Conflict Evolution: Tracking the Middle East Conflict with Drama Theory

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Abstract The situation in the Middle East has developed through an episodic process in which the protagonists have periodically changed the ‘game’ that they are playing by inventing new options, seeking to eliminate the options available to others, or by raising or eliminating doubts in the minds of others about their intentions. Such conflict evolution is readily captured by the framework of drama theory which goes some way to explaining the pressures motivating such actions. This paper traces the recent development of relations between the Israelis and the Palestinians through a succession of drama theoretic models. The importance of taking note of interactions at several levels is highlighted: stalemate at one level may be dislodged by actions taken in others. It is concluded that any resolution of the confrontations in the Middle East is likely to require the active involvement of the international community but may be destabilised by pressure from internal factions within the key parties.

Keywords Drama theory · Conflict transformation · Modelling

1 Introduction

In June 2002 the principles of the so-called Road Map for peace in the Middle East (US Department of State 2003) were first outlined. Key to this proposal was the creation of an independent Palestinian state co-existing with the state of Israel. The Road Map envisaged three successive phases of development towards this goal: first the cessation of violence coupled with Palestinian political reform and Israeli territorial withdrawal; second the establishment and underpinning of a viable Palestinian state; and third, agreement on borders, refugees and the status of Jerusalem. The pace of the
process necessary to achieve the goals of the Road Map was always ambitious, but it was derailed almost immediately by an Israeli rejection of a freeze on settlements in Gaza and the West Bank and a return to violence including a spate of suicide bombings. From that time onwards the Road Map has provided a template against which progress (or the lack of it) has been gauged and occasionally one party or another claims that it still accepts the plan while paradoxically acting contrary to its requirements. But in reality its impact has been largely rhetorical rather than practical.

The ‘road map’ metaphor is a potent one for describing progress towards a fixed target. However, as events have demonstrated, changes in the Middle East have represented anything but a steady movement towards the goals initially set down. Indeed the evolution of the conflict far more resembles the storyline of a television soap opera, with all the elements of surprise, fear and emotion that this implies, than a journey, however halting, along some prescribed pathway. The actual process through which the confrontation has developed has been shaped by unexpected interventions, by belligerent intransigence and by mood-shifting events. These are all characteristic of stage dramas in which autonomous characters seek personal fulfilment but where their wishes and desires may be either encouraged or frustrated by the wilful actions and declared intentions of others. This alternative metaphor of drama is therefore an appropriate one for describing the Israel-Palestine conflict. However it is possible to move beyond use of this metaphor as a merely descriptive device by drawing upon the analytical framework of drama theory (Howard 1994, 1999) to provide a tool for modelling and interpreting the relationships between the principals caught up in the conflict. Such an approach does more that re-state what has happened: it provides a means of investigating the characteristic approaches to confrontation management being used by the protagonists, and so of assessing the prospects for future resolutions.

In this paper the broad evolution of the complex relationships between Israel, Palestine and other key parties is traced in broad terms over a decade, looking first at the antecedents of the Road Map proposal and then at the way that later events have undermined its implementation. The evolutionary process is captured here in a number of ‘snapshots’ of pivotal moments in the overall development, with drama theory being used as the modelling medium. The approaches used by the major protagonists are then explored, noting in particular the importance of pressures emanating from different ‘levels’ of interaction. Some implications of the findings for the future resolution of the Middle East conflict are finally considered.

2 Competing Claims

Early in April 2002 a Palestinian refugee camp at Jenin became the focus for an Israeli offensive against sites regarded as centres of suicide bombing campaigns. This controversial action led directly to the loss of around 75 lives, and prompted an escalation in the violence including further bombings. Peace seemed as far away as ever. Yet at the UN, the shape of a final settlement, which called for two independent states, one for the Israelis and one for the Palestinians, had been on the table for 35 years: since Security Council Resolution 242 was adopted in November 1967 following the 6-Day War.