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ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT: THE LONG ROAD TO PEACE

by Andrea Kristine G. Molina

On January 21, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon confirmed that Palestine will join the International Criminal Court (ICC) on April 1. This would allow the Palestinians to pursue Israel on possible war crimes committed during the Israel-Gaza war last June 2014. The UN has already launched an inquiry into the possible human rights violations by Israel in June 2014 offensive to be presented on March 23. The move came after the UN Security Council rejected the draft resolution proposed by the Palestinian Authority (PA) calling for the Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state on pre-1967 borders by 2017.

The ongoing conflict started after the June kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers hitchhiking in the West Bank, which was purportedly ordered by the Gaza-based Hamas. This set off the chain of events that led to the 50-day war in Gaza, in which 2,200 people were killed, 66% of which are Palestinian civilians. As Gaza struggles to rebuild, the Palestinians have been successful thus far in launching high-stakes diplomatic offensive in the international arena. Israel, on the other hand, rallied for support in the US Congress and expanded its relations with friendly governments. At any rate, Israel's next move remains to be seen until after their March 2015 legislative elections.

With the absence of light in the political horizon and the vulnerability of relations between people, the Israelis and the Palestinians are yet again stuck in a cycle of conflict and peace seems less possible more than ever. Home to more or less 36,400 Filipinos and the "Holy Land" to the predominantly Christian Philippines, Israel and Palestine are also crucial for the Philippines.

Intractable conflict

The ongoing conflict is one of the longest-running geopolitical conflicts in modern times. Since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, the region has witnessed a series of wars and uprisings, failed peace processes, false promises, and more human suffering. As the conflict drags on, however, it seems that the situation becomes more complex and more difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle.

In simpler terms, the conflict is over who gets what land and how much control over these lands. But this passes through several high-stakes issues such as the control over Jerusalem, the borders that needs to be drawn, and the status of the Palestinian refugees and their descendants who still long to return to their former homes, among other things.

Since the breakthrough and the subsequent failure of the 1993 and 1995 Oslo Accords, the United States grappled with its attempts to salvage the peace deal between the two parties. It predictably collapsed as none of the parties were willing to compromise.

Further complicating the issue is the internal power struggle among different Palestinian factions, particularly between Fatah and Hamas, which administers the West Bank and Gaza Strip, respectively. While there was an effort to reconcile the seven-year rivalry between the two factions through the creation of the now-expired unity government in 2014, it suffered several setbacks including the unification of institutions, the holding of elections, as well as the considerable task ahead in managing the reconstruction of post-war Gaza. Should elections happen, there is a huge chance that Hamas would win both the parliamentary and presidential elections, following its increased popularity in the immediate aftermath of the Gaza war.

Israel is vehemently opposed to the Palestinian unity government, let alone a potentially Hamas-controlled one. For Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, this would mean "a Palestinian step against peace and in favor of terrorism." Israel, along with several Western countries, officially designate Hamas and its military wing *Izz ad-Din al-Qassam* Brigades as a terrorist organization, intent on the destruction of the Jewish state. For this reason, Israel refuses to lift the blockade in Gaza and will continue doing so until its security is no longer threatened by Hamas and other Gaza-based militant groups. Hamas, for its part, would not lay down its arms unless Israel lifts its blockade in Gaza and end its occupation of Palestine.

The futile attempts to resolve high-stakes issues unresolved to this day has created another layer of conflict that each party has to address: the management of the very antagonistic Israeli-Palestinian coexistence. For decades, Israel has put the Palestinians under military occupation, creating more resentment and distrust among people. Palestinian militant groups and radicalized individuals, on the other hand, continue to launch sporadic attacks of violence against civilians in Israel. Furthermore, Israelis and Palestinians have completely divergent historical narratives such that recognizing the other's grievance is unlikely. This makes it easier for extremists on both sides to derail the peace process by pursuing strategies capitalizing on force and on violence.

Prospects and perils of the two-state solution

One-state solution, in which Israelis and Palestinians coexist into a pluralistic state, is already off the table as there are no viable arrangements and outcomes that both sides would accept. Likewise, complete destruction of the other side, while preferred by extremists, is not a pragmatic solution and would definitely be more catastrophic.

In theory, the only feasible solution for the conflict is the two-state solution, which is for Israelis and Palestinians to have their own independent states. However, it poses difficult questions and requires working out thorny details on Jerusalem, refugees, and borders. Furthermore, by becoming a full-fledged state, Palestinian leaders should have to choose between nation-building and the destruction of Israel. By choosing nation-building, it goes without saying that they would have to be accountable for the welfare and security of their own people.

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Moreover, the expanding Israeli settlements jeopardize the viability of a Palestinian state. Israel would also need to concede some land to physically unite the non-contiguous areas of West Bank and Gaza Strip. But it should be clear, once and for all, what constitute "Palestine" and what exactly freeing Palestine means. As Fatah focuses on building a state in 1967 borders (i.e. West Bank and Gaza Strip), Hamas insists on the 1948 borders of the entire historic Palestine, which includes the lands where Israel currently sits. Hamas was opposed to the PA's UN draft resolution for this very reason. This ideological difference between Hamas and Fatah demonstrate, in part, why this conflict is difficult to solve. To be able to achieve a two-state solution, all sides have to agree that no one is going anywhere unless everyone is willing to make uncomfortable compromises.

It is becoming clear that short-sighted solutions would not work as long as there is glorification of revenge and martyrdom, perpetual sense of victimhood, and pervasive desentization to violence from all sides. Nothing can be expected but years of repeated cycles of violence, ceasefires, and more violence, endangering the lives of people and jeopardizing a chance for peace in the region. Political and military solutions should go hand-in-hand with cultural solution in managing and resolving the conflict, since at the core of every misunderstanding are preconceived notions that blindly warp the perception of one towards the other.

While the centricity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East universe has been challenged recently by the political turmoil across the region, the success and failure of the peace process would nonetheless be significant to the rest of the world, including the Philippines. Thus far, the Philippines' recognition of a *de facto* state of Palestine since 1989 has not jeopardized its friendly relations with Israel. But while Filipinos benefit from Israel's safety protocols and Iron Dome rocket interception system, they are nevertheless vulnerable to premeditated and indiscriminate attacks on civilians. Filipinos in Gaza Strip and West Bank are even more at risk of becoming collateral damages of war and unrests. The volatility of the situation requires the Philippines the necessary preparations to assist its nationals in the event of heightened tensions. While conflicts in the Middle East are beyond the Philippines' control, the country could only strengthen its commitment to peace and stability in the region through active diplomacy. ❧

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