Radicalization of politics: Obstructing the Oslo Peace Process

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Abstract

This article examines the radicalization of politics in the 1990s leading up to the al-Aqsa intifada, also known as the Second Intifada. A study of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad Movement, Kach, and Kahane Chai reveals that the violence of these radical groups is not necessarily senseless rebellions against oppression but could instead be seen as calculated efforts to obstruct the peace process, suggesting that unsuccessful negotiations and a subsequent turn to violence are not failures of the peace process but are instead deliberate attempts to undermine it. Understanding the motivation behind acts of terror in Israel and Palestine today and its role in radicalization is crucial in countering terrorism and highlighting the road to peace.

Introduction

A Palestinian uprising called the Intifada began in the 1980s and resulted in the loss of 2,000 Palestinian lives. Those who initiated the uprising viewed it as an act of rebellion against what they saw as a mass repression from the Israeli state. The Madrid Conference and the Oslo Peace Process, both of which were important steps toward peace in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, came after the Intifada, suggesting that it highlighted the necessity of lasting peace. The progress made in Oslo did not last and the agreements were never fully implemented. In 2000, the Second Intifada was launched. Nicknamed the Al-Aqsa Intifada, this uprising started at the Al-Aqsa Mosque as a direct reaction to then Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon visiting the Temple Mount, where the mosque stands. Considered a holy place in both Judaism and Islam, this is also where the Dome of the Rock is found. Although Sharon’s visit acted as a catalyst, there are many other underlying reasons for this Intifada, some of which will be explored in this article.

In a time when yet another attempt at peace between Israel and Palestine have failed and tensions are increasing, some predict the rise of a Third Intifada. While there are people in both Israel and Palestine working towards peace, there are also forces that are thriving within the continued struggle. These radical groups on both sides are unwilling to compromise, and they gain support with rhetoric that does nothing but antagonize the other side. The following study will examine the radicalization of politics and its effect on the possibility of lasting peace. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Israeli Kach, and the latter’s splinter group, Kahane Chai, will be used as representatives of uncompromising factions, with emphasis placed on how the violence of such groups contributes to the preservation of an uncertain situation that neither provides security for Israel nor recognition or dignity for Palestine. The study will focus on the 1990s, the failure of the Oslo Peace Process, and the events that led to the Second Intifada in order to clarify the current situation, to understand the effects of violence today, and to determine whether or not we are seeing renewed radicalization leading to a new intifada.

While originally called “hopeful”, the Oslo Peace Process turned out to be nothing but a disappointment. Some have argued that hopefulness in itself kept the peace process going, that the belief in the possibility of peace was a prerequisite for success. The push for peace, however, deteriorated quickly, and hope dwindled. Security issues became one of the earliest dangers to the process. In the five years following the 1993 agreement, more than 600 people were killed by extremists who opposed the peace process. The extremists succeeded in disrupting the peace talks before lasting peace was achieved. The progress made during the Oslo Process was not undone by a single party or a single side. The purpose of this article is thus not to place blame but rather to explore one of the many variables in the failure of the peace process leading up to the Second Intifada: radicalism. While the PIJ did play a role in breaking down the peace process, they did not do so unilaterally. The PIJ is not the sole force responsible for the failure of the Oslo Peace Process. The group is part of a larger mechanism that continues to counteract any possibility of a peaceful future.

This article seeks to answer the following: How have organizations such as the PIJ and Kach contributed to the overall radicalization that led to the failure of the Oslo Peace Process?

Analysis

The U.S. State Department describes the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) as a militant organization whose objective is the creation of an Islamic-Palestinian state and the “destruction of Israel through attacks against Israeli military and civilian targets.” The PIJ was founded in the late 1970s by two members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt who felt that the Brotherhood had become too moderate. Unlike the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, the PIJ does not participate in politics. It uses violence as its main tool to achieve its goals, consistently refuses to recognize Israel, and refuses to participate in diplomatic relations. The writings of Sayyid Qutb, who has been credited as the intellectual forefather of the terrorist group Al-Qaeda, provide a foundation for the PIJ’s beliefs on Islam and militarism. Qutb viewed Islam as inherently revolutionary and necessarily militant when not existing in its ideal form: a community of Muslims under an Islamic state, ruled by Sharia law.

According to Ilan Pappe, Professor of History at the University of Exeter, the PIJ gained momentum when members of the Muslim Brotherhood wanted to be involved in a group with a more clearly defined political agenda. They left the Brotherhood for the PIJ, where they were still able to maintain their religious affiliation but also subscribe to a national-political cause. The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, maintained a pan-ideology that did little for Palestinian nationalism.
The PIJ was not the only radical entity in the region during the 1990s. In addition to the PIJ, the Kach and Kahane Chai terrorist groups gained a strong presence in Israel and Palestine. For example, in 1994 Baruch Goldstein, a physician who moved from America to Israel to join the radical group Kach, killed 29 Palestinians at the Mosque of al-Ibrahim.7 As a result, Kach and its breakaway faction, Kahane Chai, became designated as terrorist groups.8 In 2005, an Israeli Defense Force (IDF) soldier with links to Kahane Chai went missing without official leave, refusing to participate in the evacuation of Israelis from the Gaza Strip. Several weeks later, he opened fire on a bus of Israeli-Arabs, killing four before being beaten to death. Apart from this attack, members of Kahane Chai have not claimed responsibility for, nor been involved in, any major attacks in the 21st century, but they do continue to express support of violence against Palestinians and Israeli-Arabs.9 “Preaching the motto of ‘terror against terror,’ Kach openly espoused violence against Arabs and actively participated in anti-Arab activities in Israel.”10 The PIJ, however, has continued to orchestrate several suicide bombings, including one at a Tel-Aviv nightclub in 2001, killing 21 people, and at a restaurant in Haifa in 2003, killing 22.4 Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter claims that the victory of Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud party in the 1996 election was the result of two recent Palestinian acts of terrorism.12 In the election, Netanyahu took advantage of his status as a former professional soldier of the IDF specializing in counter-terrorism.1 For example, he was involved in a 1972 counter-terrorism operation, when four terrorists from the group Black September hijacked a plane going from Brussels to Tel Aviv, demanding the release of 317 Palestinian prisoners. An Israeli commando team managed to sabotage the plane and, after the hijackers had been convinced that it needed repair, the team entered the aircraft disguised as mechanics and seized the terrorists. The incident was highly publicized and the commando team, which included Netanyahu, was praised as heroes.13 The memory of this could easily be evoked when debating between the two major parties, Likud and Labour, in the 1996 election, which was held following a series of terrorist attacks. Netanyahu and his then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ariel Sharon, pointed to these attacks and the 32 Israelis who were killed, as failures of the Oslo Peace Process. Therefore, Netanyahu saw no problems with supporting the expansion of settlements, something which the previous Israeli government had already agreed not to do as part of the Oslo Process. According to Carter, Ariel Sharon even stated that “everything we take now will stay ours… everything we don’t grab will go to [the Palestinians].”12 Netanyahu has since continued to push for more settlements, which has incited threats and violence from the Palestinian side, causing further contentiousness.13, 14, 15 Acts of terror led to retaliatory aggression, which promoted more violence.12 Laurie Zittrain Eisenberg and Neil Caplan cite the psychological effects of the failed peace process as a contributing factor to the continued violence. As previously mentioned, hope for a brighter future increased the chances of that happening. The Oslo Peace Process, negotiations that began in 1993, effectively showed how hopefulness may benefit the peace process. It works the other way around too. Acts of terror not only destroy lives and property but also incite terror and fear, which leads to suspicion, alienation, and contention. This stifled the peace process even when negotiations went smoothly because it demanded that both Israelis and Palestinians completely change their mindsets.7 There is, however, a more direct link between Palestinian violence and the failure to uphold the agreements made in Oslo. From the Israeli perspective, one of the most important aspects of the peace process was security. By reaching an agreement, they put their trust in Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) to handle the security situation of Palestine. When the PIJ continued to target and kill Israeli civilians, not only did that reflect badly on the PLO, but it also meant a devastating blow to the very foundation of Israel’s cooperation.1

While it could be argued that the Likud party and its leaders would not have implemented the agreements made in Oslo anyway, considering Netanyahu’s own admission of actively trying to undermine the process, the continued violence by, among others, the PIJ gave them both reason and public support to continue their firm position on security.14 Between the Israeli right and the PIJ, we can see a cyclical pattern of action and reaction, creating distance rather than working toward understanding. This is true not only between the extremists but also between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authorities (PA). In fact, the relationship between Likud and Kach is not much different. Their violence, such as the al-Ibrahim Massacre, is just as much a breach of security as the violence by the PIJ. After the attack in 2005 by the Kahane Chai/IDF soldier, The New York Times wrote, “the shooting on Thursday is certain to inflame passions on all sides.”16 Kach and Kahane Chai, just as much as the PIJ, contribute to justifying the so-called Hawkish, or politically aggressive, position that has been reluctant to compromise, especially on security.

These actions of the PIJ, Kach, and Kahane Chai cannot be seen as anything other than acts of terror. According to Paul Rogers, Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford, there are typically three ways of responding to terrorism: (1) intelligence and security, (2) military action, and (3) proactively undermine the motivations behind the actions.17 With the motivations being the creation of Greater Israel—a geographical area composed of at least what is currently Israel and the Palestinian Territories, but may also include Sinai and stretching to the Euphrates River—on the one side and Israel’s complete destruction on the other, there is little room for the other side to work proactively.18 One can see direct correlations between acts of terror and public support for the Israeli right’s hardline on settlements and security. This hardline, in turn, contributed to the breakdown of the Oslo Peace Process and eventually, the radicalization culminated in the Second Intifada (Al-Aqsa).

Conclusion

The use of violence can be seen as a means of creating a situation where negotiations are impossible and thus making violence the “last and only resort.” In other words, violence is self-perpetuating; it incites a radical response and cancels out all concessions that are made. For those holding to the belief that the only acceptable future is one where “the other” has been annihilated, violence has been an effective tactic.

The glorification and participation in violence has directly led to contention and tension. This has only worked in favor of those who are uncompromising on either side of the conflict. The essence of radicalization is that one act of radicalism feeds the next, which becomes a cycle. It could be said that in this way, not only have Kach, Kahane Chai, and the PIJ utilized the same methods, but they have used them to same end.

References


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