

Solving An Impossible Conflict in the Long Run

Jay Jiyuan Wu

November 9, 2023

I've been writing an article on comparing Chinese (the Mainlanders mostly) and Jewish (mostly Jewish Americans) cultures and peoples but a few latest news stories emerged that prompt me to accelerate my thinking.

Is the current Israel-Hamas war an impossible problem to solve? Is there a way out other than endless finger pointing, mutual accusations and worst of all, mutual killing?

Let me share my two cents to bring some hopes to this topic.

1 Ackman's Letter & the "Open Peril" Policy

The first story is from Bill Ackman, who wrote a long open letter to the Harvard President that he puts on X (formally Twitter) for everyone to read. Ackman has a clear message that any students involved in antisemitic behaviors and speech should be condemned and disciplined.

I agree that anti-Semitism should be brought up for the public's attention so we won't go from one extreme to another — at the cost of unfairly treating any social group.

In the insurance business we have two major policy types, “**named perils**” and “**all perils.**” A named peril policy identifies a few perils to cover (e.g., fire, theft, vandalism, falling objects that damage the house) but not others, while an all peril or better known as “open policy” covers all perils except a few that are specifically excluded (e.g., war, earthquake, flood).

Ackman’s letter reminds me that social justice is better served through an “all perils policy” than a “named perils policy.”

Our prevailing practice has been a “named perils policy” (i.e., naming and aiming a few “disadvantaged” social groups like blacks and browns) that we believe are more vulnerable and require extra layers of protection. While based on a noble intent, it ignores the possibility that **ANY** individual and social group may be vulnerable at some point in time and therefore **EVERYONE** deserves protection from injustice.

Treating everyone equally and fairly is the only equilibrium road to social justice — and this means an “open policy” covering freedom of expression **by all and for all**, with the exclusion of any forms of discrimination, hatred and words and deeds endangering anyone else.

2 Obama’s Penance

Former President Obama showed his moral conscience and empathy recently by claiming that “the U.S. had to admit that ‘all of us are complicit’ in the Israel-Hamas conflict and added, ‘nobody’s hands are clean.’”

Self-criticism can be a healthy practice with the intention of self-improvement, and I personally see it as a sign of strength, honesty and integrity, even though some people already felt offended by Obama’s opinions.

Unlike a sitting US President, Obama has the liberty to speak his mind as he

no longer needs the campaign funds and votes to run for another term. I find his reading of the current war a fair assessment of the reality.

3 Thoughts on Long Run Solutions

I love this Techcrunch.com piece with a title that says “*Your Startup Should Solve an Impossibly Hard Problem.*” So, what’s the startup’s assessment, prediction and solutions for the Israel-Hamas war or more broadly the Israel-Palestinian co-existence challenge?

3.1 Israel Will Have an Upper Hand in the Short Run

In short term and in all practicality, things in the Middle East will most likely go with what the Israelis (and all the pro-Israel lobby entities in this country) want, much more than what the Palestinians want.

The simple truth is that once humans step into a war, military strength (backed up by industrial and technological strengths) pretty much dictates what the endgame will be like. This holds regardless of diplomacy efforts. I have much sympathy for our Secretary of State Blinken who has visited the Middle East several times already and I can tell he has been trying to stay as neutral as possible, despite being a Jew himself.

3.2 Israel as the pre-Civil Rights Movement US

In the long run all is possible, although the solution is still more in the hands of Israelis than in Palestinians given the resource asymmetry in the Middle East.

Even though it is easy to lump Jewish Americans and Jewish Israelis together based on their Jewishness, even though fractions of Jewish Americans voiced unwavering supports of Israel, and even though making general statements runs

the risk of stereotype and political incorrectness, I still want to separate the two countries — the US and Israel — into different levels of civilization.

Israel today is similar to the pre-civil rights movement era of the US, with a prevailing mindset of not treating everyone the same, while the US is seven decades passed that age. Frankly I have much more respect to Jewish Americans than to Jewish Israelis, who I believe have much to learn from the Jewish Americans in order to turn their country into a country of admiration more than savage power — even with more hostile neighbors than the US did.

That said, Israel still has a higher potential to grow itself into a respected country — even by its unfriendly neighbors in the Middle East — if it does a few things right.

3.3 Play a “Nice Guy’s Game”

Israelis right now have a mentality of retribution in kind (i.e., eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth), or even multiple eyes for an eye, multiple teeth for a tooth. But that would only get the country into the endless game of revenge and escalated conflicts. A better mindset is to play a “nice guy’s game.”

Surprise your foes by being a nice guy and move within self-imposed constraints. These things show enemies and others you will move quickly and decisively if provoked but also methodically.

Here is a real-life example what a “nice guy” looks like. I have a residential parking permit on the street but one day I forgot to move my car out of the construction zone and normally I would get a ticket of \$49. But the officer waited a bit longer for me to run to the car and moved it away. The policeman even moved the road blocker to let me drive out. I will never forget this incident in my life.

This obviously is not the best example applicable to Israel but my point is that being a nice guy will have its returns — even if not in the short run. Israelis

have plenty of opportunities to show they are better than a ruthless revenger, which basically places Israel at the same level of civilization as its neighbors. Instead, Israel can win big by showing that Israelis possess higher moral values than others in the region.

3.4 Apply the Same Rules Equally

This is a part of the nice guys game: To treat Palestinians and Jewish Israelis equally. One good example is that if the Jewish Israeli settlers are found attacking Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which had been reported numerous times, arrest them just like when the Palestinians attack the Jews. This will not eliminate Hamas or other extremists but will reduce the number of their followers.

The problem of not applying rules equally is to encourage a sense of entitlement and supremacy, which is the worst enemy of social justice. Already Israel has shown an incredible amount of entitlement by basically criticizing anyone except the Americans, including demanding the UN Chief to resign after he made a very general statement that terrorist attacks did not rise from the vacuum. Most others involved in a war would probably try to win support from as many countries as possible, unlike Israel that acted like a spoiled kid with little tolerance of different opinions, even directly attacked the “referee.”

It is really to the best interest of Israel itself if the laws are set such that Jewish Israelis will expect legal consequences from attacking others, just like what would happen to the Palestinians if they moved against the law.

In order to monitor violations, Israel can install Internet of Things devices in the West Bank to collect non-debatable evidence to facilitate the rule of law.

3.5 Placing Kids in the Same School

This I believe is the most feasible and least costly step in the long term of all. Israel can have a policy to place Palestinian kids in Israeli schools to let them learn, play, compete and mingle together. This sow the seeds of cultural tolerance and embraces diversity from a young age.

The beauty of starting from young is that change requires little conscious effort in adult ages but value installed naturally and spontaneously. Kids will take it for granted that there are kids from other religious and other backgrounds and they are a natural part of their lives. This is the most preemptive action Israel can take to obtain equilibrium peace and prosperity.

President Obama suggests that we all talk to someone with a different opinions but let's face it: Most adults won't have the determination to do that. And this is why we should let kids do that and practice fair treatment for all throughout the rest of their lives.

3.6 Let the Bullet Fly for a While

This applies to pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian Americans in this country. I really believe one way for Americans to do the right thing in the Middle East or anywhere outside the country is to take the time to wait for the so called "whole truth" as Obama calls it to come up. This is far better than prematurely jumping into a conclusion and then close our mind to any evidence disagreeing with our preferences.

Waiting a bit longer also requires less effort than engaging a hear to heart conversation with someone who is perceived to hold a different opinion. All we need is to wait a bit longer to come to the right conclusion and update our own opinions.

In other words, if we all would leave an open mind for a bit longer, which essentially means we “let the bullet fly” for a while before we count casualties and damages, see more moves from both sides of the conflict, and take into account how others evaluate the fight, then our conclusions will be more likely to be right or closer to the truth. All we need is a bit patience against the knee jerk responses.

This is not to say that we simply wait out and not do anything active. An important step or steps is to update our previous conclusions when new facts emerge that necessitate changes.

3.7 Long Term Solution Has No Guarantee to Work

All the above moves require changing mindset, which is obviously easier said than done. From what I understand, a 2015 poll by the Israel Democracy Institute found that 53% of Israelis expressed support for extrajudicial (i.e., without trial) killings of alleged Palestinian attackers, even after their arrest and when they "no longer pose a threat."

I must admit I was shocked by this number. Notice this poll was conducted way before the current war. This is a “stated preference” that is pro-barbarian and anti-rule of law. It shows Israelis have a long way to go before becoming the greatest country in the Middle East.