

Daniel Bar-Tal, on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, before and after October 7, 2023: In conversation with James Liu and Veronica Hopner

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Abstract

The Israel-Palestinian conflict is one of the most well-known and polarizing issues that has impacts on societies, and institutions beyond Israel, and Palestine. This interview with prominent social scientist Daniel Bar-Tal, Professor Emeritus, School of Education, Tel Aviv University, focused on the situation in Israel and Palestine following the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent war in Gaza. Interviews such as this are an academic inquiry drawing on the expert analysis of a scholar-activist, grounded in research and theory. As such an analysis, Bar-Tal explains the causes of this war, its context, its process, the contribution of each side to its escalation, and its effects on the possibilities of peaceful conflict resolution between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. He describes the current situation as governed by considerations of realpolitik, contestations over what defines antisemitism, and whether Israeli conduct in Gaza constitutes genocide or ethnic cleansing. This interview enables the application of Bar-Tal's systematic and holistic Theory of Intractable Conflict to the current crisis to interrogate how ethos of conflict, collective memory, and collective emotional orientation dynamically interconnect to form a culture of conflict. But also, how these elements can also be addressed for solutions to enable peaceful resolutions.

KEY WORDS

genocide, intractable conflict, Israel, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Palestine, realpolitik

INTRODUCTION

As part of this special issue focusing on advancing an interface between research and practice, with special emphasis on SDG-16 -Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, we interviewed Professor Daniel Bar-Tal, Emeritus at Tel Aviv University, a prominent social scientist, a world expert on intractable conflicts and peacebuilding, and an authority on the Israel/Palestinian conflict. Our interview took place 4 months after the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attacks in Israel, and the subsequent war in Gaza. Like many other people, we were making sense of both the attacks and the scale of the Israeli response. It felt unprecedented in 2023, which proved to be the case as evidenced in Gaza, a year later.

The Israel-Palestinian conflict is one of the most well-known and polarizing issues with impacts on societies, and institutions beyond Israel, and Palestine. Since the October attacks, we watched as hundreds of thousands of supporters from both sides attended protests and rallies across Africa, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, the Pacific, and North and South America. High-level machinations from international bodies such as the United Nations were in play, there was involvement of international government and alliances, and South Africa had instituted proceedings against Israel on grounds of genocide at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

The scale of the Israel-Hamas War and the effects worldwide were widespread and fast-moving. As editors of a special issue, that was focused on peace, justice, strong institutions, and sustainable development in a political psychology journal, this was an important contemporary issue. In this special issue, we also wanted to encourage more diverse ways of knowledge production beyond the typical journal article format. Interviews hold the possibility for specified and in-depth inquiry at a particular time to interrogate events as they happen in real time. This interview enabled us to draw upon the specific expertise of Daniel Bar-Tal as a leading theorist and thought leader of intractable conflict and peacebuilding, and about Israeli and Palestinian relationships. Against the backdrop of the Second World War, Bar-Tal at age 11 emigrates with his family from Poland to the State of Israel, itself only 9 years old. An extremely young state, already with a history of war and conflict. As a scholar-activist, he was the founding director of the Walter Lebach Research Institute for Jewish-Arab Co-Existence through Education and his writing encompasses 25 books, and more than 250 academic papers and book chapters. His social and cultural location within Israeli society, being part of its educational system, service in the army, and participation in three wars, have made him a salient observer of the societal and political processes of the conflict. In addition, His accumulated and created knowledge, his history of collaboration with Palestinian and Arab scholars and coalition groups seeking peace, and his later attention to processes of de-escalation conferred a unique subjective and academic insight.

In-depth interviews are a dynamic type of guided conversation (Knott et al., 2022), and as such, our interview was a process rather than a static moment in time. We discussed the questions and topics that were the most salient to each of us, and this triangulation allowed us to form the questions (in italics below) we thought important to ask. These questions reflected contemporary political commentary, academic inquiry, media and news articles, and popular topics circulating on social media. We considered the wider comment that our interview could have and framed it to contribute to an applied political psychology of intergroup relations. The main body of the interview was conducted on February 19, 2024, in the wake of the October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, and with the Israeli IDF assault on Gaza proceeding at full force. The interview was written up using academic conventions, which allowed us to edit the interview, and add relevant figures, references, and background information. The final paper was submitted in early May of 2024, and revised in September after editing and further highlighting the theoretically important elements.

Time frames how conflicts outbreak, escalate and de-escalate (Liu & Szpunar, 2023). The current crisis was used as a window of opportunity to also see the psychological tendency for

human beings (across cultures) to focus on time centered on the present, and to downplay the historical roots of societal conflict (see Bar-Tal, 2013; Liu et al., 2009; Liu & Szpunar, 2023). Through conversation and reading such an interview as this with a time signature, we might begin to see in a reflexive manner how we remember our own history, in the passage of time viewed through the lenses of “our” own traumas. And how we can erase or occlude other peoples’ pain and suffering because theirs is not “our” fault (see Vollhardt, 2020). Hence, the interview can be a powerful generative instrument for reflexive, nuanced and, specific learning, which is central to the development of applied expertise (Flyvbjerg, 2001, 2006).



[James Liu]

My first question revolve around academic contributions. So, you're probably best known for developing a theory of intractable conflict using Israel and Palestine as the case study. I wonder if you could draw from that theory as background and show us how this theory enables us to have a better understanding of the current situation in Israel and Palestine.

[Daniel Bar-Tal]

I define myself as a social scientist, rather than specifically as a social psychologist or political psychologist. This is because I employ a multidisciplinary approach to studying conflicts and other phenomena, influenced by my time as a doctoral student under the prominent sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld, who trained me to work from an interdisciplinary perspective. While I do incorporate psychology in developing concepts, I also draw on sociology, political science, cultural studies, education, history, and mass media in my work.

On this foundation, I developed a theory of intractable conflict. It is important to note that my approach was inductive, not deductive. This means that I observed Israeli society as a social scientist, identifying phenomena such as patriotism, siege mentality, fear, hope, delegitimization, insecurity, and a sense of collective victimhood. From these observations, I began formulating concepts and conducting empirical studies on these issues. Over time, I recognized the connections among these phenomena and how they formed a cohesive whole. From this, I developed what I now refer to as a theory of a culture of conflict, which is the broadest term I use.

I observed that different intractable conflicts share similar socio-psychological dynamics in terms of phases and general categories of content during their emergence and escalation. However, they differ in aspects such as the nature of deprivations, context, and moral justifications. For instance, some conflicts are more morally justified, such as those involving unwanted occupation.

With this broad conception of a culture of conflict, my collaborators and I have developed various related ideas, including barriers to conflict resolution (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011), the routinization of conflict (Bar-Tal, Abutbul, & Raviv, 2014), trust (Alon & Bar-Tal, 2016), collective emotions (Bar-Tal et al., 2007), patriotism (Bar-Tal & Staub, 1997), narratives that support conflicts (Bar-Tal, Oren, & Nets-Zehngut, 2014), self-censorship (Bar-Tal et al., 2017), security (Bar-Tal et al., 1998), occupation (Bar-Tal & Schnell, 2013), collective memory (Bar-Tal, 2014), critical thinking (Bar-Tal, Vered, & Fuxman, 2021), and more. Separately, I advanced the notion of shared societal beliefs as a phenomenon that characterizes societies (Bar-Tal, 2000).

Now, I'd like to point out that I could be an excellent advisor to a pyromaniac intent on igniting and escalating conflict. However, I am less confident in serving as a consultant for firefighters—those who seek to de-escalate conflict and achieve peace. The conflict resolution process is intricately interwoven with many coexisting variables that influence each other and vary in impact from case to case. These include factors such as the collective memory of the conflict, enduring traumas, the readiness and charisma of leaders to engage in the peace process, the strength of opposition to peace, the level of societal support for peace-making, the role of civil society, the determination of mediators, the level of mistrust between adversaries, and the depth and internalization of the culture of conflict, among others. We do not yet know how to consider all these factors simultaneously, nor do we fully understand their relative weights, intensities, timing, or durations in predicting peace process.

So, you're asking a relatively simple question about the outbreak and escalation of intractable conflicts. I've studied these phenomena in various contexts, not only in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but also in the Algerian conflict, the Basque conflict, the Northern Irish conflict, the Kurdish conflict, the Cypriot conflict, and the South African conflict. Some of these conflicts have reached peaceful resolutions, which I summarized in my 2013 book (Bar-Tal, 2013), where I expanded on my knowledge of intractable conflicts worldwide, from their outbreaks to their reconciliations. But the outbreak of conflicts is a study of the past, that is known and the peace-making, and reconciliation can be conceptualized theoretically, or when we study their past, we can detect influencing variables for each case. Proposing practical solutions for resolving intractable conflicts remains extremely challenging due to the reasons mentioned above.

What we are witnessing in Israel now is an escalation of the conflict and a significant intensification of what I call an ethos of conflict,¹ or a narrative that supports conflict with strong collective emotions. The ethos consists of eight themes: the justness of the conflict, feelings of insecurity, delegitimization of the other, self-glorification, a deep sense of victimhood, patriotism, and more. These themes were already present in Israel from the late 1940s and 1950s. Today, we see this ethos of conflict with extreme intensity on both sides—among Israeli Jews and Palestinians alike. Both sides use this narrative in a highly selective, biased, and often erroneous manner, emphasizing the themes they believe are justified from their own perspectives. They accept information that supports their ethos of conflict while ignoring information

¹*Ethos of conflict* is defined as the configuration of shared central societal beliefs that provide a particular dominant orientation to a society at present and for the future in the contexts of intractable conflict (Bar-Tal, 2013). It is composed of eight major themes about issues related to the conflict, the in-group, and its adversary: (1) *societal beliefs about the justness of one's own goals*, which outline the contested goals, indicate their crucial importance, and provide their explanations and rationales; (2) *Societal beliefs about security* stress the importance of personal safety and national survival, and outline the conditions for their achievement; (3) *Societal beliefs of positive collective self-image* concern the ethnocentric tendency to attribute positive traits, values, and behavior to one's own society; (4) *Societal beliefs of victimization* concern the self-presentation of the in-group as the victim of the conflict; (5) *Societal beliefs of delegitimizing the opponent* concern beliefs that deny the adversary's humanity; (6) *Societal beliefs of patriotism* generate attachment to the country and society, by propagating loyalty, love, care, and sacrifice; (7) *Societal beliefs of unity* refer to the importance of ignoring internal conflicts and disagreements during intractable conflicts to unite the society's forces in the face of an external threat; Finally, (8) *Societal beliefs of peace* refer to peace as the ultimate desire of the society.

that contradicts it. At the same time, both sides are engulfed with strong collective emotions and collective memories of the past.

For example, in the context of the Gaza war, Israel focuses on the brutal Hamas terrorist attack on October 7, 2023, but omits the broader context of occupation and the subsequent war, including the devastating Palestinian losses due to bombings, the massive refugee crisis, starvation, and the destruction of the Gaza Strip. Conversely, Hamas and Palestinians omit the atrocities committed on October 7 and instead emphasize the prolonged and brutal occupation, the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, and Palestinian human losses, alongside the total devastation of Gaza. Each side is striving to convince own society and international communities of the truthfulness of their narrative.

Thus, we currently see all the characteristics of an asymmetrical intractable conflict² at its peak. The culture of conflict has become hegemonic, deeply embedded in the members of rival societies, mass and social media, cultural products, leaders' speeches, and so on.

[James Liu]

Danny, I wonder after your professional introduction if you might present yourself?

I was born in Tajikistan in 1946. (laughs) ... I'm a typical Tajik, as you can see. My parents were Polish escapees who fled in 1939. They returned to Poland when I was 6 months old, settling in Szczecin (Stettin in German), a city transferred from Germany after the war. I spent my first 11 years in Poland before we emigrated to Israel in 1957.

My mother played a significant role in my upbringing. She was well-educated and liberal, fostering a home environment of support, tolerance, open-mindedness, and critical thinking. She passed these values and skills on to me.

In Israel, I became a citizen, served in the army, and was trained as an officer. I continued to serve in reserve units until my 50s, actively participating in three wars: 1967, 1973, and 1982. I completed my undergraduate studies in Israel and pursued my doctorate in social psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, in the United States.

I began my academic career at Tel Aviv University in the School of Education. Initially, my research focused on attribution theory and prosocial behavior. In the early 1980s, I shifted my focus to the study of shared beliefs, particularly in intractable conflicts, an area in which I have remained engaged to this day. It has been a rewarding career; one I have enjoyed immensely.

In 2015, I became a Professor Emeritus, but I continue to work full-time with great energy, contributing to the understanding of our political world, particularly concerning authoritarianism and populism—the defining challenges of our time.

[James Liu]

So you've given us a beautiful description of being helpful to the pyromaniac rather than the firefighters. It's quite moving to me because in some ways, Danny, what I feel like is that your theory is very descriptive, but it doesn't give us any levers. We know what people do to escalate conflict. What are the some of the levers that peacemakers can use to de-escalate conflict, and have you tried some of them? Or does the macro situation dominate everything?

[Daniel Bar-Tal]

The concepts of de-escalation are discussed on a theoretical and conceptual level in my seminal 2013 book, where I explored peace-making and reconciliation (Bar-Tal, 2013). However, these are merely descriptions of the phases a society needs to undergo and the processes that it experiences during peace-making.

There is a significant difference among societies as the societal process of peacebuilding takes place. The transformation of society is a lengthy process that requires numerous goals

²Intractable conflicts are fought over goals viewed as existential, are violent, perceived as being of zero sum nature and unsolvable, preoccupy a central position in the lives of the involved societies, require immense investments of material and psychological resources, and last for at least 25 years (Bar-Tal, 2013).

and activities. We can examine the reconciliation process between Germany and France after the Second World War, or even between France and Britain in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These states, once seen as eternal enemies after centuries of rivalry and wars, underwent reconciliation that took decades.

It's also essential to differentiate between societal peace processes that occur before negotiations, during negotiations, and after the completion of a peace accord. The critical variables that determine the nature of these actions include decisions made by governments and leaders, the strength of societal support for peace-making, the intensity of active support, the strength of opposition to peace-making, and so on.

Let me give you an example. In September 1993, the surprising Oslo Accord was signed between the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Israeli government after the Labor Party won the elections in 1992. In 1994, I was appointed by the Minister of Education to be responsible for peace education in the ministry. It was a massive task to shift the perspective of hundreds of thousands of students in the educational system from seeing Palestinians as enemies to viewing them as peace partners. With the support of the government and the majority of society members, I invited representatives from every department of the ministry to join the executive committee. We decided to address this mission in two ways: in the short term and the long term. We prepared position plans for each department and began implementing the program. However, on November 4, 1995, the Prime Minister was assassinated by a Jewish zealot. By March, Benjamin Netanyahu was elected Prime Minister, and all our work was lost. The new right-wing Minister of Education had no interest in peace education.

We can also look at what has been done in Northern Ireland or Bosnia, where peace agreements were signed, but conflicts remain unresolved. Even in these situations, carrying out peace education is very challenging, but at least there is no violence. However, when violence continues, as in the Middle East, where 65% of the Israeli population is right-wing³ and opposed to a two-state solution, and the government is extremely right-wing, launching any peace education programs in schools becomes impossible. It is also very difficult to advance peace education in the broader society as well.

Despite this, it is still possible to create interventions that promote peaceful attitudes. In the final phase of my academic career before retirement, I realized that something was missing from my research—specifically, what you're asking about. I began developing paradigms to help de-escalate conflicts. In general, de-escalation requires societal change, especially if opposition to peace-making is widespread, as it is in Israel. This means changing the conflict-supporting narratives that guide a society (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2013), which is a prerequisite for de-escalation.

One necessary change is in the belief in the justness of the conflict's goals. Another crucial change is in dehumanization beliefs, or what I call the delegitimization of the rival, which must be altered to build the minimal trust needed to start negotiations (Bar-Tal & Hammack, 2012). The rival must be legitimized and humanized, and there must be a willingness to consider compromise and negotiation. Additionally, emotional reactions that accompany intractable conflicts, such as hatred, fear, and anger, need to be addressed and altered. Look, in 2000, Saudi Arabia proposed a plan to resolve the Israeli-Arab conflict, which was endorsed by all Arab League states 2 years later. This initiative called for the normalization of relations between the Arab world and Israel in exchange for a complete withdrawal from the occupied territories. It included mutually agreed minor land swaps between Israel and Palestine and

³In Israel the dimension of right-left solely reflects the positions toward the conflict. Rightists hold uncompromising position toward the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, support Jewish settlement in the occupied territories, and view Palestinians negatively and distrustfully, whereas leftist favor compromises, object to Jewish settlement, and view Palestinians as partners to the peace-making process.

aimed to address the right of return for Palestinian refugees through an agreement with Israel. The plan was reaffirmed at the Arab League summits in 2007, 2017, and 2023, but Israeli governments even have not dealt with the proposal. Given this context, how can we discuss about changing narratives, emotions, attitudes, or visions?

The two models I helped develop over the last decade are particularly interesting because they specifically aim to change conflict-supporting narratives. One is what we call the paradoxical paradigm. It suggests that messages, consistent with an individual's view, but that are formulated in an amplified, exaggerated, or even absurd manner, arouse lower levels of disagreement and resistance when compared to conventional persuasive approaches, that aim to induce inconsistency between the message content and the held views. For example, suggesting that conflict is somehow positive because it proves the conflict is real, and patriots must die for their country. Or it presents the conflict as an opportunity to showcase moral superiority. The paradoxical thinking message is intended to lead individuals to perceive their held societal beliefs or the current situation as farfetched and implausible, and ultimately, to lead to unfreezing and re-evaluation of held attitudes. Eventually, unfreezing may lead to openness to alternative, more moderate viewpoints that may then be adopted. This model works well with hawkish individuals (Bar-Tal, Hameiri, & Halperin, 2021).

The second paradigm is based on the universality of the conflict-supporting narrative. When people talk about delegitimizing the rival, self-glorification, or a collective sense of victimhood, these concepts often sound negative when described. Our approach is to normalize these messages by suggesting that all nations in intractable conflicts experience similar thoughts and feelings. We then explain that these groups were trapped in a vicious cycle of violence that perpetuated hatred and animosity. However, when societies recognized this cycle and changed their conflict-supporting beliefs, they were able to negotiate peaceful resolutions, as seen between the French and Algerians or the Basques and Spaniards. This information helps to "unfreeze" entrenched attitudes, leading to more positive attitudes toward peace-making (Ben-Ezer et al., *in press*; Rosler et al., 2022).

However, the question arises: Can these models or others be used to help practitioners in situations of intractable conflict? Unfortunately, my response may disappoint you: probably not! It is nearly impossible to replicate a real situation of intractable conflict. First, the conditions in field experiments are highly controlled, whereas reality is not. Reality is fluid, with many variables simultaneously at play—some supporting peaceful solutions and others opposing them. Even field studies that use real media, for example, tend to focus on only a few variables.

Second, when examining cases that ended in peaceful solutions, I found that each had a unique combination of factors that facilitated the process at different times. In some cases, it was the pressure of civil society; in others, powerful mediators intervened. Sometimes it was the decisions of leaders or the costs the society paid that caught the leaders' attention. In some instances, the threat of external intervention, a boycott, or a stalemate played a crucial role. Often, several factors were at work simultaneously or at different times. While we can describe these processes retrospectively, we cannot predict them with certainty.

So, how do we assist practitioners? We do so by highlighting the key variables (Bar-Tal, 2004): the influence of ethos, recognizing barriers, the importance of emotional factors, the detrimental effect of restricting information flow, the significance of hope and motivation, the value of contact, the necessity of critical thinking, and so on. Two particularly important factors are (1) the ability to take the perspective of the rival, and (2) the ability to engage in self-reflection—that is, to be aware of one's own contribution to the conflict. In my edited book, I address these challenges, and the contributors explore what psychologists can do (Bar-Tal, 2011). However, in the real world, it is exceedingly rare for rivals in a conflict to act as expected. They are deeply entrenched in a culture of conflict, driven by an ethos of conflict, collective memory, and collective emotional orientations.

[Veronica Hopner]

Danny why did Hamas make such a violent and inhumane surprising attack and why has the Israeli response been so brutal?

[Daniel Bar-Tal]

Why did Hamas⁴ carry out the attack on Israel? This is one question, but a second question must also be asked: Why did Hamas resort to such atrocities in the attack?

First, I will address why Hamas carried out the attack on Israel, from my perspective. There were several goals, and I believe Hamas achieved at least a large part of them, though at a very heavy price. The first reason was to demonstrate that their violent strategy works, and that they have the ability to plan and execute such an attack. They managed to surprise Israel, which exposed Israel's vulnerabilities. Over 3000 Hamas fighters had been preparing for more than a year to attack Israel from the air, sea, and, primarily, the ground. This operation showed that Israel is not as strong and capable as both Jews and experts around the world thought.

Additionally, Hamas sought revenge for the ongoing brutal occupation, including violations of the status quo at the holy site of Haram al-Sharif (Temple Mount), the appropriation of land, and the harassment and pogroms of Palestinians in the West Bank by Jewish settlers. Another significant reason for the attack was to highlight the complete siege of Gaza. Israel controlled every exit and entrance to Gaza, except one to Egypt, which was also closed. Israel not only controlled the type and quantity of food and other goods entering Gaza but also registered every birth and death in the strip.

However, the most important goal was to bring the Palestinian issue back to the forefront of global attention. If you consider that on October 6, 2023, the issue of Palestinian occupation was not a priority for the international community. Now, the situation has drastically changed. President Biden has proposed a plan to establish a two-state solution. Arab states like Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have become more involved, setting their goals and prioritizing the Palestinian issue. The world is now discussing the recognition of a Palestinian state, with countries like the UK and the USA considering it and states like Spain, Norway, Slovenia, and Ireland actually recognizing it. As of June 2024, 145 out of 193 United Nations member states recognized the State of Palestine. Additionally, there have been worldwide demonstrations in support of Palestinians. Ironically, such a terrible act of violence has reignited this issue.

Another reason for the attack was to discredit Mahmoud Abbas,⁵ known as Abu Mazen, who chose non-violent struggle with Israel. This approach failed, as Netanyahu was unwilling to negotiate a two-state solution and sought to separate the Palestinian Authority from Hamas. By demonstrating that violence could achieve results, Hamas positioned itself as a major player in Palestinian society, and the primary force resisting occupation.

A further goal, which has been successful, is the release of Palestinian prisoners, who are considered freedom fighters and highly honored in Palestinian society. It is only through violent attacks and the abduction of 253 Israeli Jews and foreigners, that Palestinian prisoners can be brought home.

Finally, Hamas aimed to disrupt the negotiations between the United States and Saudi Arabia, which were occurring at the time of the attacks. There was information suggesting

⁴Hamas, “Islamic Resistance Movement”, is a Palestinian **Sunni Islamist** political and military movement governing the **Gaza Strip**. Hamas which promotes **Palestinian nationalism** in an **Islamic context** is widely popular in Palestinian society due to its ant-Israeli stance. It did not recognize the state of Israel and objected to Oslo agreement. Hamas has carried out attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians, including **suicide bombings** and **indiscriminate rocket attacks**.

⁵Mahmoud Abbas, also known by the kunya Abu Mazen, is the president of the State of Palestine and the Palestinian National Authority. He has been the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization since 2004. He supports non-violent way to achieve independence and therefore objects to use of violence. His security services keep that Palestinians will not use violence and will cooperate with Israeli security system.

that the “Palestinian issue” was not going to be a barrier in these negotiations. However, the situation has now shifted, and Saudi Arabia insists that any agreement with the United States must address the Palestinian issue.

This is my response to the first question. Now, regarding the second question—why did Hamas resort to such inhumane and immoral atrocities? On that morning a surprise attack by Hamas occurred on 20 Israeli kibbutzim, and on military bases and towns near the Gaza Strip which involved thousands of Hamas terrorists and Gaza citizens. They murdered over 1200 persons of all ages (over 800 civilians), wounded, raped, and kidnapped in total—253 children, women, elderly, men, and soldiers. There are several reasons for this:

First, the delegitimization and hatred of Israeli Jews played a significant role. Israelis are viewed as colonialist occupiers, who are brutal and violent. A second reason was vengeance for the occupation, siege, deprivation, despair, hopelessness, and a sense of collective victimhood. This led to moral disengagement and a sense of moral entitlement. The former justifies ignoring moral norms because “we are the victims,” while the latter rationalizes harming those perceived as threats by any means. This harm is justified by virtue of a sense of Palestinian victimhood (Bar-Tal, 2023).

Feelings of delegitimization and hatred of Israelis are also linked to beliefs that every Israeli (except the ultra-Orthodox) is connected to the military. Israeli men serve mandatory military service for 3 years, and women for 2 years, with ongoing reserve duty for many years afterward. This intertwines society with the military and security systems, leading Hamas to view every Israeli Jew as a potential soldier or someone connected to the military system.

Religious fanaticism further played a significant role. For some, the desire to become martyrs—an honorable title in Palestinian society—drove their willingness to carry out atrocities, believing they had nothing to lose because of the appalling circumstances of their lives. This is a very important reason because fanaticism can strip human beings of their humanity (Bar-Tal & Hammack, 2012).

The surprising success of the attack further fuelled the carnage that followed. The stark differences in living conditions between Palestinians and Israelis also likely contributed to the anger, hatred, and frustration. When Hamas fighters entered the kibbutzim and saw comfortable housing, trees, and lush grass, the contrast with their impoverished living conditions may have led to envy and resentment, which then manifested in inhumane actions to humiliate Israeli Jews. Women were raped, a horrific act often used to degrade and dehumanize the rival during conflicts.

These factors help explain why Hamas resorted to such brutal and inhumane violence. But what about the Israeli response? How do they justify killing civilians, including children, mothers, and fathers, and flattening Gaza? The Israeli army is resorting to indiscriminate bombing, artillery, and tank bombardment, which have exacted a tremendous toll on Palestinians. As of September 31, 2024, over 40,000 Palestinians have perished, with 8000 buried under rubble, and more than 93,500 wounded. Even if we include the estimated 12,000 Hamas fighters in this number, the civilian losses are staggering—comparable to losing over 128,000 Jews in Israel. Approximately 90% of Palestinians in Gaza face severe hunger and tens of thousands suffer from communicable diseases. Over 70,000 housing units have been destroyed in the Gaza Strip—70% of all buildings.

My answer to these questions begins with the dehumanization of Palestinians. They are frequently labeled as Nazis or terrorists, with no distinction made between Hamas fighters and civilian Palestinians. To understand this, one must grasp what “Nazis” mean to Jews—it is the ultimate label of a perpetrator. Added to this are vengeance, hatred, and the anger aroused by the events of October 7th. In turn, Israelis seek to deter and teach Palestinians a lesson. Moreover, the same moral disengagement and sense of moral entitlement that appeared among Palestinians have also manifested among Israeli soldiers. The majority of Israeli society is affected by denial and repression regarding what is being done to Palestinians. The desire

to humiliate Palestinians also plays a role in the war, evidenced by numerous degrading and humiliating incidents, such as forcing Palestinians to undress, raping the captives, writing slogans on walls, forcing them to kiss the Israeli flag, using Palestinians as human shields in the military operations, or destroying homes for the sake of destruction.

Israelis are obedient soldiers. Army units receive orders and execute them faithfully. Only during the 1982 Lebanese War did incidents of disobedience occur within the Israeli army. Indoctrination also plays a role, particularly within the Zionist religious sector and among soldiers serving their mandatory military service. They are eager to avenge and punish Palestinians, partly due to incitement by the leaders of the current government. Some advocate for killing all Palestinians and flattening Gaza. Some ministers even talk about resettling Jews in Gaza, dropping atomic bombs, or starving Palestinians. Pilots drop bombs, and the Air Force uses drones guided by AI that do not distinguish between fighters and civilians. The soldiers do not see the people they are killing—they simply drop the bombs. Artillery and tanks also fire from a distance. The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) is an incredibly powerful army, capable of widespread destruction, and it is using its full military might in this war, resulting in massive casualties and devastation. Remember that there is tremendous asymmetry of the military might between the Israeli army and Hamas military capability.

At present, I am coediting a book on the Gaza war with Professor Amal Jamal, in which I attempt to provide a new psychological framework for understanding the brutalization that characterizes the actions of both Palestinians and especially Israeli Jews in this conflict. This framework describes a syndrome with specific symptoms that have been observed.

[Veronica Hopner]

Danny, why do you think that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is so mobilizing for the West. We saw 500,000 people march in London, New Zealand, we have protests in the street. There are numerous protests in the USA and in Western Europe. There is a lot of conflicts in the world and in some of them there is also significant atrocities. In our own country, we have terrible issues that go on here which nobody marches in the street about. What is it about this conflict that mobilizes people who are not Palestinian and who are not Israeli to support and march in support of either side but mainly support of Palestinians.

[Daniel Bar-Tal]

You are right. There is currently a conflict in Congo that receives little attention, despite that around 2 million people have been killed. Several factors contribute to this situation. One significant reason is that, at present, only Morocco and Israel maintain unwanted occupations where the occupied populations are denied civil rights. Even China, which occupied Tibet, granted Tibetans full civil rights—whether these rights are fully respected is another issue.

In Israel, after 57 years of occupation, Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank continue to live under a military regime that denies them civil rights. This occupation is widely viewed as brutal and immoral, and out of step with normative values of the 21st century. Additionally, in the West Bank, there is a system of apartheid, where Jews and Palestinians, living just a kilometer apart, are subjected to completely different legal systems. Jews are governed by Israeli law, while Palestinians are under military rule. The Israeli government perpetuates structural oppression to maintain Jewish-Israeli dominance over Palestinians in the occupied territories of West Bank and Gaza Strip.

It's also important to note that Israel is actively settling its citizens in these occupied territories, a practice that violates international law and is condemned by almost all countries worldwide. There are currently around 490,000 Jews living in 123 settlements and over 100 illegal outposts in the West Bank, along with another 210,000 Jews in occupied East Jerusalem.

Second, to some extent, people—especially in the West (not to mention in Asian or African countries)—tend to identify with the Palestinians as a colonized people under Israeli occupation. The West Bank is often seen as the last place still colonized by Europeans. Additionally,

Jews are expected by themselves to uphold moral values, especially as they claim to be the “chosen people.” Many Israeli Jews deeply believe that Judaism is unique in providing the universal moral foundation for Western civilization, particularly through its prophets and the Torah. However, by continuing the occupation, Israeli Jews are violating these very beliefs. Furthermore, Israeli Jews aspire to be part of the civilized Western world, sharing its moral heritage, and seek to be compared to it favorably. This is why they often claim that the Israeli army is the “most moral army in the world,” a statement echoed by Israeli prime ministers, presidents, and military leaders. When a nation that speaks of morality and promotes values like “Tikkun Olam” (repairing the world) acts in ways contrary to these ideals, the world watches carefully (Bar-Tal, 2024). When Israel violates international law or principles of human rights, it draws vocal criticism, including from liberal Jews.

Alongside this criticism, however, there are also antisemites who add antisemitic overtones or question the legitimacy of the Israeli state. Antisemitism is alive and appears in different parts of the world. In the present circumstances of Gaza War, antisemitism has been mobilized and it appears more frequently and with more intensity.

People in other countries who have marched or protested in support of the Palestinians have also done this due to the causalities growing daily, and the ongoing destruction in Gaza. The Palestinian population continues to suffer severe losses. Out of 2.3 million Gaza residents, 1.7 million have been displaced, with many becoming refugees for the second time. This ongoing tragedy mirrors the Nakba (“catastrophe”) of 1948, when 750,000 Palestinians were displaced. In 1948, around 12,000 Palestinians were killed, but in the current conflict, more than 48,000 have perished, many buried under the rubble. For these people, the Nakba continues.

In Israel, the devastation in Gaza is rarely shown on television. The Israeli media is largely focused on the events of October 7, the kidnapped civilians and soldiers still in captivity, and the Israeli soldiers who have been killed or the lives of the evacuated Jewish population in the south and north. With the ground invasion in the Gaza Strip on October 27, Israeli military forces lost 340 soldiers, and 2227 of them were injured until September 2. It is estimated that about 120,000 Israeli Jews were evacuated and continue to live displaced from their homes. Some of these evacuees were part of the October 7, 2023, carnage.

Images of Gaza's destruction are mostly omitted in the Israeli mass media, instead are covered on channels like CNN and BBC, but Al Jazeera offices in Israel and the Palestinian Authority were closed by the Israeli security forces. Citizens of other countries who see these images often empathize with the Palestinians, feel anger toward Israel, and some join demonstrations. The Israeli government and a large portion of Israeli society often label protests against Gaza's destruction as antisemitic. Even criticism from Israel's allies about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is often seen as hostile by the Israeli government. Nevertheless, in Israel there is knowledge about what happens in Gaza, which can be found in one newspaper Haaretz (an Israeli version of the New York Times), channels of social media, and through civil society networks.

Netanyahu's refusal to conclude the deal to free about 100 kidnapped Israelis, to engage with “the day after the war,” his rejection of a two-state solution, his perceived prolonging of the conflict for personal reasons (such as avoiding his ongoing corruption trial), his refusal to relinquish the southern border of Gaza, his incitements against the opposition with lies and his yielding to pressure from his religious coalition—along with his tensions with the Biden administration—have all contributed to critical sentiments from majority of Israelis and many non-Jews. This criticism is not antisemitism.

Even my interview could be accused as being antisemitic or leftist by the government, simply because it contradicts the official narrative. The prime minister and his supporters label criticism of their narrative as “leftist”, a term that has been institutionalized to mean lovers of Arabs and betrayers of the state's interests. The opposition is scrambling to avoid this label as if fleeing from a wildfire.

[Veronica Hopner]

If we could revisit a little bit that you touched on anti-Semitism. You talk about collective narratives and things that are inherently produced in societies. Do you think that there is this archetype of anti-Semitism and of this kind of evil sort of Jewish person that is somehow sitting there waiting to be activated at particular time.

[Daniel Bar-Tal]

Antisemitism has been a persistent issue in both the Christian and Muslim worlds throughout history. It's a history, our history. This history is marked by pogroms, exiles, libels, executions, tortures, and more. A significant culmination of this history is the Holocaust, which was the result of legal antisemitism. This is the reason that Israel decided to memorize Holocaust as a chosen trauma⁶ with which we are all connected. Nevertheless, many Israeli Jews view the murderous event of October 7 as another Holocaust. However, comparing the loss of six million lives in an industrialized extermination to the approximately 1200 people killed and 250 abducted on October 7 is inexplicable. The relationship between past and present is sometimes misapplied, leading to the misuse of the term "Holocaust." Israeli Jews often extend the term to different circumstances and conditions, suggesting that such atrocities could occur anywhere, at any time (Bar-Tal & Bar-Tal, 2022).

Throughout history, various enemies of the Jewish people, such as the Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Germans, Iranians, and Arabs, are perceived as having sought to annihilate the Jewish nation. The Jewish tradition reflects this with phrases like "shall dwell alone" (Numbers 23:9) and "The whole world is against us" (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992). Additionally, during the prolonged conflict with Arabs and Palestinians, some leaders and media have drawn parallels between Nazis and Arabs in their wish to exterminate Jews (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005).

In this framework, there is a tendency to label every criticism of Israel as antisemitism, which can hinder critical thinking about Israeli policies (Bar-Tal, Vered, & Fuxman, 2021). Every critical statement by a leader, even of friendly country, is singled out as antisemitism and the meeting with him or her are boycotted. Nonetheless, here is a noticeable rise in real antisemitism in various parts of the world and it remains a serious issue in Europe, the United States, and Arab countries. Recent news reports have shown demonstrations featuring Nazi uniforms and swastikas, and incidents of violence against Jewish communities, such as the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting and attacks in Germany and France, indicate a resurgence of antisemitism.

On the contrary, there is heightened sensitivity among Israeli Jews, who may see any criticism of Israeli policies and actions as antisemitism. The formal definition of antisemitism itself is contentious. Currently, two major definitions are widely accepted. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition, adopted by many states in 2016, includes examples of criticism of Israel as a possible form of antisemitism. In response to criticisms of this definition, the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA), signed by around 200 scholars in 2021, distinguishes between criticism of Israel's activities and antisemitism.

[Veronica Hopner]

Have the more moderate and the more liberal Israelis become more polarized and become more right wing since October 7?

[Daniel Bar-Tal] 08:51:40

⁶Chosen trauma is defined as shared mental representation of a historical event in which the group suffered a catastrophic and traumatic defeat, loss and humiliation at the hands of its enemy. It has determinative effect on the shared societal feeling of being a victim by society members. Of importance is the fact that the group did not heal this experience and is unable to properly mourn it (Volkan, 2001).

In Israel, Jewish society is undergoing a significant transformation. This shift began in 2000 when the failure of the Camp David summit talks and the onset of the Second Intifada reshaped national attitudes. The Second Intifada was marked by numerous suicide bombings, resulting in the deaths of approximately 1000 Israelis, most of whom were civilians. This period saw the collapse of the Israeli peace camp. These pivotal events were intentionally misused by Israeli leaders, who, despite receiving contrasting reports from Israeli security institutions, still viewed them as evidence of Palestinian leadership's ill intentions (Bar-Tal, 2023).

In the 1980s and 1990s, about 35% of Israeli Jews were hawkish, 35% were dovish, and the rest were centrist. However, after 2000, there was a noticeable shift in Israeli public opinion. By 2002, Israeli society had largely moved toward a hawkish stance, with many moderate and dovish Jews adopting this position. Since then, around 65% of Israeli Jews have identified as hawkish, a figure that has remained stable for the past two decades. Approximately 15% have maintained dovish views, with the rest leaning centrist (Bar-Tal, 2023).

More significantly, since 2000, there has been a change in Israeli Jewish identity. The migration to the occupied territories and a religious awakening, led by Zionist religious groups, has facilitated the emergence of a new Israeli identity—neo-Zionism⁷ (Schnell & Bar-Tal, 2013). This identity has brought forth new elites, supported by both the Labor⁸ and Likud⁹ parties (two mainstream secular parties in Israel until the mid-2000s). These elites, primarily from religious Zionism, migrated to the territories and shifted from the political margins to the centre of society, becoming influential within key institutions, including the government and the army. Although they represent only about 12%–15% of the Jewish population, they have been joined by the ultra-Orthodox community, which also migrated to the territories. Today, this neo-Zionist identity has permeated Israeli society, influencing governmental offices, the army, formal institutions, the education system, NGOs, and the mass and social media. The current government, dominated by nationalist, racist, religious, and messianic extremists, reflects the values of neo-Zionist sectors.

This new identity, rooted in the culture of conflict, has become hegemonic in Jewish society. Four important implications arise from this:

1. The next government, without Netanyahu though likely hawkish, may be more democratic because the political forces in power will object to complete overhauling the legal system and care about the statehood of Israel.
2. Hawkish governments tend to be authoritarian, as they suppress the free flow of information, oppose dovish views, penetrate to mass media, and subjugate Palestinians.
3. The distrust belief that Palestinians are not peace partners has become ingrained in the Israeli Jewish psyche.
4. No substantial political action is likely toward peaceful resolution of this conflict until Israeli Jews reestablish their sense of security and deterrence.

⁷Neo-Zionism is a **far-right**, **ultra nationalistic**, racist (anti-Palestinian) and religious **ideology** that appeared in **Israel** following the **Six-Day War** in 1967 and the capture of the **West Bank** and **Gaza Strip**. Neo-Zionists consider these lands part of Israel and advocate their **settlement** by **Israeli Jews**. They also emphasize Jewish nature of Israel and strive to limit the democratic foundation of the state.

⁸The Israeli Labor Party is a social democratic and Labor Zionist political party in Israel. The party was established in 1968 by a merger of Mapai, Ahdut HaAvoda, and Rafi. Until 1977, all Israeli prime ministers were affiliated with the Labor movement. After 2000, the party lost support of the Jewish population.

⁹The Likud is a National Liberal Movement, a major right-wing political party, in Israel. It was founded in 1973 by Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon in an alliance with several right-wing parties. In 1977 it ascended to rule the country and with short cessations it rules Israel until today.

The trauma of October 7th profoundly shook Israeli Jewish society. It shattered fundamental assumptions about Israel's security, strength, and ability to protect its citizens. In a single day, a horrific massacre occurred, with children and adults being kidnapped and murdered, women raped, all of this took place until late afternoon when the army intervened. This has left an enduring trauma. Today, Israeli Jews are unified in their desire to restore a sense of security, a task made more difficult by the failure of both civil and security leadership during this crisis.

A new sense of "disillusionment" has taken hold. Even among those who once advocated for peace, some have now shifted to hawkish views. Trust in Palestinians has eroded, with many supporting aggressive actions in Gaza, viewing Palestinians as collectively complicit in the atrocities of October 7th, and opposing the two-state solution. However, in recent months, there has been changes in this shift to hawkish views, with moderates demonstrating for the return of kidnapped Israelis, as well as for governmental change and for removing the Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from his office. Yet, these protests do not address the issue of peace with Palestinians.

[Veronica Hopner]

What do you predict for Netanyahu's future?

[Daniel Bar-Tal]

He is expected by majority of Israeli Jews to leave office, but at present, I am not sure that it can be done. He might remain until the next elections in November 2026. He has been on trial since 2020 on charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust—a very long process. There is a possibility of earlier elections, but he has a very loyal base, and currently enjoys stable support from 67 coalition members out of 120 in parliament. Removing him from office is not easy. He is trying to delay this as long as possible, and therefore, he may seek to prolong the war with Israel attacking Lebanon.

Currently, the conflict with Lebanese Hezbollah¹⁰ is escalating, following a series of violent exchanges between Israel and Hezbollah. Hezbollah has launched rockets into northern Israel, while the Israeli Air Force has conducted bombings in southern Lebanon. Civilians on both sides are being evacuated and face significant uncertainty. Recently, an Israeli terror attack using telephones' pagers resulted in approximately 40 deaths and over 5000 injuries, many of them serious, including numerous civilian casualties. Subsequently, Israel assassinated senior Hezbollah commanders in Beirut, which also resulted in civilian deaths. Eventually Israeli military forces entered south Lebanon.

It remains unclear whether a new war will erupt with Iran. However, I can say with confidence—based on official information published in Israel—that there were, and maybe still are, pathways to de-escalation. The violence could cease, the war could end, hostages could be returned, and the conflict in both the south and the north could come to an end. There is even the potential for Israel to reach an agreement with Saudi Arabia. Yet, Prime Minister Netanyahu has refused to accept such deals, opting instead to continue the conflict. This is a very sad truth.

The alternative government will likely be based on a right-wing coalition, as the majority of Jewish voters lean toward the right. The next government will also likely oppose the two-state solution, which would require relocating around 70,000 Jewish settlers who have moved deep into the West Bank. Approximately 400,000 settlers live near the Green Line, which marks the border between Israel and the West Bank and occupy about 4–5% of the West Bank. A land swap with the Palestinians could be possible, whereby Israel annexes

¹⁰Hezbollah is a Lebanese Shia Islamist political party and paramilitary group, led since 1992 by its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. Hezbollah's paramilitary wing is the Jihad Council, and its political wing is the Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc party in the Lebanese Parliament. Its first objective was to **fight against** what Hezbollah described as **American** and **Israeli imperialism**, including the **Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon** and other territories.

the areas with the majority of settlers and gives the Palestinians an equivalent amount of land elsewhere, such as the largely uninhabited Negev Desert. However, I do not foresee an Israeli Prime Minister willing or able to relocate at least 70,000 settlers from deep inside the West Bank. Much will depend on mediation efforts, and especially on the role of the United States. Israel heavily relies on US support, and the United States could pressure Israel to implement the two-state solution.

Currently, despite significant disagreements between Netanyahu and Biden, Biden is providing substantial assistance to help Israel win the war. How can this be understood? It's a matter of realpolitik, where domestic political factors in the US elections, and external concerns about how a perceived "victory" of Hamas might be viewed internationally, play significant roles.

[James Liu]

So, what do you see as possible steps for the future? Is there a point of return where there is a possibility of peace?

[Daniel Bar-Tal]

I really don't know. Just look at Netanyahu's reactions and those of his more extreme ministers. For example, the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Internal Security are extreme to the highest degree. The Minister of Internal Security, in particular, has faced charges of hate speech and was convicted of supporting the terrorist group Kach.¹¹ Now, he has successfully taken control of the Israeli police. The Minister of Finance has taken over Israel's financial resources and the civil administration of the West Bank. The rest of the ministers are under the absolute control of the Prime Minister, except the Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant, but there are talks about removing him from his office.

So, from my view, the current government will not take any meaningful steps. When Netanyahu defies Biden, he risks undermining Biden's plans to reorganize the Middle East and resolve the Palestinian issue through a two-state solution. Yet, at the same time, Biden provides Israel with weapons, ammunition, promises \$14 milliard in aid, and continues to stand alone in the UN, voting against Palestine's recognition as a state. As psychologists, we know that tangible assistance, rather than words of reprimand is what ultimately counts and influences behavior.

This underscores a key point: global actions largely follow realpolitik principles. This means that policies are driven primarily by interests and circumstances rather than moral or ethical considerations. I believe political psychology often overlooks this crucial factor, missing a significant part of the picture. The outbreak, escalation, de-escalation, and peace-making processes of violent conflicts—including reconciliation—are deeply shaped by realpolitik. Countries make decisions based on their economic and political interests, as well as internal political factors such as elections, public support, and opposition strength. These interests guide whether they prolong or de-escalate a conflict, a crucial element in understanding conflict dynamics. How do we study this reality? Very few of us know how to integrate it into our analyses.

In the case of Israel, the West views it as an "aircraft carrier" in the Middle East that serves their interests. Netanyahu understands this and feels he can diverge from Biden's wishes. He also knows that Harris is facing an election year and must consider how these dynamics will impact her campaign. Perhaps Netanyahu hopes Trump will return to power. It's difficult to predict what to expect from Trump, as he is unpredictable. In the past, he has strongly criticized Netanyahu's actions, but recently he claimed he would "end the war"—what he means by that, nobody knows.

[James Liu]

¹¹Kach was a radical orthodox Jewish religious Zionist political party in Israel existing from 1971 to 1994. The party was ultimately barred from standing 1992 election and was barred by the Israeli cabinet in 1994 under 1948 antiterrorism laws.

So it's not terribly optimistic. Do you see any life left in the two-state solution?

[Daniel Bar-Tal]

While this is an important question, several issues are connected to the story. The West Bank is divided into three regions¹²: A, B, and C. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), between October 7 and September 1, 2024, Israeli forces killed approximately 630 Palestinians, including dozens of children, many of whom were killed in airstrikes. At the same time 18 Israelis were killed in the West Bank including 5 civilians and in Israel were killed 10 people because of terror attacks.

Israeli military forces entered area A freely in a search of whom they all describe as terrorists. Several cities such as Jenin, Tulkarem or Nablus were partially destroyed. Additionally, Israeli forces arrested over 9500 Palestinians from the West Bank, about half of whom were affiliated with Hamas. This is typical in situations of occupation, where those who resist it are labeled as terrorists and subsequently detained. During this period, there were about 1270 attacks by Jewish settlers against Palestinians, with around 120 leading to Palestinian fatalities or injuries, and about 1020 attacks causing damage to Palestinian property. Israeli settlers continue to try to push Palestinians from area C. Furthermore, 130,000 Palestinians lost their jobs in Israel because they are no longer permitted to enter the country. In sum, the Israeli military activities in the West Bank and the Jewish settlers pogroms are similar to what is going on in Gaza.

As I mentioned before, achieving a two-state solution seems increasingly difficult, so alternative solutions may need to be explored. One potential solution is for the 70,000 settlers, who would need to be relocated, to remain in their settlements with Palestinian consent, maintaining Israeli citizenship and passports. However, I doubt Palestinians would agree to this, as many settlers in the West Bank hold extreme ideological views.

Another option is a one-state solution, where Israel annexes the West Bank and Gaza Strip. However, this would threaten Israel's Jewish majority. Currently, there are 6.5 million Palestinians living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, alongside 6.5 million Jews. I do not recommend this solution, as history shows that opposing sides in prolonged violent conflicts rarely live peacefully afterward. Look at examples such as India, Bosnia, Turkey, Chechnya, Sri Lanka, or Rwanda.

Some envision a scenario in which Israel annexes the West Bank without granting Palestinians full civil rights, effectively making them second-class citizens. But would the world accept such an arrangement? I doubt it, as this would constitute formal apartheid. Conversely, giving Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories equal rights would mean losing Jewish identity of the state. There is one more solution that constitutes a desirable outcome for the extremists in the Jewish society: This is to carry a transfer of Palestinians like in 1948 from Gaza strip and the West Bank. It is hard to believe that the world will allow such an act, but we have seen some present use of this desired solution and the world largely has "allowed" it. But in any event, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asserted that Israeli Jews are doomed to live "by the sword", in permanent state of war, if they want to survive.

[James Liu]

¹²The Oslo Accords signed in 1995 divided the Palestinian territory into three temporary administrative sectors, Areas A, B, and C, which would exist until a final agreement would be signed. The three areas do not have territorial contiguity but are separated from each other and the division was made on the basis of various population areas and recognition of Israeli security demands: **Area A** (18% of the West Bank) includes all of the Palestinian cities and their surroundings, with no Israeli settlements. It is under full civilian and security control by the Palestinian Authority. But Israeli security forces enter the area with the permission of the Palestinian Authorities to arrest Palestinians suspected of violent resistance to occupation. **Area B** (22% of the West Bank) includes areas of many Palestinian cities, towns, and villages, with no Israeli settlements. It is under civilian Palestinian control and under Israeli-Palestinian security control. **Area C** (60% of the West Bank) includes all Israeli settlements (cities, towns, and villages) as well as over 350,000 Palestinian residents with some over 400,000 Jewish settlers. It is under full civilian and security control of Israel, except for Palestinian citizens.

I think occupied territories is quite a precise statement of the situation of West Bank and Gaza. If Israel formerly annexes those areas, it will clearly be an apartheid state, right?

[Daniel Bar-Tal] 09:17:48

A portion of the Jewish population acknowledges and discusses this issue of apartheid. However, still 32% of Israeli Jews support annexation, while 35% prefer maintaining the current situation. But what is the current situation? It is, in essence, apartheid in the West Bank, as we are witnessing. Many international organizations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, recognize the situation as apartheid. Additionally, some Israeli Jews, including certain NGOs, openly discuss this issue. However, many Israeli Jews continue to deny its existence. Despite denials by Israel and many Western countries, including the US, apartheid exists in the West Bank. This denial is part of international politics, which, as I previously explained, operates according to realpolitik rather than reflecting the actual reality on the ground. The United States decides for the Western World what state or organization is terrorist and who is not, what country is undemocratic and what country is democratic, what country is aggressive—mostly according to self-interest.

[James Liu]

What would you describe as the situation on the ground in Gaza right now, because people use the term genocide. South Africa's formally used the term.

What term would you use?

[Daniel Bar-Tal]

I will not use the term “genocide,” as it has a specific definition. But there are social scientists who define the present action of Israel as genocide. According to the UN, genocide involves acts “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.” None of the acts occurring in Gaza fit this definition—Israel does not intend to destroy the Gazan population, but it has killed 1.7% of it. Instead, I would use the term “ethnic cleansing,” which was defined by the UN commission investigating crimes in the former Yugoslavia as a “purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove, by violent and terror-inspiring means, the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.”

In the case of Gaza, this involves forcibly moving over 1.5 million people from their homes to the south, along with mass killings. These actions constitute crimes against humanity. Israel's justification for these actions cannot be accepted, as it essentially denies responsibility for illegal acts.

[James Liu]

Yes, but if you say this in terms of, objective description of the situation on the ground- isn't it then, that a substantial portion of Israelis might label you as a traitor?

[Daniel Bar-Tal]

You are absolutely right. If you label the current situation as apartheid, you are often branded a traitor or a liar. The right-wing government, along with the mass media, tries to delegitimize these so-called “traitors.” However, some Jews openly discuss apartheid in different channels and on social media, without facing consequences. But if Israeli Palestinians express similar views, they are likely to be called in for investigation. They can't even show sympathy for Palestinian casualties in Gaza without risking repercussions, so they often prefer to remain silent.

In Israel, most academics, especially social scientists, tend to lean toward more dovish views. As of now, there's no open censorship in academia for Jews. However, for Arab citizens of Israel working in academia, the situation is different. Personally, I was able to pursue any research question I wanted. It wasn't as open in the 1960s and 70s, but since the mid-1970s, academic freedom has expanded. Libraries are full of books and journals, some of which are highly critical of the occupation, the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, and the policies of the Israeli governments. However, Israeli archives remain closed for 70 years, limiting

some avenues of research. Nonetheless, scientists have a role and to reflect on and write about the present situation without self-censorship.

I do notice, especially in the current climate, during times of war, that the world is becoming more aware of the Middle East situation. What will happen? I don't know. On the one hand, there are the values of humanity and morality—numerous international treaties address wars, apartheid, and discrimination. And of course, there are International Courts of Justice (IJC) which ruled on July 19, 2024, that Israeli occupation of the Gaza strip, and the West Bank including East Jerusalem is unlawful. There is also International Criminal Court (ICC) where the chief prosecutor seeks arrest warrants for Benjamin Netanyahu, Yoav Gallant, and one for a Hamas leader (two Hamas leaders were assassinated by Israel) as responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Gaza strip and Israel. On the other hand, there are economic and military interests, and it's uncertain which will take precedence. Until 2024, clearly, the latter interests were more important, but that is starting to shift. However, I'm not sure how long this shift will last, because the global focus often changes with the next crisis. For instance, attention has recently shifted to Gaza, diverting focus from the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, and there is a silence about wars going on in Myanmar, Kashmir or Africa.

When I look at the development of civilization, I reflect on how much has changed over 200 years: Look at slavery, colonialism, extreme inequality, and lack of freedom. Women in Switzerland, for example, couldn't vote until the 1970s. So, in the long term, I agree with you that we are experiencing a period of regression. Yet, ideas continue to progress, pushing civilization forward to more morality, equality, freedom, and inclusion. I believe we are moving two steps forward and one step back. I also believe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will eventually be resolved—maybe with much bloodshed and suffering, but resolved, nonetheless. I estimate this could happen within 20 or 30 years, because civilization is advancing toward a better world. The world cannot tolerate apartheid and indefinite occupation forever. Also, a nation will not accept unwanted occupation. Poles, Hungarian, Irish, Serbs, Indians, Indonesians, Mexicans, Algerians, Kenyans, Bolivians, and even Americans and others rebelled violently time after time until achieved their independence. Palestinians also will not stop resisting the occupation until they get an independent state. However, we are currently living through a phase of regression. That said, unexpected breakthroughs can happen, just like the peace with Egypt, the recognition of the PLO, or the fall of the Berlin Wall.

As social scientists, we have a responsibility in this period. First, we need to broaden our analysis of reality, looking at the bigger picture and take into the account even historical events, not just micro-level situations. Second, we must adopt a multidisciplinary approach to studying societal issues, using a variety of scientific methods. We must also face the realities of realpolitik, which often shape national policies. Most importantly, in this era of uncertainty, where social media, propaganda, and populist leaders spread misinformation and fake news, it is our duty to shed light on reality with as much accurate information as possible. While it's true that, like all humans, we are subject to knowledge biases, we must continually examine ourselves, avoid self-censorship, use rigorous scientific methods, remain open-minded, think critically, and be brave in the face of accusations of treason and attempts at delegitimization.

[James Liu]

Yes, it changes the meaning of the term. When things get as bad as they are, in Israel and Palestine... I always say when the bullets start flying, we as social scientists have very little power, but I guess the very minimum we can do is try to speak precisely with the correct language that enables better communication.

I thank you very much for your precise terminology because I've learned a lot just hearing how you express about these things. It's hard hitting, but you're quite precise in what you do as well.

[Daniel Bar-Tal]

Thank you.

We would like to note that Professor James Liu passed away untimely and is no longer with us. The latest revision has been completed in his absence. We express our deep admiration for James' contributions to political and social psychology. He will be greatly missed for his knowledge, intelligence, sociability, humor, kindness, and humility.

CONCLUSION

Taking on the tone of an essay in places, the academic interview is an inquiry about a moment in time. Interviews such as these are important, perhaps even vital for timely academic responses to critical events. They allow the situating of expertise, often extraordinary, of eminent scholars to be shared with academic communities and beyond. These interviews are responses from experts which are grounded in theory and research, and often as in this case, grounded in the interviewee's subjectivity. In this interview, we were able to engage in an academic conversation during the ongoing crisis in Israel and Palestine with a social scientist, and political psychologist whose lived experience of Israeli society now spans nearly 50 years in academia. Experience which has been shaped by academic training, years of theory-building and research, and relationships with Palestinian people.

This interview with Daniel Bar-Tal highlights that political psychology often presents a fragmented understanding of conflict, rather than adopting a broad, multidisciplinary perspective. We are quite capable of describing and explaining the outbreak and escalation of violent conflicts, but we are relatively less successful at proposing pathways to peaceful resolution. Bar-Tal also argues that macro-level realpolitik, particularly at the highest levels of governments plays a crucial role in processes of outbreak, escalation and peace-making of conflicts.

Looking at the violent intractable conflicts of the last 40 years, only a few have been successfully resolved—such as those in Algeria, the Basque region, Colombia, Egypt-Israel, and South Africa, Guatemala, and El Salvador. In some cases, violence has ceased, but true resolution remains elusive (e.g., Northern Ireland or Bosnia). Other conflicts have seen one side claim victory, but tensions persist under authoritarian regimes, as in Rwanda, Sri Lanka, and Chechnya. Meanwhile, conflicts like those in Israel-Palestine, Kashmir, or involving the Kurds continue to bleed. Political psychology has yet to develop paradigms that reliably lead to peace-making. Successful resolutions, whether full or partial, have involved a mix of factors, with varying emphasis depending on the context.

As an academic production, this interview pushes past an opinion piece and conveys expert knowledge that offers hope in that if applied, this knowledge could be a way forward to understanding potential solutions and developing paradigms that support peace, justice, and strong institutions. Interviews as a form of academic communication can offer cognitive road maps to change thoughts, feelings, attributions, and beliefs. In this case, advancing knowledge of the socio-psychological dynamics of societal peace and reiterating understanding of how de-escalating conflict and peacebuilding can be achieved. This is especially crucial at critical junctures, such as the Israel-Hamas War for peace and security, not only for Palestinians and Israelis but for other societies who are also impacted.

Academic interviews encourage possibilities for brave conversations that are likely more guided by moral and ethical considerations than objective scientific assumptions. Hopefully, in turn this moderates self-censorship, and encourages the foregrounding of other voices that could and should be heard. We hope that this interview further enables similar work as well as serving as a catalyst for further research, perhaps offering new avenues to pursue. Our emphasis on particular features of conflict and its resolution in specific moments and places shows an area ripe for further theoretical development and practical

application. Hence, supporting political psychology to enhance its capacity to serve as a tool for peacemakers.

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