most important: your own insights about it.* Strive to make connections within the reading that the author may not have made. Strive to connect the reading with other reading, with central ideas and issues as they develop in the course, with your own understanding of the world, you reactions to what you see in society and your own life.

5. The premium in these papers is on showing the reader that you are grappling with the course materials and have opened yourself up to the possibility that there is something in them for you, and that you can think creatively with what we are studying. The premium also is on integrating what may seem like disparate materials, and struggling to make sense of them in your thinking, your reality as a citizen and as a thinking, feeling, viable actor in society.

6. In the response papers, you may work with class discussions, professors’ and TAs’ views, world events, whatever, but *always in the context of the readings.* I.e., no riffing from the top of your head on interesting things that may be relevant to the course but are not anchored in the texts. We are looking for *real struggle* with reading and other course materials.

**B. Outside events**

Attend at least 3 Middle East conflict-related events (preferably but not necessarily) on campus during the semester. The professor will advise as to when such programs are going to happen and will welcome suggestions about programs that might not have come to his attention.

The final written work for the course will include a paragraph or two of very brief
discussions of each of these programs and their relevance to the course.

C. Final paper

This will be a sort of mega-response paper (approx. 15 pages or so), to be done in groups of two or three. The assignment will be announced several weeks before the end of the course. The paper is to show what sense you make of the readings and other course materials and how you come to terms with them. *The final paper will be due Tuesday May 6.*

D. Practicum

If at least five or six students are interested, we will have a two credit course practicum which will meet for an hour each week and call upon the student to put in three additional hours of work each week. The practicum will begin with the realization that narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are usually presented by journalists, academics, religious figures, and politicians. What about ordinary people who are in none of those categories? How do they define and understand the conflict? We will learn how to do non-judgmental interviewing and will videotape a number of students, faculty, administrators, and staff at Brandeis explaining what they understand to be the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We will tape, transcribe, and analyze the interviews. The professor will organize the practicum, likely with the help of a TA.

**GRADING**

Our standards for grading are these:

A—mastery of readings, concepts, and exercises; full participation, engagement, *risk-taking, and growth*; grappling with the course and coming to your own insights about its issues, its implications, its relation to yourself.

B—clear understanding of course materials and conscientious participation but little evidence of risk-taking and growth or grappling with the course toward one's own insights. Not full or steady participation.

C—fuzzy, incomplete, lethargic relationship with course materials, minimal involvement of self in course, little risk-taking and growth, no insights of one’s own, sporadic participation.

D—same as C but moreso.

E—trying to wing it by leaning too much on others’ understanding, not writing papers fully germane to the readings and central concepts of the course, rare participation, not completing all course requirements, etc.

To pass the course, the student must do all written work, attend the 3 outside events, come to class, and take part in discussion sections. All written work must be backed up on
discs. Computers crashing, etc. are not acceptable excuses for not completing work.

**ASSIGNED READINGS**

**BOOKS:**

Daniel Bar-Tal and Izhak Schnell, eds., *The Impacts of Lasting Occupation: Lessons from Israeli Society*  

Breaking the Silence, *Our Harsh Logic: Israeli Soldiers’ Testimonies from the Occupied Territories, 2000-2010*  

Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*  

Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (graphic novel)  

Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*  

Robert L. Rotberg, ed., *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict*  

**ARTICLES, REPORTS, AND BOOK CHAPTERS**

B’Tselem (The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), assorted reports (on line: http://www.btselem.org/)  

GAP (Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry), *Self-Involvement in the Middle East Conflict* (xerox)  


Meir Kahane, “Uncomfortable Questions for Comfortable Jews” LATTE  

**RECOMMENDED BUT NOT ASSIGNED:**

Avram Burg, *The Holocaust Is Over; We Must Rise from Its Ashes*  

Jeffrey Goldberg, *Prisoners: A Muslim and a Jew Across the Middle East Divide*  

Emile Habiby, *The Secret Life of Saeed, the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist*  

Mark Heller, *A Palestinian State, the Implications for Israel*  

Deena Hurwitz, ed., *Walking the Red Line, Israelis in Search of Justice for Palestine*
Shaul Mishal and Reuben Aharoni, *Speaking Stone: Communiques from the Intifada Underground*

Wendy Orange, *Coming Home to Jerusalem*

Shimon Peres, *The New Middle East*

Conversations with Penny Rosenwasser, *Voices from a Promised Land: Palestinian and Israeli Peace Activists Speak Their Hearts*

Alice Rothchild, *Broken Promises, Broken Dreams*

## SCHEDULE OF READINGS

### TWO JEWISH VIEWS OF ZIONISM

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<td>1</td>
<td>1/14, 16</td>
<td>Yehoshefat Harkabi, ch. 3, “The Two Streams of Zionism” and ch. 5, “Nationalistic Judaism,” from Harkabi, <em>Israel’s Fateful Hour</em> LATTE</td>
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<td>Meir Kahane, “Uncomfortable Questions for Comfortable Jews” LATTE</td>
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**A JEWISH HISTORICAL AND PERSONAL VIEW OF ZIONISM**

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<td>1/21, 23</td>
<td>Shavit, chs. Introduction, chs.1-6</td>
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REQUIRED OUTSIDE EVENT: Ari Shavit will speak Monday 1/27, 2-3:30, Rapaporte Treasure Hall

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<td>3</td>
<td>1/28, 30</td>
<td>Shavit, chs. 7-12</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>2/4, 6</td>
<td>Shavit, chs. 13-17</td>
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** Due 2/11, response paper on weeks 1-4, on what is new to you, troubling to you, etc. in these texts?

### ZIONISM/ISRAELI AS PALESTINIANS SEE IT

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<td>5</td>
<td>2/11, 13</td>
<td>Sacco, pp. 1-133</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>2/25,27</td>
<td>Sacco, pp. 133-end</td>
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Narrative Analysis: Israeli and Palestinian views

Wk 7 3/4, 6  Rotberg, Preface-ch. 5
Wk 8 3/11, 13  Rotberg, chs. 6-11

** Due 3/18, response paper on weeks 5-8, on narrative analysis. Are the two sides’ main narratives reconcilable? Irreconcilable? Or what?

Self-involvement theory

Wk 9 3/18, 20  GAP report, entire

Denial theory

Wk 10 3/25, 27  Cohen, chs. 1-6

** Due 4/1, response paper on narrative theory, self-involvement theory, denial theory, and paradigm shift theory (this will be from lectures only). Do these approaches complement each other, shed different lights on the confrontation, conflict with each other or what?

The occupation

Wk 11 4/1, 3  Bar-Tal and Schnall, Foreward, preface, and Introduction, chs. 1, 4, 5, 6
Wk 12 4/8, 10  Bar-Tal and Schnall, chs. 8, 11, 12, 13, and Conclusion

4/14-4/22 VACATION

Wk 13 4/24  Breaking the Silence, Introduction, Overview and all odd-numbered chapters
Wk 14 4/29  TBA

*Final paper due Tuesday, May 6, midnight. Send electronically to professor and TAs.*

Students with special needs: If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see the professor immediately.