Palestinian and Israeli Attitudes Toward Time

In the Middle East as elsewhere in the world, it was the universal custom of human groups to draw a sharp line between themselves and others – to define the group and reject the outsider. This basic primal need goes back to the beginnings of humanity and beyond them to most forms of animal life. Invariably, the distinction between insiders and outsiders was determined by blood; that is, by kinship or by what we would nowadays call ethnicity. (Lewis, 1996: 32)

The formal model introduced in Chapter 3 offers empirical predictions pertaining to territorial control and resorting to violence. While these predictions are amenable to quantitative assessment, the crux of the model concerns the somewhat nebulous concept of ‘patience’ and the manner in which it is thought to evolve within populations engaged in territorial conflict.

An unobservable concept such as ‘patience’ is essentially an analytical construct designed to make sense of observable patterns of behavior. Even in the controlled environment of a decision-making laboratory, we can at best contemplate an implicit depiction of such a variable. With naturally occurring data, the idea of actually measuring or observing patience seems unrealistic.

Nevertheless, historical inquiry can be helpful in depicting such an unobservable concept in political and cultural terms, thus lending credence to the properties of the formal model. Thus, even if we cannot speak definitively of a specific society’s ‘average level of patience’, we can draw a suggestive picture of prevalent attitudes towards time and attempt to describe how such attitudes have changed over the years.
The following historical discussion is therefore concerned with a description of how attitudes towards time in Palestinian and Israeli society have changed during the 1967–2002 period. The post-1967 period is of specific interest here, since the Israeli–Palestinian conflict only came to possess the basic properties of ‘asymmetry’, as defined above, during this last period.

This discussion is intended to help fill the gap left by the statistical analysis of the previous chapter. The quantitative aspects of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict have been examined in the previous chapter (p. 87) and are discussed in more detail below. Though it is difficult to contemplate qualitative historical research for a large number of rivalries, the case study presented here goes some way toward including patience within the empirical examination of the model, at least for the case at hand.

In what follows, I present a brief discussion of the conflict’s broader historical context, followed by a discussion of the progression of violence and territorial change, akin to the analysis presented in the previous chapter. After considering the Israeli–Palestinian case in comparative perspective, I trace the evolution of temporal attitudes in both societies, focusing on the political leadership. I argue that the political discourse explicitly and implicitly pertaining to the issue of time evokes a remarkable resemblance to the evolutionary process described in Chapter 3. Put simply – and perhaps simplistically – I contend that Israeli society underwent a process whereby it ‘lost patience’, whereas Palestinian society underwent an opposite process by which it ‘gained patience.’ Moreover, both sides displayed a marked awareness of the changes ongoing amidst their rival, where such awareness appears to have been an important factor affecting changes in their behavior. This provides some support for the notion that equilibrium analysis – involving rivals’ mutual and interdependent perceptions – is appropriate for understanding these behavioral changes.

5.1 The Israeli–Palestinian conflict: 1897–2002

In the late nineteenth century, many features of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict were still in a nascent stage of coalescence. The Jewish communities in the Ottoman provinces of Damascus and Beirut drew on successive waves of immigration from geographically and culturally diverse countries, and contained a broad array of interpretations as to what modern Jewish nationalism – Zionism – meant and implied