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The Palestinian Refugee Question: A Constitutive Constructivist Interpretation

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Abstract

The paper aims to present a constitutive constructivist interpretation of the Palestinian refugee question by examining the speeches and other public documents. The proponent questions the perennial inadequacy of mainstream theories particularly realism, thus its purpose is to present an alternative theoretical framework, and with the help of a method to deeply understand the problem. The constitutive version of constructivism differs from the conventional strand because it gives importance to the potency of the use of language. This will be undertaken through the verbs-in-context-system (VICS) method of content analysis. Consequently, the findings are not as good as we would hope for because based on the calculative verbs that were gathered using VICS, it gave us a negative and even pejorative interpretation whether all of the agreements and public statements were done in the spirit of *pacta sunt servanda*. However, there are glitches in the evaluated statements stating some plethoric and unbinding declarations. Most, if not all, were unilaterally declared based on their perspectives and insinuate some argumentative issues particularly on the right of the refugees to return to their homeland or acquire their lost properties.

Key words: Palestinian refugees, constructivism, Habermas, political psychology, Verbs-In-Context System (VICS)

The Palestinian Refugees: A Closer Look

In this section of the research, it will correspond on the contemporary socio-economic and demographic plight of the refugees rather detailing an historical account. The Palestinian

refugee problem was created in the course of the 1948 Israeli War of Independence or the Zionist Movement as some historians referred it.

The general term “Palestinian refugee”¹ refers to population groups whose social and political situation is extremely uneven. Thus, 22 percent of the refugees live in the Gaza Strip; according to the UN agency, 818,000 of the 1.1 million Palestinians who reside in the Gaza Strip are refugees. Most of them are members or descendants of families that in 1948 fled from the region extending from Jaffa southward. Nearly half of these refugees live in eight tremendously overcrowded refugee camps. The Shati camp, for example, is home to 74,000 refugees who are squeezed into an area of less than one square kilometer.

In 1949, the Palestinian population totaled 1,380,000 people, of whom 730,000 were refugees. Fifty-two years later, a second and third generation has been added to the first generation of refugees: Natural growth at a rate that is one of the fastest in the world has multiplied their number by fourfold at least. According to data of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which devotes its activity to the Palestinian refugees, their number today stands at 4 million.

Israeli partisans often assert that the Arab Palestinian refugees left because Arab radio broadcasts and Arab leaders told them to leave and make way for invading Arab armies, promising them a quick and easy return. Palestinian partisans claim this is not so, and that the Palestinians were forcibly expelled. In fact, there is evidence of expulsion, of fear of expulsion but also of encouragement by Arab leaders to leave.

In the West Bank, the refugee population is 580,000 out of a total population of 1.8 million Palestinians, according to the UN relief agency. One quarter of the refugees, live in 19 camps. The refugee families in the camps maintain an attachment to their towns and villages of origin. There are 1.7 million Palestinian refugees in Jordan, according to the UN agency, of which 200,000 are considered "displaced persons" - Palestinians who left the West Bank in 1967. About 280,000 of the refugees live in 13 camps. The majority of the refugees in Jordan holds Jordanian citizenship and has integrated themselves into the country's economic and social life.

There are 376,000 Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA in Lebanon, constituting 10 percent of the country's population. According to Yitzhak Ravid, the actual number of refugees in Lebanon is between 250,000 and 300,000. Most of them are from families that fled to Lebanon from Haifa and Galilee in 1948. Of all the refugees in the Arab states, their plight is the most severe. Because of the Lebanese government's fear of upsetting the ethnic-religious balance in the country, only a quarter of the refugees have received

citizenship. The majority of the refugees in Lebanon live in 12 camps. They are not accepted to government positions and are also barred from a wide range of professions, including those that require academic training.

A few hundred thousand Palestinians whose families fled from their homes in 1948 live in the Gulf States (according to the data of the PA's refugee affairs ministry, there are 274,000 refugees in Saudi Arabia, 34,000 in Kuwait and 105,000 in the other Gulf states), in other Arab countries and elsewhere in the world. The refugees in the Gulf States do not enjoy civil rights but, overall, are relatively well off economically. The Palestinian Diaspora in the United States numbers about a quarter-of-a-million people, who constitute about 10 percent of the Arab-American community. Most of them are American citizens and have integrated economically and socially.

UN Educational Program for Palestinian Refugees

UN interest in education for the Palestine Arab refugees began almost immediately after the development of the problem. By agreement between the two bodies, the UNRWA-UNESCO educational and training program was initiated in May of 1950. From the modest initial allocation of slightly \$400,000 in 1950, the educational expenditures rose to \$15,000,000 by 1968.²

Refugees' Sentiments

The refugees themselves have no great love for UNRWA. Their basic feeling has been, and continues to be, that the UN was responsible for their plight and thereby the relief given by the agency is considered as a right and as such is inadequate. As the environment of the host countries has changed so also has the refugee population change.

Refugees' Developments

The refugees who left Palestine some twenty years ago as predominantly uneducated labor have grown to become one of the most literate groups in the Middle East. The refugee group has also, by taking advantage to the opportunities offered by UNRWA, been able to a great extent to break out of the traditional Arab society. In the process, it has developed urban aspirations for upward mobility and economic security because of increasing contacts with the urban societies in the host countries.³

Tenets of Constructivism Reinterpret the Origin of the Problem

There are various theoretical attempts to address the question on Palestine while prospects for peace seem to be gray and narrow. It has been 90 years and the problem still persists. Geopolitics plays a great role in analyzing the intricate events that upholds and continues to evolve in the Palestinian Question. One interpretation that has not been extensively looked upon is the constructivist approach to the problem.

It examines the role of norms and, in fewer cases, identify in shaping international political outcomes.⁴ Henry Nau of George Washington University has provocatively theorized that a country's national interest begins with what kind of society the nation is, not just what its geopolitical circumstances are.⁵

Zionism entrusted as structure of human association wherein its constructed identity and interest is determined by shared ideas rather than nature or material forces. According to the realm of eastern literature the problem started with Zionism as a political movement, which "claims that Palestine belongs to the Jews."⁶ It has based its claim on historical grounds and appealed to religious and humanitarian sentiments.

Jews had lived in North America since early colonial times, the first Dutch Jews arriving in New Amsterdam in 1654. It was only in mid-nineteenth century with the arrival of German Jews in the aftermath of the failed revolutions of 1848 that "Jews started to become a significant element in the American population."⁷

As realization of the near destruction of the Jewish people of Europe spread, the Zionist movement in the U.S., the country that now contained the largest Jewish community in the world, gained a tremendous support. It was inconceivable to most U.S. citizens regardless of their religious beliefs, that they could fail to support Jewish aspirations for a safe place where Jews could never again be senselessly slaughtered. In the process, the reality of Palestine and its indigenous people was ignored.⁸

The events that caused the exodus of the Palestinian Arabs did not begin in 1948 or for that matter with the Balfour Declaration in 1917. They began much earlier in the history of the conflict between the Christian West and the Muslim East. This is "a struggle that cannot be fully understood or appreciated unless one grasps the problem as it originated in the Ottoman Empire."⁹

The idealist ontology of social constructivism is particularly attractive since it offers the prospect of "via media."¹⁰ In 1954, Palestinian group, primarily in Gaza, began to take commando action and conduct raids, this is seen by constructivists as the materialistic

sociological structure. This is the most fundamental fact about society in nature and organization of material forces e.g. forces of destruction.¹¹

By British declaration of intent to create a “Jewish National Home in Palestine,” David Ben-Gurion reads out the proclamation of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948.¹² Leonard Stein, authoritative historian of Zionism, argued that the real purpose of the Zionist movement was to detach Palestine from its people and form a very effective guard for the Suez Canal thus turning it into a Jewish State.

According to International Law Prof. Henry Cattan, the Palestine Mandate was invalid on three grounds:¹³

1. By endorsing the Balfour Declaration and accepting the concept of the establishment of Jewish national home in Palestine, it violated the sovereignty of the people of Palestine and their natural rights of independence and self-determination.
2. It violated, in spirit and in letter, Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, under the authority of which it purported to be made. Stressing that the League was founded on the principles of non-annexation of territories and that the mandates prohibited the alienation of territory, have ruled that sovereignty rested with the people of a Mandated Territory, albeit in suspense since they could not exercise it.
3. The endorsement and implementation of the Balfour Declaration conflicted with the assurances and pledges given to the Arabs during the 1st World War by Great Britain and the Allied Powers. The denial to the Palestinian Arabs of their independence and the subjection of their country to the immigration of foreign people were breach of those pledges.

Since there is no common ground on Arab-Jewish Relationship e.g. the Arab community is predominantly Asian in character; the Jewish community is predominantly European. They differ in religion and in language. Their cultural, social life and ways of thoughts and conducts are as incompatible as their national aspirations. It is time to assert some geopolitical issue-areas.

Conventional and Constitutive Constructivism

The main assumption of constructivism resides on the importance of normative or ideational structures as well as material one in defining the meaning and identity of an individual. It is the human being interprets the material environment, but the salient is how these material

resources are conceived.¹⁴ In addition, constructivists stress on intersubjective beliefs such as ideas, conceptions and assumptions.¹⁵

Norms and shared beliefs constitute actor's identities and interests, e.g., the way people conceive themselves in their relation with others.¹⁶ Constructivists concentrate on the social identities and interests of actors.¹⁷ Social identities and interests are not fixed but relative and relational.

Conventional constructivism examines the role of norms and identity in shaping international political outcomes. It desires to present an alternative to mainstream theories of International Relations which requires a research program to carry-out. This means that conventional constructivism must have the explanatory power to reconceptualized notions of sovereignty, balance-of-power, security dilemma, neoliberal cooperation, democratic peace and among others.¹⁸

Constitutive constructivism focuses on how threat perceptions, the object of security, are socially constructed. Thus mainstream theories of International Relations are concerned with 'why' questions and are considered 'explanatory', while constitutive constructivist approach is considered with 'how' questions and is considered as 'understanding'. It emphasizes discourse and linguistic methods, use of language in social construction of world politics. It suspects conventional constructivism suffers from lack of empirical studies.¹⁹

Shared Assumptions

Both aim to "denaturalize" the social world, that is, to empirically discover and reveal how the institutions and practices and identities that people take as natural, given and product of human agency of social construction. They believed that intersubjective reality and meanings were critical data for understanding the social world. They insist that all data must be "contextualized," that is, they must be related to, and situated within, the social environment in which they were gathered, in order to understand their meaning.²⁰

Both accept the nexus between power and knowledge as embodied from Foucault's conception of power, i.e., the power of practice in its disciplinary, meaning and mode producers. They accept the restoration of agency to human individuals and stress the reflexivity of the self and society, i.e., the mutual constitution of actor and structure.²¹

Contesting Conceptions

Conventional constructivists wish to discover identities and their associated reproductive social practices, and then offer an account of how those identities imply certain actions.

However, constitutive constructivists wish to surface, not to articulate their effects, but to elaborate on how people come to believe in a single version of naturalized truth. In other words, it aims at exploding the myths associated with identity formations, whereas conventional wish to treat those identities as possible causes of action.

Moreover, constitutive constructivists self-consciously recognize their own participation in the reproduction, constitution, and fixing of the social entities they observed. They claim that the actor and observer can never be separated. On the other hand, conventional ones ignore this injunction, while largely adopting interpretivist understandings of the connectivity of subjects with other subjects in a web of intersubjective meaning.

Constitutive Constructivism: The Habermas Tradition

Scholars following Habermas have explored the role of argument as a mechanism of social construction. However, speech can also persuade; it can change people's minds about what goals are valuable and about the roles they play (or should play) in social life. When speech has these effects, it is doing important social construction work, creating new understandings and new social facts that reconfigure politics.²² German scholars have explored possibilities for Habermasian "communicative action" to change minds and world views.²³ Under this view, there are six tests of plausibility:²⁴

1. Communicative action would predict that successful cooperation can only be established, and indeed that conversations can only begin at all, when the preconditions of communication are fulfilled; namely, that the partners recognize each other as equals in discourse independently of existing power imbalances.
2. Prenegotiations themselves are a further important indicator of the communicative action's fruitfulness.
3. In discourse within societies, the authenticity of the speakers is usually the most serious problem.
4. Within the language communities, the experience of a shared lifeworld provides the background against which common criteria for evaluating validity claims can in principle be found.
5. Utilitarianism treats the results of cooperation as nothing more than the distribution of gains. Communicative action, by contrast, anticipates an agreement which contains factual, normative and authenticity directed elements and which comes into being through a process in which arguments about these elements are exchanged.

6. Two processes are always entangled with one another in negotiations: the shared “creation of values,” which is a communicative act, and “the distribution of goods,” which represents a strategic competition.

In this regard, the proponent will maximize the six test of plausibility in adherence to the agreements and policies implemented by parties, the Palestinians and the Israelis concomitant to the refugee issue. Habermas emphasized the importance of speech act in persuading a group of people and in the light of his arguments; praxis of VICS will be installed. This is to contextualize the speech act by relegating a method that will help examine documents of treaties, agreements and speeches. The following were the selected and limited to the following sources:

- 1978 Camp David Accords I
- 1991 Madrid Conference’s Speeches
- 1993 Oslo Accords I
- 1995 Oslo Accords II
- 2000 Camp David Accords II
- 2001 Taba Negotiations
- 2002 Beirut Declaration on Saudi Peace Initiative

Verbs-In-Context-System Method of Content Analysis

The sources will be evaluated through the Verbs in Context System (VICS) method of content analysis. This system focuses on verbs, as they are the direct linguistic representation of the posited hypothesis of this study.²⁵ It draws inferences about public sources—speeches,, agreements, or other public statements by an individual or by the state.

The most relevant source for the systematic prediction of the state’s behavior is probably the public speech.²⁶ The VICS is a set of techniques for retrieving belief patterns from a leader’s public statements and drawing inferences about public behavior that are compatible with these beliefs.²⁷

Appeal/Support (+1), while negative transitive words are coded as either Threats (-2) or Oppose/Resist (-1).³⁰

Verbs that do not fit into one of these categories or which do not have a political context (i.e., do not deal with a policy domain or are not directed toward a political target) are coded as Neutral (0) and discarded. The remainder describes the leader's beliefs about the intended or imagined exercise of power by self and others regarding the political issues raised in the public statement.³¹

The calculation and interpretation of these indices in consonance with the evaluated agreements and speeches are summarized below.

Sources	Hostile				Friendly		
	very	definitely	somewhat	mixed	somewhat	definitely	very
<i>Verbal Interpretation:</i>							
<i>Numerical Interpretation:</i>	-0.75	-0.50	-0.25	0.0	+0.25	+0.50	+0.75
1978 Camp David Accords I					+0.17		
1991 Madrid Conference			-0.11				
1993 Oslo Accords I					+0.06		
1995 Oslo Accords II		-0.27					
2000 Camp David Accords II			-0.21				
2001 Taba Negotiations					+0.11		
2002 Beirut Declaration						+0.28	

In the summation of all the verbs found in every public statements and speeches, it has been viewed that there are conundrums and vagueness in calculating whether each accords of agreements resulted to either hostile or friendly. The nature of political universe reflect on the matter that both parties are consciously aware of their political existence and thus recognizes each other.

Table 2. Direction of Strategy							
Sources	Conflict				Cooperation		
	very	definitely	somewhat	mixed	somewhat	definitely	very
Verbal Interpretation:							
Numerical Interpretation:	-0.75	-0.50	-0.25	0.0	+0.25	+0.50	+0.75
1978 Camp David Accords I					+0.07		
1991 Madrid Conference					+0.11		
1993 Oslo Accords I					+0.09		
1995 Oslo Accords II					+0.14		
2000 Camp David Accords II					+0.22		
2001 Taba Negotiations					+0.24		
2002 Beirut Declaration						+0.26	

In this table you can absolutely see that there was a fair cooperation among all the agreements signed and was somehow done in good faith initially. However, obstacle arises whenever new elements of hostility and misunderstanding were committed. In to-to, the direction of strategy is clear and can be a sign of strength in the future (binding) treaties.

Table 3. Control over Historical Development					
Sources	Control			Control	
	Very Low	Low	Medium	High	Very High
Verbal Interpretation:					
Numerical Interpretation:	0.0	.25	.50	.75	1.0
1978 Camp David Accords I			.26		
1991 Madrid Conference		.22			
1993 Oslo Accords I		.18			
1995 Oslo Accords II		.15			
2000 Camp David Accords II	.09				
2001 Taba Negotiations	.10				
2002 Beirut Declaration		.11			

The anticipation of dwelling on the past or historical arguments was very low and at the abysmal of discord. The Israelis and so the Palestinians have very wide misunderstanding and gap on their control of each other's historicity. Thus no party will compromise their grand historical admonition for a certain agreement.

Table 4. Predictability of Political Future					
Sources	Predictability			Predictability	
	Very Low	Low	Medium	High	Very High
Verbal Interpretation:	0.0	.25	.50	.75	1.0
Numerical Interpretation:					
1978 Camp David Accords I		.21			
991 Madrid Conference	.10				
1993 Oslo Accords I		.15			
1995 Oslo Accords II		.17			
2000 Camp David Accords II			.33		
2001 Taba Negotiations		.14			
2002 Beirut Declaration		.22			

It is lamenting that the verbs used were bleak and vague congruent to their aspirations for their political future particularly of the Palestinian delegates who represented their people in such a conferences. But the willingness is there and yet if (hypothetically) predicts that there will be a viable political future especially for the Palestinians it is an insurmountable task to operate.

Table 5. Risk Orientation					
Sources	Risk Adverse			Risk Acceptance	
	Very Low	Low	Medium	High	Very High
Verbal Interpretation:	0.0	.25	.50	.75	1.0
Numerical Interpretation:					
1978 Camp David Accords I			.27		
991 Madrid Conference		.24			
1993 Oslo Accords I			.28		
1995 Oslo Accords II			.30		
2000 Camp David Accords II				.55	
2001 Taba Negotiations			.31		
2002 Beirut Declaration			.29		

Risk orientation tells us how both parties are willing to compromise and accept some risky adversaries and later accept the risk that each of them anticipated and signed. Most of the

agreements and statements were calculated and show a medium interpretation of how both accept a small percent of risk in their undertaken negotiations. It is a priori to note that when an individual will try to negotiate regarding a very important issue that represent their whole integrity, it is perceptively conceived that that party will try its very best not to take any higher amount of risks in the negotiation table.

Table 6. Role of Chance					
Sources	Chance			Chance	
	Very Low	Low	Medium	High	Very High
<i>Verbal Interpretation:</i>					
<i>Numerical Interpretation:</i>	0.0	.25	.50	.75	1.0
1978 Camp David Accords I	0.2				
991 Madrid Conference	0.5				
1993 Oslo Accords I	0.8				
1995 Oslo Accords II	0.9				
2000 Camp David Accords II		.12			
2001 Taba Negotiations	0.9				
2002 Beirut Declaration		.11			

The role of chance is so deemed small and the verbs used were not even accountable whether it reflects chances or hope. But rather full of animosity and opposing (antonyms) words as against to the operationalization of giving hope a chance. Thus chance is really out of context here. Neither both are willing to lower their pride and ego.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Domestic or transnational non-state actors have important decisive effects on the frequency or manner in which states engage in negotiations. Constructivists looked at the structure of ideas in the social system. The structure of any social system will contain elements of material conditions, interests and ideas. These elements are equally necessary to explain social outcomes.

The VICS is just one of the ways that were developed to examine and evaluate the thinking or schema of an actor, state-leader, public statements, speeches and agreements. However, it doesn't mean that it is effective in presenting the whole scenario and provide the best (plausible) answer to the complexity of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It was able to

present a new form of how to interpret the refugee problem by examining the statements and agreements salient to the cause of the refugees.

Disappointingly, while assessing the documents with the help of VICS it only show a dismal result towards finding a soluble variable for the refugees. But the paper's aim is not to find a solution to the problem instead it objectifies that constitutive constructivism can be an alternative view because of its strong epistemological grounds and empiricism compared with the conventional. In addition, it shows its explanatory power that a theory requires.

Constitutive constructivist notion of *Common knowledge* might be the answer for this devastated problem. Common knowledge concerns actors' beliefs about each other's rationality, strategies, preferences, and beliefs as well about states of the external world. These beliefs need not be true, just believed to be true. Common Knowledge requires interlocking beliefs meaning those beliefs must be accurate beliefs about others' belief. Common knowledge is an interaction-level phenomenon as one of the three levels of analysis relevant to theorizing about world politics.

The beliefs endowed and uttered in the statements and stated in the agreements were important especially for constitutive constructivists to measure the language use, the potency and power of words and their effectiveness in encouraging or persuading the other party to act on a common, if not, appropriate manner which is advantageous to both of them. Thus, the Arabs must recognize the existence of the Israeli People and in return, they should acknowledge the Palestinian nationalism and right to self-determination. Culture both has causal and constitutive effects. Constructivists are more interested on its constitutive effects. The relationship between agency and the structure is not of interaction but of mutual constitution. This could manifest the religious attachment of Israelis and Palestinians to Jerusalem.

The constitutive constructivist's notion of *Collective Self-Esteem* may apply on the question of the refugees because it refers to a group's need to feel good about itself, for respect or status. Refugees can be compensated in lieu of being allowed to return to Israel. Those living in camps in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon can move to the new Palestinian state or become citizens of the countries they're in.

Israel suggested for three-track fifteen-year absorption. The first track referred to the absorption to Israel of more than 25,000 in the first three years or 40,000 in the first five years of the program. The second track referred to the absorption of Palestinian refugees into the Israeli territory that shall be transferred to Palestinian sovereignty. And the third track is the absorption of refugees in the context of a family reunification scheme. Or refugees can be

compensated in lieu of being allowed to return to Israel. Those living in camps in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon can move to the new Palestinian state or become citizens of the countries they're in.

Some realities to ponder: the Arab League proposed a peace initiative as advocated by Saudi Arabia but was rejected by the Israeli government. The Palestinians split in two as the militant Hamas party, the dominant parliament, which the E.U. and U.S. declared as a terrorist group but Russia, has maintained its ties, controls the Gaza. The moderate Fatah Party led by Pres. Abbas, who formed an unconstitutional new cabinet appointing Fayyad as the new Prime Minister, controls the West Bank. U.S. Pres. Bush gave a \$30 billion military aid to Israel to preserve its superiority and to counter negative influences of Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria.

These two national groups have fought over one small piece of land in the Levant for over 90 years. Palestinians and the Arab countries have been unable to defeat Israel's militarily; Israel has been unable to eliminate Palestinian nationalism. Neither of these conditions is likely to change in the near future. Thus, the choice facing Israelis and Palestinians is whether to continue to fight indefinitely or to search for negotiated settlement to their conflict. With mutual recognition, mutual acceptance of the right of national self-determination and mutual acceptance of fixed and secure boundaries for all states in the Levant, a way may be found to resolve this enduring and destructive dilemma in world politics.

Consequently, the Palestinian Nationalism and Zionism must change for a lasting peace if their ideals have become dogmatic and endanger the continuity of both nations. The good of one nation is the good and protection of the other and their continuity depends on retaining the goodwill of both.

NOTES

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