

The Problem with the Comfort Zone Between Managing and Shrinking the Conflict

 **Omer Einav**

“No, I do want to say what my approach is, my approach in this context is to Shrink the conflict. We will not resolve it... but wherever it is possible to have entries, more quality of life, more business, more industry, we will [encourage it – O.E.]” said Israel’s Prime Minister Naftali Bennett in an interview with Amit Segal on the local Channel 12 News on the eve of his inauguration in June 2021. This was a short, casual statement—an aside in an interview that dealt with many other issues on the agenda. In fact, Bennett was not even asked about his position regarding the conflict and insisted on digressing due to the impatience of our interviewer toward the subject.

Thus, Bennett tried to differentiate himself from “managing the conflict” — the approach of his predecessor, Benjamin Netanyahu — by offering a fresh, new approach. “Shrinking the Conflict”, an approach and terminology brought to the Israeli public discourse by Dr. Micah Goodman, is the necessary branding tool to try to redefine Israel’s policies about an issue that it does not want to deal with - but must. The differences between the two approaches are few if any at all. Both echo a cognitive situation of rejecting and repressing, attempting to ignore reality instead of trying to change it. In this essay, we will address their nature, understand their differences, and assess their prospects.

| Managing the Conflict

The most important detail to understand about “managing the conflict” is that there is no such official policy. Netanyahu, who is most identified with this approach, did not refer to it in his official statements. Instead, this approach became deeply ingrained after many years of what had commonly been called the status quo. The basic logic behind the policy stems from the

conviction that it is impossible to reach an agreement with the Palestinians. Moreover, the creation of a Palestinian state does not serve Israeli interests (some view it as desirable in principle, but out of the question in the current political climate), and therefore the status quo must be preserved. Therefore, we should refrain from negotiating with the Palestinians, while taking pains to prevent a descent into deadly or widespread violence. Cooperation with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank on security affairs is permissible, but as a political partner, it is better to weaken it and strengthen Hamas instead. Easing the daily lives of Palestinians is possible when it does not interfere with reinforcing the occupation.

Netanyahu received a comfortable inheritance for his needs. In the West Bank, relative calm prevailed during the first years of the close security cooperation between Israel and the PA security forces, after the Second Intifada years. During Netanyahu's long tenure as prime minister, this quiet was hardly ever broken, and in retrospect, this was perhaps the calmest period in recent memory in terms of violence in the West Bank. Although attempts to carry out terror attacks did not cease (and during the wave of violence in 2015–2016, a large number were successful), the motivation and the scope of the attacks decreased overall.

In the Gaza Strip, when Netanyahu took office — about three and a half years after Israel's disengagement, two years into Hamas rule, and a few months after Operation Cast Lead — there was also relatively quiet. In his 12 years as prime minister, facing a hostile enemy regime that would constantly fire at Israel, Netanyahu “settled” on one ground operation (“Protective Edge”), two aerial operations (“Pillar of Defense” and the “Guardian of the Walls”), and many more surgical attacks on specific targets. At the same time, he made sure to negotiate indirectly with Hamas and authorize recurring fund transfers to it from foreign entities.

There are several reasons for the possibly unprecedented calm of the Netanyahu era: the upheaval in the Arab world, which turned the international community away from the Palestinian issue and also raised real concerns about the establishment of a weakened Palestinian state; the United States under President Barack Obama, which focused its foreign policy on the Far East at the expense of the Middle East, and Obama's successor, Donald Trump, who all but completely ignored the political existence of the Palestinians; at the same time, the Palestinians in the West Bank did not want to return to the days of the

Second Intifada, while the Israel Defense Forces and the General Security Service (Shin-Bet) have effectively thwarted and prevented terrorism.

The Palestinian issue not only has not only been pushed to the margins of the agenda in Israel and the international community, but it seems that Israel received dividends for its policies. The Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and other countries, gave an impetus to the concept of conflict management; it served as proof that, contrary to common perceptions, relations with the Arab world do not entirely depend on resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. This is consistent with the economic peace approach that Netanyahu promoted even before he was elected for a second term as prime minister. “Over the past decade,” wrote Dr. Doron Matza, a supporter of the economic peace approach, “within the framework of the conflict management paradigm, Israel has coped well with the potential of Palestinian damage using an old-new operational concept of ‘cooperation between adversaries,’ in which Israel has enabled the Palestinians in Judea and Samaria to have autonomous self-management, in exchange for security cooperation. This was accompanied by an effort to strengthen stability by improving the quality of life of Palestinians, which relies on increasing their employment opportunities in Israel.”

There have also been justifications, mainly security-related, for this approach. For example, in his analysis titled “In Praise of Conflict Management,” Colonel [res.] Dr. Eran Lerman, vice president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, wrote in 2018 that:

"Amidst violent events, it is easy to be tempted to seek 'solutions' to the Palestinian problem(s) – in both the PA areas and in Gaza – through drastic military action, or equally dramatic concessions. But given the lessons of recent history, as well as the unpredictable nature of regional events, it makes sense to adhere to 'conflict management' and piecemeal agreements. Not as a cowardly choice by hapless political and military leaders, but as a rational choice in irrational circumstances; even more so when the Iranian challenge looms larger than ever on Israel's immediate horizons. Patience has its own merits."

Thus, the optimal picture of reality for supporters of conflict management crystallized: Israel should not negotiate a state with the Palestinians; in fact, it should not negotiate anything.

Occasionally, it should give military blows when necessary - but not overdo it. Occasionally, it should give economic incentives - but in a controlled manner. Meanwhile, the Arab world, thrilled by the soft power of the start-up nation, is knocking at Israel's door, wanting to strengthen relations, because, with all due respect, there are more important things than the Palestinians. For a moment, even the United States rewarded Israel by putting the Trump plan on the table- the adoption of which would have meant annexing all settlements and shattering the two-state paradigm, which had been shaped since the days of the Oslo Accords [with the signing of the Abraham Accords and after the change of government in Washington, the plan was shelved]. This situation can be considered Netanyahu's greatest political achievement, whereby he succeeded at fully realizing his vision of leaving the Palestinians in a fixed position below the threshold of a state and above the abyss of violence. You can almost err on the side of the illusion that the winning formula has finally been found. Just almost.

| Shrinking the Conflict

There are a lot of problems with conflict management across the political spectrum. We are going to focus on the mainstream, the Israeli political center, in its broadest sense. For it is centrist voters - who, in the current political reality extend from the Yamina party, through New Hope, Blue and White to Yesh Atid - are not always comfortable with Israel's ambiguous policy toward the Palestinians.

We know from surveys over the years that the majority of the Israeli public, including those in the political center, want to partition the land. Although it depends on the plan, the context, and the perception of feasibility, in principle the majority supports separation from the Palestinians; or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the majority opposes a single state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Unfortunately, the Second Intifada and its aftermath caused many supporters of the two-state solution to lose faith in it and consider it no longer feasible, in the near future or at all. Although they are uncomfortable with the reality in the West Bank, they also do not see any other way out. The difficulty of resolving this contradiction has led to some despair and public repression of the conflict, as an issue that has no prospect, certainly not when the Israeli government

under Netanyahu struggled to articulate its vision. It is tricky to market a “do not” policy, or as George Costanza put it on the TV show Seinfeld: “A show about nothing.”

Dr. Micah Goodman entered this conceptual-marketing vacuum with his book **Catch-67** [published in English by Yale University Press, 2018]. Goodman understood the necessity in giving an intellectual, ideological platform to Israel's extant policy. He does not believe that managing the conflict is desirable, since there is no vision in it, and he understands the need to present a purpose — something to aspire to — as an organizing idea. According to Goodman,

"[Israelis] are trapped in an impossible no-win situation. The very action that can save them from the conflict is precisely the action that would deepen the conflict and make it worse. Withdrawing from the territories would transform the demographic problem into a security problem, whereas remaining in the territories would remove the security threat at the cost of perpetuating the demographic threat. The action that lifts one catastrophic peril merely converts it into another peril, no less catastrophic. This is Israel's 'Catch-67.' Israelis' way of thinking would be so much more productive if they stopped defining the situation as a 'problem' and started framing it as a 'catch' instead. Why? Because problems are meant to be solved—and this problem has no solution. A catch, however, is not meant to be solved—it is meant to be escaped from. And Israel's Catch-67 can almost certainly be escaped from too."

Goodman does not want to end the conflict but also thinks it should no longer be managed. He actually accepts the conservative principles of conflict management, of avoiding total dichotomies and definitions of end modes, but that is not enough in his opinion: For most Israelis,

"(c)ertainty has been replaced with confusion. If Israel remains in the territories, it will endanger its future, but if it leaves the territories, it will also endanger its future. This dilemma has created a new space for new ideas... Confusion can produce paralysis, but it does not need to. It

can lead to fresh thinking and new courses of action... The new political center is not a place for innovation, but mostly apathy. The political center has changed the subject of conversation to the cost of living and other important matters – but not the conflict... centrists do not offer a moderate position on the conflict: they simply don't talk about it. The silence of the Israeli center abandons the conversation about the future of the territories to the hard right and hard left. And their monopoly over the conversation has created an undesirable, false illusion: The only options are to manage an unsustainable status quo, or to solve an intractable problem. The Israeli political center should offer a middle way, but it remains quiet, apathetic, and preoccupied with other affairs."

Goodman proposes to shrink the conflict: not to seek dichotomy and solutions that will inevitably fail to please both sides but to promote what is agreed upon, on the Israeli right and on the left (God forbid, not Israel and the Palestinians, as the Palestinians merely play a secondary role in this story), and to work to improve the situation of the Palestinians while preserving the security interests of the State of Israel. Goodman's conflict-Shrinking approach made waves when his book was published. Former Prime Minister Ehud Barak wrote a long and critical response to it, as did others, and it was also sharply criticized by intellectual circles, mainly on the left.

Goodman became a mentor — a conceptual shepherd for many — especially in the center-right spaces of Israel. He frequently met with politicians, including now-Prime-Minister Bennett. The discomfort felt by the same despairing public, he managed to dispel somewhat, using the formula he concocted. There's reasoning, there's logic, and there's vision. Israel has so far managed a conflict, and now it must act to Shrink it. The scattered stream of consciousness became an orderly school of thought.

An outgrowth of Goodman's public intellectual activity was the establishment of the "Shrinking the Conflict Initiative". The initiative aims to work in the political and public spheres to promote the idea of Shrinking the conflict, based on Goodman's school of thought. It operates through a method of crowdfunding and democratic votes among its members, who decide what policy measures to promote next. So far, the initiative has

succeeded in promoting government decisions such as Resolution 189 to increase the quota of work permits for Palestinians in the construction industry by about 15,000 permits and to promote providing the COVID-19 vaccine to 100,000 Palestinian workers employed in Israel. A lobby has also been established in the Knesset, and there is extensive parliamentary and nonparliamentary activity to advance the agenda for Shrinking the conflict. This is not yet a mass grassroots movement at this stage, but it has resonated

| The Problem

The common thread between managing and shrinking the conflict is the stated assumption that Israel should continue to control the Palestinians. That is, in fact, the real problem with both approaches. Even if there are serious reasons for these approaches, both completely ignore the consequences of this reality and its fragility. Both exist in an almost mystical cognitive space, which allows them to assume that time can relieve tensions, eliminate problems, and normalize real difficulties (even though it hasn't done so until now). They are looking for an easy and effective course of action where uncomfortable decisions are required.

It is worth mentioning the basic convention upon which any perception of the conflict should be built: The occupation of another people is not sustainable in the long term. It is needless to mention (or isn't it?) the moral aspect of the subject. It is the daily reality of living under military rule in which political sovereignty is invested in a General, with all that entails, and the implications of an occupation on the structure and character of Israeli society.

Yet morality is a negligible component of policy in the view of the conflict managers and Shrinkers, not because it is inherently unimportant but rather because it hovers above in utopian worlds, disconnected from the violence and roughness of this country. However, even with the other components, occupation is not a good option. Most senior security officials past and present, have argued over the years that the pseudo-calmness will inevitably end in a flare-up. The next violent confrontation will erupt—it's just a matter of time. In fact, even in quiet times of —according to IDF and GSS data — hundreds of

attempted terrorist attacks are thwarted every year. Palestinians are growing increasingly despaired with the status quo: more and more young people, in particular, are abandoning the idea of two states and expressing an interest in the idea of one state. Yet naturally, they do not see themselves as disenfranchised in such a country, but as having equal rights to the Jews there. Simply put, the change in Palestinian public opinion is related to political scenarios and does not reflect any softening in relation to the occupation itself.

It's important to remember another point. There is a degree of smugness in the assumption that Israel controls the situation and can contain any development, provided it maintains the intermediate stage — the status quo. This relies on history, on the two intifadas and the occasional military operations. But history does not repeat itself. How can we know that the next violent outbreak, which will eventually happen according to almost every professional assessment, will not completely change today's existing balances? Who guarantees that an ongoing violent confrontation will not take a toll on Israel which it is not willing to pay, and will create a situation much worse than the current one? Israel's political imagination is directed toward conflicts of old. And so, Israelis find it difficult to envision a better reality, and more importantly, it ignores the likelihood of a worse one.

If the status quo is much less stable than we would like to hope, then managing or shrinking the conflict are dangerous approaches because they keep us from preventing a violent outbreak in the future. Occupation is not now and cannot in the future serve as a work plan. Conflict is not meant to be constantly managed or "shrined". Conflict is meant to be resolved. Even if not immediately, the overall vector of progression therein must be motion toward ending rather than sustaining it.

As for managing the conflict, in the end, it does not provoke a range of overly extreme emotions, since it is not an active policy, and thus "secret to its magic" is in the indifference that it enforces. Some agree with it, some oppose it, but overall, it is difficult to conceptually bash a vague and cautious idea.

Shrinking the conflict provokes other reactions. Goodman's pretension to bring new news, and his success in doing so — at least at the political level and to a limited extent among

the public — succeeds in creating opponents, especially on the left. In an interview with Goodman in Haaretz on December 1, 2021, in response to the question about the evacuation of Khan al-Ahmar, a Bedouin village next to the settlement Kfar Adumim, where he resides, he is quoted as saying

"Each side wants me to join him, but I do not take sides. I never tried to understand this event, to investigate and formulate a position on it. Precisely because it's my backyard. In my house, I need my peace to write. If people interpret this as a repudiation of my duty as an intellectual — they are right. There's a dimension of moral laziness to it."

This statement caused outrage among critics on the left. It fit neatly with the accusation of the entire project of Shrinking the conflict as moral laziness at best, and as a patronizing tool for preserving the Israeli occupation at worst [consider as evidence the votes of the members of “the initiative” on measures designed to benefit the occupied population]. Something about this idea touched a nerve on the Israeli left, there is no doubt about it.

I admit I don't quite understand why. My superficial impression of Goodman and the people of the initiative, which is based on published texts and their public appearances, is that they are what is commonly referred to as “good people,” in the abstract sense. Suppose their intentions are sincere and their hearts are in the right place. They really want the Palestinians to have it better. They really feel that something needs to be done to change the situation so that the reality in Israel and the Occupied Territories will improve. They deserve a principled praise for it.

The real problem is their ambition. If it was a limited plan, with specific policy measures, there would be no reason to complain. But that's not the story here. The title “Shrinking the conflict” allows them to market a magic formula designed to win people over. As mentioned above, here lies the danger: they do not offer anything that can change the reality of conflict, but rather perpetuate it. Setting aside the inherently patronizing, colonial-esque aspects of this approach, as well as the statements made by the people behind the initiative — the fact of the matter is that tactical measures to Shrink the stress of

daily Palestinian lives are a necessity already happening under the auspices of Israel's conflict management policy. They have no potential for addressing the deeper problems.

What Goodman offers can be likened to a piece of advice to a married couple on the verge of a breakup, that they should behave better and act kindly toward each other in order to make the process of breaking up pleasant and to avoid dangerous fights that could leave them feeling bad and scarred. This can indeed make the separation process pleasant, but it can not prevent the separation itself nor can it solve any of the fundamental problems that brought about the parties' decision to part in the first place. If we accept Goodman's claim that demographic considerations on the one hand, and security considerations on the other, prevent any significant break from the status quo, we must conclude that we are stuck with the current situation. Therefore, the policy is driven solely by the dangers of the present, devoid of any consideration of future risks and opportunities. In other words, it is completely lacking in vision.

Shrinking conflict is not much more than a well-branded, aesthetically pleasing filter for conflict management. Yes, the melody is easier on the ears and makes sense to those who have sought justifications and reasoning for the status quo. But it is not offering much beyond that. The Middle East has indeed changed. Israel has changed, and so have the Palestinians. One thing has not changed, however: partition of the land into two sovereign states, however problematic, is superior to all other alternatives in every parameter. The illusion that Israel can, over time, control another people without worsening its situation, is wrong and dangerous. A Palestinian state will not be established tomorrow morning; the conditions are not yet ripe on both sides. But the conflict-Shrinking approach offers no real substitute for the two-state option. Hopefully, it is a harmless step on the path toward the final destination. But the goal is not to continue Israel's occupation but rather to end it. Those who sell, or are tempted to buy, other dreams are at risk of a particularly rude awakening.