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Gdańsk, 4.05.2018

Review of the PhD dissertation entitled *Treadmill Negotiation: The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process* by Itai Kohavi, Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań 2018, pp. 321, prepared under the supervision of prof. dr hab. Wojciech Nowiak, and auxiliary supervision of dr Anatol Czaban.

1. General remarks

The subject of Mr. Itai Kohavi's research is part of a broader framework of studies on the Middle East region. The study pertains to the incessant, yet futile negotiation process that is aimed at the resolution of moot points in the smoldering Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and can be perceived in the wider perspective of resolving and reframing international conflicts. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict as we know it, is undoubtedly identified as an international conflict. It constitutes the core of the wider Arab-Israeli argument. Various actors outside the region are involved in it, such as Egypt, Iran, Jordan, the European Union, the United Nations, Russia and the United States, to name only a few. The international community plays a particularly important role for Israel – a political heavyweight actor in the region, but still a relatively small country in the hostile Middle East. Israelis are striving to secure sound relationships with external actors, especially with the USA, which is perceived by the Israeli National Security Elite (hereafter INSE) not as a privilege but rather as an existential need. At

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the same time, negotiating with the Palestinians, the Israelis find themselves caught between two standpoints. For fear of the mounting pressure from the international community, Israel has decided to negotiate and discuss the most inflammatory agenda items, such as: (1) the Jewish settlements in the West Bank (called 'Judea and Samaria' by most Israelis); (2) the status of (East) Jerusalem; (3) the Palestinian refugees issue and the perception of Nakba (Al-Nakba). Afraid of the Palestinian intifada and the resurgence of anti-Jewish sentiments, the Israelis have participated in multiple peace negotiation rounds with the Palestinians, yet in a peculiar way. Like a skilled athlete, the Israeli (and Palestinian) leaders are running on a treadmill. They are burning energy and devoting a lot of time to this exercise, but not moving forward from where they have begun.

In his doctoral dissertation, Mr. Itai Kohavi analyzes these incessant negotiations. He traces the process of "running on a treadmill" from the Israeli perspective, and ponders whether a negotiation process can be considered as a conflict management tool. Looking at the processes of resolving the conflict, he points to the interplay between the actors, the strategy, structure and transformation of the conflict, and asks the following questions: How are strategies formed? What is the interplay between agent and structure during the negotiation process? How are the outcomes of the negotiations linked to the transformation of the conflict? Finally, Mr. Kohavi carries out a case study of the Israeli frame of negotiation, as well as of how the political actors are placed in a structural strategic context that may facilitate or restrain the negotiations. Looking at the processes of resolving the conflict, Mr. Kohavi asks about the meanings, beliefs, and perceptions of the overall "treadmill negotiation" by the INSE – a group of top intelligence and planning officers who shape Israeli national security strategy. The question of why, despite a dozen negotiating rounds since 1967, Israel has failed to reach an agreement with Palestinians is analyzed with respect to the predominant framing of the conflict among the Israelis and Palestinians, which is observable in the opinions expressed by the secluded and highly influential Israeli national security elite.

2. Framework of methodology

The dissertation of Mr. Kohavi is entitled *Treadmill Negotiation: The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process*. In the reviewer's opinion the **title** is justified. In the introduction, Mr. Kohavi presents the subject of his research, hypotheses, the main lines of inquiry as well as the basic methodological problems, among which emphasis is placed on the issue of filling the gaps in the research on the mapping of the opinions and insights of the INSE regarding the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This ambitious intention is worthwhile, but comes at a considerable cost – the research is focused solely on the conflict and national security implications for Israel, while disregarding the wider historical and cultural context (unless connected with the national security of Israel), and one-sided, with very limited reference to the Palestinian counterparts of the INSE – Fatah and Hamas. This is somewhat disappointing, as the title of the dissertation promises the consideration of both sides of the equation.

The main purpose of the dissertation of Mr. Kohavi is not explicitly stated in the introduction, yet the contents make it possible to identify it as an analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations as a conflict management tool, based on the opinions and insights of the INSE. Much more attention is given to the **core and additional research questions**, as well as the **core and additional hypotheses**. The **core research question** (why Israel has participated in multiple peace negotiation rounds with the Palestinians since 2000, and why they have always resulted in a failure to reach a peace agreement) corresponds with the proposed answer (**core hypothesis**), namely that “the INSE believes that if a Palestinian state is formed, it may become a national security threat to Israel, which is a risk that Israel should not take. Therefore, based on this professional opinion, the Israeli government haven’t enabled negotiations to reach a compromise point in which a peace agreement could be signed and a Palestine state could be formed.” The hypothesis and research questions are carefully examined in the third part of the dissertation and recapitulated in conclusions. The dissertation employs appropriate **research methods**. The research is based on interviews with 26 members of the Israeli national security elite and with top advisors to Israeli Prime Ministers, who held senior positions from 2000–2016, and written questionnaires (more than 60 questions) answered by 18 out of the 26 interviewees who provided qualitative data. Working with the data obtained from the interviews, Mr. Kohavi used the tool of thematic analysis (p. 106). It is a pity that the theoretical dimension of this interesting dissertation is somewhat limited. Mr. Kohavi writes that his main hypothesis “is a part of a security paradigm” (p. 13), extensively explored in the second part of his work. Indeed, the geopolitical ‘ambience,’ noticeable in the first and second part of the dissertation, leans towards neorealism, which at its core affirms that all states seek security. Neorealism gives prevalence to interest in the security of states over that of individuals. The core of the conflicts between the Israelis and the Palestinians is fundamentally a dispute over security versus land. The solution to the conflict, according to structural realists, can only come through an agreement that will allow both parties to exchange Israeli security for the land the Palestinians require. However, the main agents influencing the structure in the case of the Israel-Palestinian negotiations are a

group of individuals known as the INSE. Their beliefs, opinions, insights, and actions shape the Israeli political elite's approach and understanding of hard, material interests. This influence and creative process of the spillover of certain beliefs or convictions can be explained by social and sociological constructivisms which affirm these components of international politics, which are the product of specific social circumstances and historical processes. From the constructionist point of view, the Israeli-Palestinian dispute can be understood primarily as a conflict of social identities and religious beliefs rooted in a complex and specific mix of history, ideas, norms, and beliefs. In the dissertation, this 'constructivist component' is used to verify the first claim of the core hypothesis, namely: "the INSE believes that if a Palestinian state is formed, it may become a national security threat to Israel..." (p. 13). A constructivist interpretation makes it possible: (1) to confront the narrative of Nakba (Al-Nakba), or the narrative of injustice, with the Israeli narrative of justice; (2) discuss the opposing views on the creation of the Palestinian state as one state with two nations, or two states with two nations, as solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; (3) underline that the INSE are not 'free' in their opinions and insights but operate in a social context and, to a certain degree, are influenced by the dominant discursive representation. A case here are the different standpoints of Israeli and Palestinian historians in relation to the Nakba, including work undertaken in the 1980s by the group of Israeli historians (especially Simha Flapan, Benny Morris, Tom Segev and Avi Shlaim), who were not associated with the 'Zionist historical school.' Their work in the mid-80s led to a change in the traditional Israeli historiography which glorifies the history of Israel. A constructivist would ask: how did the new representations of the real events related to the founding of Israel, submerging traditional representations as historical beliefs and myths, influence the perception of the Palestinian narrative of injustice by the INSE?

The **literature base** used is adequate. In addition to numerous documents, legal acts, materials, and internet sites Mr. Kohavi uses an extensive and thoroughly considered body of academic articles and monographs. The bulk of them is written by scholars from the Anglo-Saxon circle, supplemented by works of Arab and Israeli researchers. The work is abundant in valuable maps, tables and charts (such as pp.132-135). The value of the dissertation is confirmed in the annexes: the approval letter from the interviewees (pp. 270-271), and the questionnaire used in the research (pp. 272-289).

3. The content of the dissertation



The dissertation is divided into a list of abbreviations, an abstract, three parts, each consisting of chapters and subchapters, a list of maps, figures, charts and tables, annexes and bibliography.

The first part starts with the chapter where Mr. Kohavi presents the research problem. He discusses the background for the involvement of the international community in the negotiation process from 1967-2017, and the main obstacles in reaching an agreement between Israelis and Palestinians using the elements of the emotion-deception model, or the so-called 'red herring.' Driven by pressure from the international community, Israeli prime ministers have entered the negotiation process with no intention of reaching an agreement, with few exceptions (or specific moments) where a possibility of successfully concluding talks existed. The second chapter is focused on the territorial aspects of the conflict and outlines three critical issues for continuing the peace negotiation process: (1) the geostrategic importance of the West Bank; (2) the West Bank settlements (Jewish communities established after 1967); and (3) the status of (East) Jerusalem. These complicated and unresolved issues have been used by Israeli (and Palestinian) leaders in 'red herring' negotiation tactics, as the criteria necessary to reach agreement. Their usefulness for the treadmill negotiation is illustrated by the "yes, we agree to continue negotiating, but, first, we demand that Palestinians officially declare x or y" approach (pp. 132-135, p. 147). It is notable that in chapter two Mr. Kohavi operationalizes the definitions and some of the terms used in the dissertation. He also shows the interesting results of the surveys, which found that more than 50% of Israelis believe that the settlements will strengthen the security of Israel (p. 36), while an overwhelming majority of the INSE (86%) believe that most of the settlements are a security liability for Israel (p. 262). This dissent shows that: (1) the internal Israeli debate is not necessarily about the legality of the settlements, but about the ways of reassuring the national security of Israel; (2) the pure security perspective shared by the INSE and Israeli leaders (continued army presence, risk for soldiers, costs, obstacles to reaching a peace agreement, conflicts with the international community) is not compatible with the perception of security by the Israeli public, which is unwilling to support the logic of the two-state solution. In the third chapter Mr. Kohavi explores the issue of Palestinian refugees and Palestinian institutions, such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Palestinian Legislative Council, Fatah and Hamas, which are essential in understanding the Palestinian positions in the conflict. He provides valuable information, which can be perceived as an attempt to rebalance the one-sided narration in the dissertation. However, this is somewhat inconsistent with his earlier assumption that "the research deals with the Israeli side of the

equation” and that “understanding the Palestinian side is very important, but that is beyond the scope of this research” (p. 12). This inconsistency is partly diminished by the rationale behind the third chapter – that is the uncovering (not necessarily theoretical) of the challenges of state-building and the two-state solution. This part of the last chapter is devoted to a brief analysis of the Israeli national security elite, a key ‘community’ involved in shaping the perception of the peace negotiation process by Israeli political leaders.

The second part of the dissertation consists of three chapters and departs from description enriched by a literature review, towards an analytical approach, detailed methodology, and showcasing findings. This is the core of Mr. Kohavi’s dissertation which, as was previously mentioned, is built on semi-structured interviews and written questionnaires. To avoid biases, mistakes and subjectivism, he combines two research tools, which allows him to increase the reliability and validity of his study. Chapter six presents the heart of the Israeli security paradigm. The findings from the interviews correspond with the research questions about: (1) the impact of the West Bank settlements on the Israeli national security (there are three main points of view); (2) the stability of Palestine as a new state after signing a peace agreement; (3) the perception of the unstable new Palestinian state as a potential national security threat to Israel; (4) using the ‘red herring’ in peace negotiations; and (5) projecting scenarios (best-case, worst-case) of the negotiations based on critical decisions. Chapter seven supplements the qualitative results of the research with the findings from written questionnaires, prepared originally in Hebrew and translated into English. The data gathered concerns the critical issues of: (1) the West Bank and settlements there (possibly the most important argument); (2) strategic threats for Israel; (3) the defense agreement with NATO and the USA (and the impact of such an agreement on the strategic security of Israel); (4) Palestinian refugees; (5) East Jerusalem; (6) risks from Jewish groups, (7) the increasing risk of anti-Semitism abroad in the case of the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and (8) the future strategy that Israel should strive for.

In the third part of his dissertation, Mr. Kohavi concludes his research and puts forward some proposals for future investigation, while highlighting the main limitations. He also consolidates the results of his analysis with professional literature, in particular providing answers to the research questions and verifying the hypotheses. The core hypothesis, divided into three parts was validated as to claim one: “The Israeli National Security Elite believe that if a Palestinian state is formed, it may become a national security threat to Israel.” Not only interviews and questionnaires but also professional literature back this claim. The results of the research do not support the second claim: “the formation of a Palestinian state is a risk

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that Israel should not take,” and the third claim based on the professional opinion of the INSE, that “the Israeli governments haven’t enabled negotiations to reach compromise point in which a peace agreement could be signed.” Summing up the results of the research, it can be said that the INSE believe that a newly formed Palestinian state may be a national security threat to Israel, but its formation is acceptable as the other alternatives (e.g. the deterioration of Israeli-Egyptian relations) are more dangerous to national security. The majority of the INSE believe that it is in the best interests of Israel to strengthen the army after signing a peace agreement allowing for a demilitarized Palestinian state to be established, more or less within the 1967 borders, relations with which would be similar to those Israel has with Egypt and Jordan. An optimistic message from the research is that the influential Israeli security elite prefer the two-state solution as optimal for the national security of Israel, consider a possibility of shifting from deception (red herring) in the negotiations to reaching a peace agreement, and believe that there are no fundamental obstacles in Islam and in the Arabic culture which would be likely to make the Palestinian leadership fail to honor the agreement with Israel.

4. Concluding remarks

Mr. Itai Kohavi, in the doctoral dissertation entitled *Treadmill Negotiation: The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process*, undertakes the analysis of the incessant, yet futile negotiation process aimed at the resolution of moot points in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite some minor flaws in the dissertation, the multitude of issues raised, views and opinions referenced, and the complicated nature of the issues discussed allows him to provide original insights into an important scholarly problem and exhibit the broad knowledge of this Ph.D. candidate in the field of political science. Emphasizing the ingenuity, the detailed presentation of the research problem, high culture of language and the indisputable merit of work, I consider this dissertation as corresponding to the requirements set out in **Art. 13.1 of the Law on Academic Degrees and Titles of March 14, 2003 (Dz.U. [Official Journal] of 2003, no. 65, item 595, of 2005, item 1852, and of 2015)** and recommend that Mr. Itai Kohavi is admitted to continue the doctoral degree procedure.

Marek Rewizorski

