

Introduction

The Palestine question has been internationalized from its very beginning. More than a hundred years ago, in 1917, the Balfour Declaration—later incorporated in the British Mandate for Palestine—promised to support a “national home for the Jewish people” while ignoring the right to self-determination of the local Arab-Palestinian majority, which it referred to as the “non-Jewish communities.” In July 1937, for the first time in history, the British Peel Commission recommended partition, and the related forced transfer of 225,000 Arab-Palestinians and about 1,250 Jews. Ten years later, in November 1947, thirty-three (out of a total of fifty-six) member states of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) suggested the partition of Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. Over fifty years ago, in November 1967, United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 242, as well as Resolution 338 in October 1973, embodied the land for peace principle. When the General Assembly now began to stake out Palestinian collective rights—including the right to a state—the so-called peace process took off. In November 1977, Egyptian president Anwar el Sadat made his historic visit to the Knesset, and one year later the Camp David Accords were signed under US auspices. Indeed, the US had now become the key power in the region, launching repeated “peace” proposals that crystallized into the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP). This “peace process”—as this book argues—has been a specific script that has attached meaning to the Palestine/Israel question (namely, a prescriptive one that conditioned the return of land not on preemptory norms of international law, but on negotiations), but also included specific roles for all powers involved (but not for the UN). As long as all powers performed this script into being, it was resilient and had an impact on the ground. At the time of writing, US president

Donald Trump is overperforming this script, as he not only sidelines international law but engages in breaking it, for example when moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, implicitly recognizing the city as the capital of the State of Israel, in contravention to international consensus and law. A proceeding has been initiated against the US by the State of Palestine at the International Court of Justice, while the Palestinians in Gaza have begun their “Great March of Return,” partially in reaction to this US move.

While this short overview shows the importance of the international layer of the conflict and the key role that global and regional powers play in the conflict, no study exists so far that *comparatively* explores their role in it. This lacuna is puzzling, maybe now more than ever; after almost four decades of peace processes and substantial international diplomatic and economic efforts, the solution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict appears as far away as ever. *This begs the question: What if the efforts of all these powers, rather than helping to solve the conflict, have actually led to its perpetuation? Rather than being external to the conflict, have they been a substantial part of it? What exactly have the roles of these powers been in the conflict?*

The literature has tended to frame the conflict as Arab-Israeli (Sela 1997), representing the Arab states as a bloc of conflict actors. Some parts of the literature also framed the conflict as one seated in a larger conflict with Islam (Bartal 2015), including Iran (Rawshandil and Lean 2011), at times also Turkey (Tür 2012), into the circle of conflict actors. In contrast to this, the three global powers that have historically also been substantially involved in the conflict—European states/the EC/EU, the US, and the USSR/Russia—are generally framed as external actors, mainly as diplomatic brokers, despite the fact that all three of them have been major arms providers in the conflict, much more than, for example, Iran. The literature has so tended to unreflexively repeat how these three global powers have represented themselves. This book observes key powers—Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, EU, Russia, the US—as *actors* in the conflict, as parts of the conflict at its different layers, that is the local, regional, and global ones.

With this approach, this book departs from the Euro-centric tendency of the literature on the conflict specifically, but also of the International Relations literature more generally, which has come increasingly under critique for its Euro-centrism (Acharya and Buzan 2010). The latter is ever more at odds with a world that, while still dominated by the US,

is becoming more multipolar and which the current IR toolbox fails to understand and address. The calls for a non-Eurocentric literature are therefore accumulating (Keukeleire and Lococq 2016; Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013). Euro-centrism, as Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria have pointed out, can be understood as the more or less explicit assumption that the general historical development that is seen as characteristic for Western Europe and Northern America is a model according to which the histories and social formations of other societies can be measured and assessed (Conrad and Randeria 2013, 35). The IR literature, specifically the one that began to grow in the 1990s, has had the tendency to argue that the European, Western, and transatlantic worlds had succeeded to build Kantian cultures of friendship, while the Middle East was still dominated by Hobbesian—at best Lockean—cultures of enmity or competition. The eminent role of global powers in constituting such “cultures” in order to foster their own political interests and in being an intrinsic, even dominant, part of them in the past and present are hardly identified in IR.¹ Some of the literature from the field of history, specifically from postcolonial scholars, has studied the deep entanglement of Europe in the conflict. This book shows that this entanglement has not ended there, but that it has evolved since the end of the Second World War. It aims at being decentering by exploring how regional and global powers are interwoven in the conflict, how their role performances interacted in constituting its structure and meaning discursively. Through this historical and comparative approach the book also helps to understand dynamics in the Middle East that go beyond the conflict. It shows how the “peace process” script and its performance has set the scene for the current geopolitical rupture in the region and gives more nuance to evolving academic discussion on an implosion of order in the Middle East (Valbjørn and Bank 2012). The decentering approach of this book is not only pursued through a comparative approach that crosses what is often referred to as the Global South and the Global North but also through its conceptual, theoretical, and methodological framework.

How to Read This Book

This book is in two parts. The first four chapters lay out the decentering conceptual (chapter 1), theoretical (chapter 2) and methodological (chapter 3) framework, as well as the categories and key concepts (chapter

4) in the representation of the Palestine/Israel question extracted through grounded theory in the observed UN speeches and documents. The second part of the book consists of the two analytical chapters, which explore the role performances of the seven powers, as well as the meanings and web of relationships they have sustained (chapter 5), and the evolution of the authoritative international normative framing of the conflict at the United Nations (chapter 6). These two chapters identify dominant and alternative scripts, as well as “periods of continuity” in which these scripts were performed (orders) and “periods of ruptures” when they broke down and new scripts emerged.

In more detail, chapter 1 critically explores the state of the art of the literature to which this book relates and, based on this, conceptualizes the conflict, but not the Palestine/Israel question, which is left undefined since the book investigates inductively how the latter is framed by the key powers and in the UN. It argues that by referring to the conflict as the “Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” some parts of the literature posits that Israel and Palestinians share equal responsibility for the situation (Collins 2012, 19–20), and downplays or obscures, or both, the reality of a disenfranchised population and the social, economic, and political structures that have ensured that Palestinians remain stateless. Indeed, this book also reveals how the “peace process” has obscured this project. To highlight the power asymmetry, it refers to the “Israel-Palestinian conflict,” with one actor being a state and the other a stateless people being denied their individual and collective rights and sovereignty over the Palestinian territory.

Chapter 2 then proceeds with theoretical reflections. Given the high visibility of the conflict in the regional and global arenas, all powers engaged in the Middle East have an incentive to build their regional and global role identities through it, thus in turn contributing to its high visibility and defining its meaning on the international level. The roles they perform establish a configuration of relationships. For example, the Camp David Accords set up a specific structure of relations between the US, Israel, and Egypt, as well as indirectly also with Syria, Lebanon, or the Palestine Liberation Organization, and they bound these relationships with a specific meaning, a normative representation of the conflict. As these powers continuously performed their roles and associated meaning—that is, this script—into being, it remained resilient and constituted a regional “order.”

Chapter 3 explains the methodological approach of this book, anchored in grounded theory and critical discourse analysis of all the

speeches of representatives of the seven powers at the opening sessions of the United Nations General Assembly between 1948 and 2015, as well as of all United Nations General Assembly and UN Security Council resolutions on the conflict in the same time period. It also reflects on difficulties and challenges when doing research on this conflict.

Chapter 4 links the first to the second part of the book. It identifies categories and key concepts in the representation of the Palestine/Israel question extracted through grounded theory in the observed UN speeches and documents. These relate to the representation of the self, of Palestinians and Israelis, of the Palestine/Israel question, and of the role of the United Nations.

Chapter 5 inquires into the role performances of all seven powers to identify patterns as well as ruptures. It shows that two scripts existed alongside each other in the period from 1948 to 1967: a global one whereby the Palestine question was framed as a “refugee question” and was managed by the superpowers through the United Nations. They legitimized one state, while speaking only of individual refugee rights, not of the collective rights of the Palestinians. The regional script was spearheaded by Egypt, whereby the Palestine question was one of Western imperialism and Zionist colonialism and played a central role in pan-Arabism. The 1967 war was a rupture: the Arab script broke down and a transition period set in, in which a new script emerged, now produced by the US, which eventually became dominant in 1979. This script split the Arab world, which meant that its ability or willingness to produce an alternative script was undermined. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the EU, and Russia were all gradually absorbed into the US script, playing the roles foreseen for them in it, while excluding and marginalizing Iran. Instead of a comprehensive and inclusive security architecture guaranteed by the UN, the script centered around the US as the gravitational power with no mechanisms built in that could have outlived US power in the region. In terms of substance, the script silenced international law and Palestinian rights, ostensibly enabling the occupation to normalize to such a degree that a contiguous Palestinian state is hardly realizable anymore. The lynchpin has been the negotiations paradigm, namely that an occupied people has to negotiate its statehood with the occupying power, which has given Israel a de facto veto over a Palestinian state. The year 2011 is another rupture from the data analyzed in this book. Scripts need to be performed to sustain themselves and since the Arab uprisings, first Saudi Arabia and later on also the US and the EU have changed their

performance. The US—the gravitational power of the “peace process” script—and Saudi Arabia are overperforming the script, while the EU seems to have almost stopped performing.

Chapter 6 then analyzes the authoritative international normative framing of the conflict at the United Nations. It shows that in the first period (1948–67), the framing at the UNGA and the UNSC reflected the position of the superpowers. This changed from 1967 onward. The General Assembly became increasingly independent and affirmative as a result of decolonialization. While the US has silenced discussion over its emerging peace process script in the UN Security Council through its vetoes, the UN General Assembly has contested its approach, by confirming the illegality of Israeli settlements and the rights of the Palestinian people, including the right to their own sovereign and independent state. Indeed, the UNGA has set up a powerful alternative script that, however, needs agency—and performance—to sustain itself. This could be seen in the 1990s, when such agency slowed down. This is changing again since the Arab uprisings, as evident in 2012 when a stark majority of the UNGA affirmed the Palestinian non-observer-member state bid.

The conclusions highlight the findings and reflect on them once more in light of the theoretical framework of this book. When looking at the performances of powerful states at the UN, we can see them as theatrical performances, which is also why the cover picture of this book shows the United Nations hall almost as a theater stage. This theatrical play of all actors involved has continued even during outright war, violence, and death on the ground. Rather than solving the conflict, it has bound the performing actors to a shared, collective performance, which has provided them with “meaningful order.”