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A Journey of Knowledge: When Theory, Research, and Practice Met, I Became Who I Am

BRONZE MEDAL

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What a pleasure to be with you today, on the day of the 125th anniversary of Nikolai Kondratieff. I hope this occasion will provide an opportunity to exchange views and discuss scholarly impact of Kondratieff waves on today's global economy, contributing to the ongoing evolution in the social sciences.

It is a great honor to accept the award of the 2017 Kondratieff medal by the International Kondratieff Foundation. I would like to give special thanks to those who nominated me for the award and to congratulate the organizers and the award committee for the impressive work they have done to make this moment happen. Thank you all wholeheartedly. I am truly honored by your decision to award me the Kondratieff medal. I hope I will be able to live up to the expectations of contributing to the development of social sciences as this medal aims.

Coming from a conflict analysis and resolution educational background, I am intrigued by the Kondratieff wave economic theory and whether a similar model of 'Waves' or 'Cycles' (Grinin, Devezas, and Korotayev 2012) exists especially in the evolution of intractable conflicts. As Christopher Mitchell (1981: 66) argues, conflict parties often 'become involved in repetitive cycles of conflicts at different times and over new sets of issues'. Further research on how patterns of cycles could inform both economics and conflict situations is definitely needed.

Having spent my entire career studying conflict and its resolution, I came to realize that capturing the complexity of conflict (Sandole 1999) can mainly be achieved using an integrated approach that incorporates theory, research, and practice.

I experienced the challenges of conflict from an early age – I was born in Palestine, and was raised under the Israeli military occupation. I saw conflicts every day of my childhood. I saw it in the streets as my fellow citizens protest-

ed against the brutality of the occupation, while Israeli soldiers in military uniform gave orders to arrest or shoot them as they saw fit. I saw it in the hundreds of military checkpoints in the West Bank that severely restricted the daily movement of the Palestinian people in their own land (B'Tselem 2017).

I lived through the first Palestinian Intifada in 1987–1993 and became involved in the national struggle against the occupation. I learned to endure conflict by spending the first year of my undergraduate degree in 1990 in a parallel education system established after Israeli military closed my university – Birzeit – for four years (Chartrand 1991). I had to take classes in hotels, cafes, and my professors' private homes as the university campus was sealed by the Israeli army. To endure conflict is to fear being caught for receiving an education, that is what living in conflict zones taught me.

I came to understand conflict through my fellow university students who, sadly, either lost their lives for the conflict, were wounded and spent many days and weeks recovering, or became permanently handicapped.

Nikolai Kondratieff served time in prison for speaking his mind and thinking outside the box. I also was arrested and imprisoned by the Israeli authorities in 1989 for speaking out against their occupation of Palestine.

I learned that life in a conflict zone requires you to pay your 'national share' or in my case the 'tax of occupation'. My prison cell helped me understand the cost of conflict, its nature, dynamics, and the prospects of its resolution. It provided me with the knowledge that I cannot find in books published by highly ranked universities and academic institutions.

However, in 1993, the conflict changed its trend, and a peace agreement was signed – the Oslo Accords. For the first time, a hope for a new life was on the horizon – free of occupation and daily violence. My experiences took a new turn as I began to debate the design, dynamics, and prospects of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

I debated not only with Israeli scholars and activists but also individuals from further abroad – mainly Europeans – who became closely involved in the peace process. I later realized that I had moved from analyzing conflict to trying to understand how to resolve it. While hopes were high in the beginning of the peace process, they started to fade away as the years went by. I became increasingly convinced that the design of the peace process was structurally flawed – doomed to fail.

Years of negotiation led to only one outcome, which was that the Israeli occupation became ever-more entrenched. As the building of Israeli settlements in the West Bank intensified, the suffering of the Palestinian people seriously deepened.

Five years later after the signing of the Oslo Accords, I was certain of two things: the Oslo process was doomed to fail, and that experience of conflict alone would not give me the answers I needed about the keys to conflict resolu-

tion. I would need to pursue a robust theoretical approach to understanding conflict dynamics.

I therefore left Palestine in 1999 and enrolled in a Ph.D. program in conflict analysis and resolution at George Mason University in the United States. The start of my doctoral program coincided exactly with the 2000 Camp David talks between Palestinian leader Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak with Bill Clinton, negotiations that sought a final settlement of the conflict. This led my classmates to joke that I was just starting to study conflict at the same time that these leaders were meeting to resolve the very conflict I wanted to study! Seventeen years have passed after the failed negotiations today and instead of resolving the conflict we are discussing whether the two state-solution is still alive.

I am eternally grateful for the School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution (S-CAR) at George Mason University due to the rigorous academic training it offered me during my doctoral degree program. It not only gave me the theoretical frameworks I sought to put my conflict experiences into perspective but also gave me insight into why the Israeli-Palestinian process failed.

First, negotiations in a situation of asymmetric conflicts are likely to end in favor of the powerful party. Due to severe power imbalance between the Palestinians and Israelis, the peace process ended up with a 'cost free occupation' where Israeli maintained security and sovereignty over the West Bank and Gaza while the Palestinian Authority became responsible for 'governing without ruling'. Unlike South Africa, the international community did nothing to remedy this imbalance in a way that would give negotiations a chance to succeed. The international community pressured the Pretoria government to dismantle its system of segregation and discrimination it accommodated the Israeli government policies in the West Bank.

Second, impartiality is a key principle for successful mediation (Bercovitch 1995; Northedge and Donelan 1971). Severe bias in American mediation towards Israel alienated Palestinian negotiators and questioned any outcome could be reached under these conditions. Two years of impartial American mediation led by George Mitchell in Northern Ireland led to the Good Friday agreement in 1998, ending a three-decade conflict in Belfast (Curran and Sebenius 2003). A 24-year-long biased American mediation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has led to what now seems to be a perpetuation of the conflict.

Third, my doctoral program emphasized an entire set of ethical norms such as 'do no harm' (Anderson 1999) to guide intervention in conflict zones. Reflecting on my interaction with international organizations involved in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process (1993–1999), I noticed that some of them were entirely driven by their own agendas, fundraising demands, and other types of vested interest in the process. And in fact, some intervention undoubtedly caused harm,

whether to vulnerable communities like refugees or to the entire cause of Palestinian independence.

Conflicts of interest do exist on many levels and not everyone intervening in conflict zones would abide by a firm ethical code. Here again, theory and academic investigations help us understand the complexity of conflict situation, highlighting the risks of our actions causing harm rather than helping the situation.

With this combination of direct experience and rigorous academic training in conflict resolution, I left my doctoral program confident I had captured what needed to respond to conflict zones around the world. The academic component was further solidified by my teaching on international conflict resolution at George Washington University and Georgetown University.

However, when I started my field research later as a senior foreign policy fellow at the Brookings Institution, I started to test longstanding theories through the research that I have done on post-conflict transition in Arab Spring countries. My knowledge of the conflict resolution literature was partly tested by the 'ground truths' of over 200 interviews that I conducted in Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia. Over three years, I interviewed government officials, heads of political parties, revolutionary youth, NGOs representatives, women activists, tribal leaders, and representatives of refugees and IDPs.

In many areas, academic theories have proven valid; however, in a number of areas my field research challenged academic theories and pointed out their limitations.

First, the concept of 'peace' – widely emphasized in Western academic literature of conflict resolution as an end goal of any dispute – carries a different meaning in countries ruled by ruthless dictators like Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia. Peace in these countries means submission to autocratic leaders and accepting their terms. Peace in Western contexts means maintaining rule of law, democratic systems, and a social contract (Salem 1993) that has been forged between the state and the society. In countries of dictatorships, the only social contract that exists is the ruler's absolute power, thus making 'revolution' necessary instead of 'peace'.

In this context, 'revolution' becomes the sought-after concept that replaces the 'dictator's peace'. Even in countries under military occupation, as confirmed by 24 years of futile Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, peace means submission to the more powerful party and acceptance of Israel's terms on refugees, settlements, borders, and Jerusalem.

Second, the 'interest-based negotiation' approach (Fisher and Ury 2011) as developed by Harvard University professors has become one of the most well-known approaches in academic literature, yet does not fully capture the cultural dimensions of negotiating in societies like the Arab world. While, of course, 'interest' remains an important factor that impacts negotiations, other factors

like face-saving, pride, status, and religion have a significant effect on the negotiations' dynamics and outcomes. My interviewees also spoke of expectations of potential mediators as expected to meet some requirements like age and social status, unlike in Western societies where mediators are expected to be university trained ones.

Third, while the academic literature suggests truth-seeking commissions to learn about the past in order to ensure healthy transitions to the future (Galtung 2001), my field research interviews suggest a different take on the relationship with the past. When I asked my interviewees whether they wanted to know what happened in the past – under the ousted dictators – the answers were quite different. Due to my further research into the reasons for such differences in the answers I discovered that perspectives on the past were heavily politicized, with each party weaving a narrative to serve their political agendas (Fraihat 2016). For example, some of those who asked for the 'full truth' about the past wanted to use the 'truth' to pass lustration laws that would exclude political rivals from running to public offices. In this context, revealing the truth as suggested in academia could lead to further polarization and a more intense social conflict. To ensure an in-depth analysis of how the three countries approached post-regime change transitions, I incorporated my major findings into my book *Unfinished Revolutions: Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia after the Arab Spring*, published by Yale University Press in 2016.

This journey through experience, theory, and firsthand research – complementing each other in certain areas and challenging their limitations in others – encouraged me to combine all three approaches in my future academic work. Last year, I together with my colleagues at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies established the first Master Degree program of its kind in the Arab world in Conflict Management and Humanitarian Studies.

The design of the program, which aims to respond to the challenges that continued conflicts pose in the Middle East region, incorporates not only surveys of academic literature but also field research and internships with international conflict-zone organizations working in different conflict zones.

Over twenty-five years of continued work to ideally bring theory, research, and practice in my conflict resolution world to live together and I still feel I need more. Though my academic journey is not over yet, I feel confident that theory, research, and lived experience have already shaped who scholarly I am today.

I close with a heartfelt thank you for all those who had an impact on my being here today; the organizers for enabling such a remarkable event and the audience for sharing it with me.

Thank you.

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