

Interview – Dana Gold

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other young scholars.

Dana Gold won E-IR's 2019 Article Award with her article *The Israeli-Palestinian Impasse and Theories of Peace in International Relations*. She is a PhD candidate in Political Science at the University of Western Ontario. Her dissertation explores how mental representations of the “Other” are constructed and reproduced in the Israeli education system. Dana received the Kimmerling Award for the best graduate paper presented at the Association for Israel Studies Conference at the University of Los Angeles, California (UCLA) in 2014 and was a Visiting Scholar at Concordia University's Azrieli Institute from 2016-2017. Additionally, Dana's work has been published in the *Israel Studies Review* and the *Canadian Journal for Political Science* and she has contributed to two textbooks, *International Relations Theory* (2018) and *International Relations* (2017), for E-IR.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

To say that my thesis supervisor, Dr. Andrés Pérez-Baltodano, has had a significant impact not only on my dissertation, but also on my current knowledge of academia, would be an understatement. I came across his work in my first year as a PhD student at the University of Western Ontario and we instantly connected. Dr. Pérez-Baltodano has supervised my comprehensive exams as well as my dissertation and we went on to have many meaningful and thought-provoking discussions together. He has always encouraged me to read and pick apart academic literature by continuing to ask questions, and he strongly believes that curiosity can lead to better research. He has motivated me to push my work further, which has resulted in several academic presentations and publications in books and journals.

Several scholars have also influenced my research, including Daniel Bar-Tal and Sami Adwan's work on representations of the “Other” in Israeli-Palestinian textbooks. Their groundbreaking 2014 study (with Bruce Wexler, Professor Emeritus in Psychiatry) argues that both the Israeli and Palestinian education system impart detrimental material that portrays the other side negatively, among other claims. Additionally, Wexler has written extensively on cognitive science and neuroplasticity of the brain, and his research has enhanced my work on how mental representations are both constructed and maintained among Israelis and Palestinians, further complicating the potential for peace in the ongoing conflict.

In your thesis you argue that there is a process of Israeli ‘Othering’ of Palestinians within the education system in Israel. How do these processes manifest and what are the consequences?

In my doctoral dissertation, I explore the cognitive role in understanding how negative mental representations of the “Other” are maintained through the Israeli school system. One of my claims is in arguing that transformation on an individual level must precede institutional change, such as altering textbooks or multilingual classrooms. By applying an interdisciplinary perspective with concepts from both the social and cognitive sciences, there exists a greater opportunity for studying the issues at hand outside of limited academic boundaries that are respective to each discipline.

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From a young age, culture plays a large role in the creation and preservation of negative mental representations of the “Other” on both sides of the conflict. Institutions, including the education system, the military, religion, the family, and so on, have a large role to play in perpetuating harmful sentiments of the “Other”, which become more concrete over time. Although mental representations are subjective to each individual, they become scaffolded as a result of institutional influences early in one’s life; however, dominant narratives become ingrained in a society and more resistant to change. An individual whose mental representations are inconsistent with the general group he or she belongs to is cast as an outsider. Thus, in my thesis, I argue that one of the reasons Israeli and Palestinian leaders have not succumbed to concessions from the other side is as a result of the challenges presented by robust narratives that have been pervasive throughout each group.

What is your analysis of recent efforts to create harmony between Israelis and Palestinians? What more could be done?

Elections will be held on March 2nd, 2020, for a new Israeli Prime Minister for the third time in less than a year, after Benjamin Netanyahu failed to form a unity government twice in a row. Many have lost faith in Netanyahu after over a decade as the longest serving Prime Minister, as he was indicted over charges of bribery and corruption and has been blamed for stalling peace talks with the Palestinians. Additionally, there have been ongoing talks among Israelis for a new, fresh face of politics, and former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff, Benny Gantz, has emerged as a significant contender.

As ongoing contentious political issues continue to reverberate through Israel’s institutional framework, the education system has been considered in improving relations with minorities both within and outside of Israel. The most successful project to integrate Jews and Arabs together in the classroom has been the case of ‘Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam’, translated to mean “Oasis of Peace”. Located in the center of Israel, Jews and Arabs in this village live and study together, and their curriculums integrate several narratives in a multilingual setting where Hebrew and Arabic are both equally taught.

Although the case of ‘Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam’ has been shown to be successful in allowing Jews and Arabs to coexist and look past their differences, unfortunately, it appears to be an ideal situation that has presented a challenge in being incorporated on a larger scale. In particular, Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs are less likely to find success in such an arrangement since they tend to disagree more widely on issues that would impact attempts at a multicultural classroom. For example, how would the birth of the State of Israel in 1948 be represented alongside the ‘Nakba’, which found thousands of Palestinians either fleeing or forced from their homes as a result of the Israeli War of Independence? This question remains unclear and, at this time, it will be important for Israelis to elect a government that will seek to improve relations with their Palestinian neighbours and tackle difficult issues that could inspire positive change in the region.

In my opinion, there needs to be an intermediary who is truly committed to creating a resolution between both sides. Jared Kushner was a poor choice to implement an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan, not only as the son-in-law of the President of the United States and appointed White House Senior Advisor, but also since he fails to present himself as an ally to the Arabs. Consequently, the Palestinians haven’t viewed Kushner as trustworthy. Both Israelis and Palestinians need assistance at the negotiating table from a third party that will be sympathetic to their needs.

What does IR theory tell us about the prospects for peace between Israelis and Palestinians?

IR theory is constantly evolving and, in the past few decades, has moved away from traditional scholarship (e.g. state-centered approaches), towards more individual approaches that amplify marginalized voices. This turn has also resulted in novel approaches to concepts such as peace in global politics. In my article for E-IR, I seek to answer two specific questions. First, “Does IR theory account for peace?” and, second, “Is peace possible between Israelis and Palestinians?” I argue that despite important advancements in IR, the field itself does not present a cohesive approach to peace. Further, although IR literature leads us to believe that peace is possible between Israelis and Palestinians, the present material is not sufficient to assess the application of peace to conflict.

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What continues to be most striking to me about this topic is the fact that despite the popularity of “peace studies” in IR, there is a lack of a general approach to peace. Furthermore, scholars are at odds with one another in favour of a concrete definition of what “peace” entails. How are we, as scholars, to truly understand peace when its core meaning cannot be agreed upon within academia? Additionally, there is a disconnect between academics and policy-makers over what needs to be done to enhance global peace, which may evidently impact any sort of hope in advancing such ideas outside of the ivory tower.

What role do emotions play in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Because of the human component involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, emotions are undoubtedly involved and further intensify negative sentiments as well as violence. Many have lost loved ones in war and their lives have been shattered by deep physical and psychological wounds that cannot easily be healed. Empathy and forgiveness go both ways and become increasingly challenging when politics plays a role and people are separated by both concrete and metaphorical walls. Additionally, there is much internal conflict in the region, for example not only between Jews and Arabs, but also between secular and ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel, as well as between Fatah and Hamas rivalries in the West Bank and Gaza. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is complex and multi-faceted with many layers. Thus, to claim that one is an expert in these issues is implausible in some ways.

Regardless of any solutions between Israelis and Palestinians, emotions will certainly always prevail due to undeniable competing claims as a result of a shared land rooted in religious, cultural and historical factors. For my Master of Art’s thesis at McMaster University (2011), I investigated the role of emotions in international relations and employed a critical lens in applying the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This paper was presented at the 2013 Association for Israel Studies (AIS) Conference and subsequently won the AIS Kimmerling Prize in 2014.

In my Master’s thesis, I found that like ‘peace’, ‘emotion’ is an underdeveloped topic within IR, particularly because of its broad nature. Human beings often fail to understand emotions on a basic level as they are very much a part of our biological DNA in determining judgements towards our surroundings, including those around us. This act of recognition enables us to determine potential dangers and, more than often, we misinterpret the intentions of others. In an already tense environment in the Israeli-Palestinian region, with political leaders casting constant blame on one another, it is no wonder that an end to the conflict remains distant.

What are you currently working on?

I’m currently working on a few projects, including two chapters with Dr. Stephen McGlinchey, Editor-in-Chief for E-IR, for the second edition of E-IR’s International Relations textbook, which will be published by Macmillan in 2021. Essentially, we will be splitting our chapter on IR Theory from the previous textbook into ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ chapters, to expand upon the cases from the first textbook. Stephen is great to work with and I’m excited for what the second edition of this book will bring.

Additionally, I’m currently expanding a paper that I plan to present as a poster at the upcoming Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA) Conference in London, Ontario in June 2020, in regards to the influence of the Israeli military on the secular education system in Israel. More specifically, in this paper, I explore the literature on institutionalization in understanding the power and influence of the Israel education system. For example, I assess the impact of texts, curricula and teachers in promoting the steadfast belief of an existential threat to the Jewish state, leading its citizens to safeguard the nation at all costs, consequently impacting relations with the Palestinians.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

My advice to young scholars would be to *believe in your strengths*. Listen to your instincts and don’t let anyone define your worth. The academic environment is unfortunately such that young scholars are frequently put down with their ideas harshly criticized, instead of being offered constructive feedback that can assist these ideas in blossoming and truly having an impact on one’s field.

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At last year's International Studies Association (ISA) Conference in Toronto, Ontario, I presented the very paper that was awarded the E-IR 2019 Article Award. At the conference, a senior scholar from a Latin American University disapproved of several of my claims, particularly because of certain literature that he felt wasn't given enough attention in the paper. Although I maintained the integrity of my manuscript in its improvement, I utilized this scholar's feedback in enhancing my own knowledge of the topic at hand.

Had I taken his comments to heart, perhaps I would have not submitted this paper to the competition in the first place. What needs to be remembered is that every individual, whether within or outside of academia, has their own opinions, biases, prejudices towards certain ideas and theories. It may be difficult to not take another person's feedback personally, but we should try to use this advice for the betterment of ourselves as scholars and purveyors of knowledge.