Routinization of the Israeli-Arab Conflict

The Perspective of Outsiders

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**ABSTRACT:** This study explores the features of the routinization of the Israeli-Arab conflict in everyday life in Israel. Specifically, it examines how foreign students view this mechanism of the culture of conflict, compared to the point of view of Israeli students born into the day-to-day reality of a society that has been engaged in an intractable conflict for decades. Findings show that foreigners have perceived and identified various conflict-related routines that have been absorbed into the social and physical spaces of daily life in Israel, becoming unnoticeable to Israelis. This was the case particularly with various images and symbols of the conflict that saturate both public and private spaces, conflict-related informal norms of behavior, and the central place that the conflict occupies in private interpersonal discourse. These results are discussed in relation to the functionalities of the routinization of the conflict and its implications.

**KEYWORDS:** culture of conflict, intractable conflict, Israeli-Arab conflict, outsiders’ perspectives, routinization of conflict

The Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been characterized for decades by all the features of an extreme, intractable conflict. Although the conflict has become more tractable over time, some of the characteristics that have made it a prototypical intractable conflict have remained intact to this day, and it continues to take a heavy toll on human life and property, on economic well-being, and on the quality of life (Aruri 1983; Bar-Tal 2007; Bar-Tal and Schnell 2013; Gordon 2008; Makdisi 2008; Svirsky 2005).

Over the decades, symbols of the conflict and of its culture have penetrated both the public sphere and the intimate space of daily routine, becoming an
integral part of the everyday life experiences of the participants. In this regard, Bar-Tal et al. (forthcoming) suggest that, as a result of this routine contact with its symbols, the conflict has become banal to members of the engaged societies (see also Billig 1995).

The present study deals with the culture of conflict and its routinization into the everyday life of Israeli society. It seeks to explore the way in which the presence of the conflict in daily routines is perceived and interpreted by foreigners soon after their first visit to Israel and during their initial stay. The analysis also compares the observations of outsiders with those of Israelis who have experienced this everyday routine throughout their lives.

The choice of studying the routinization of the conflict in this way was made on the assumption that outsiders may be in a better position to discern and reveal those routinized elements that Israelis, having lived with the conflict for so long, would not notice. In his seminal essay “The Stranger,” sociologist Georg Simmel ([1908] 1950: 405) suggested that an individual coming from outside the group is inherently objective and, as such, “is bound by no commitments which could prejudice his perception, understanding, and evaluation of the given” as he is “not tied down in his action by habit, piety, and precedent.” Although Simmel’s conception does not describe the newly arrived outsider of this study, the attributes of his ‘stranger’ fit the purpose of exploring the features of the routinization within Israeli society as a mechanism of the culture of conflict.

**The Culture of Conflict**

We propose that the particular living conditions imposed by intractable conflict lead to the development of a socio-psychological infrastructure of conflict that fulfills crucial psychological functions while satisfying individual and collective needs (Bar-Tal 2013). It provides the major narratives, motivators, orientations, and goals that society members need in order to carry on with their lives in the harsh conditions of intractable conflict. Eventually, this infrastructure becomes disseminated and institutionalized and thus serves as the foundation for a culture of conflict that comes to dominate the society (Bar-Tal 2010, 2013).

Bar-Tal’s (2007) analysis of Israeli-Jewish society indicates that indeed it has notable features of the culture of conflict. Especially during the climactic period of the Israeli-Palestinian intractable conflict, from the late 1940s until the 1970s, the Israeli-Jewish public at large consensually held the societal beliefs of the ethos of conflict and its core themes (Oren 2005). These themes include an emphasis on the Zionist goals and support for retaining the territories conquered in the 1967 War; they focus on high levels of threat
and on security as a primary concern; they include negative stereotypical references to Arabs and underline the moral and cultural superiority of the Jewish people and their status as the victims of the conflict; they stress the need for patriotism and the unity of Israeli-Jewish society while downplaying sectarian societal conflicts; and, finally, they emphasize peace as a core value of Israeli society—as the ‘ultimate desideratum’ of the Jewish people.

During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the societal beliefs of the ethos of conflict were disseminated by the mass media. In addition, they were prevalent in cultural products such as adult and children’s Hebrew literature, Hebrew drama and Israeli films, and school textbooks. Finally, they were expressed in Israel’s rich history of commemoration of events of the conflict and of the fallen.  

In the 1970s, some themes began to appear that were in contradiction to the dominant themes of the ethos of conflict. By the late 1990s, all of the described indicators, including beliefs shared by the Jewish population, showed the development of alternative viewpoints that recognized the rights of the Palestinians to a state, legitimized and humanized Arabs, questioned the exclusivity of Jewish victimhood in the conflict, and even began to present immoral acts by the Jews and thus to challenge their moral superiority (Oren 2005, 2009). In fact, it is possible at present to identify in Israel an alternative culture that is in competition with the dominant culture of conflict. It is expressed not only in shared views of segments of the Israeli population but also in cultural products, such as films, literature, theatrical plays, visual art, and academic work, as well as in new ceremonies, narratives, and so forth (see Bar-Tal 2007).

Nevertheless, many of the themes of the ethos of conflict still prevail among a large portion of the Israeli public (Bar-Tal et al. 2010). They are evident in public discourse and are reflected in the political arena, in speeches by Israeli formal leaders, in national and cultural symbols, and in official ceremonies. As an example, Tsur (2013) illustrates how the Hebrew language reflects the dominance of the ethos of conflict by incorporating expressions, sayings, and words that denote and connote this particular worldview.

Generally speaking, the culture of intractable conflicts has the following six characteristics. First, its general themes are universal and can be found in the culture of practically every society involved in a protracted, violent conflict. Those themes are part of the ethos of conflict; they appear in the narrative of collective memory of the conflict and serve as an organizing framework for viewing the past, present, and future. Second, the culture of conflict particularly emphasizes the glorification of violence, which is a primary characteristic of intractable conflicts. It praises the personnel, organizations, and institutions that carry out the violence and
views their actions with great reverence. Third, each society expands on the general themes of conflict by including content that concerns its own experiences, conditions, and value systems, thus adding cultural meaning to the conflict (for Israeli society, see Bar-Tal 2007). Fourth, the specific symbols of the culture of conflict appear and reappear in various forms, such as myths, stories about heroes, and narratives of major historical events. Fifth, social and cultural institutions and channels take an active part in socializing societal members and in disseminating the content of the culture of conflict among them. This content is expressed, for example, in books, ceremonies, art, film, speeches, monuments, and so on. Sixth, symbols of the conflict and of the culture of conflict are routinized so that the intractable conflict becomes an integral part of the everyday life experiences of society members (Bar-Tal 2013). The present study focuses on this last characteristic of the culture of conflict—its routinization.

**The Routinization of Intractable Conflicts**

Living with an intractable conflict and sharing the culture of conflict, society members encounter expressions and symbols of the conflict on a daily basis. The result is a process of gradual routinization in which the conflict becomes part and parcel of the daily life of the society (Bar-Tal et al., forthcoming). Since the conflict constitutes a lasting, stable, and continuous part of everyday life, a “whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations and practices … must be reproduced in a banally mundane way” (Billig 1995: 6). In fact, over time, these daily, low-key symbols are no longer recognized as unusual signs of conflict. Instead, they have become an integral part of normal life and cannot be separated from everyday living routines.

Bar-Tal et al. (forthcoming) describe four ways in which intractable conflicts become routinized—and even ritualized—in everyday life. First, society members are continually exposed to images and symbols of the conflict in public and private spaces. In Israel, for example, citizens encounter armed military forces and security guards on a daily basis in public spaces, such as at entrances to shopping centers and public institutions. They often see military and security facilities, checkpoints, public bomb shelters, and in-house safe rooms.

Israelis frequently come across statues and memorials related to the conflict on roadsides and in public gardens, educational institutions, and other public areas. The names of towns, streets, and public parks serve to commemorate the fallen or specific events of the conflict, and symbols of the conflict are present in the mass media, with soldiers appearing in television
commercials (see Bar-Tal 2007). Being visible in the daily course of life, these images and symbols inevitably become an inseparable part of the landscape, providing constant reminders that the conflict is ongoing, even in times devoid of conspicuous cues of violent conflict.

Second, society members are engaged in everyday behavioral practices that are related to the lasting situation of conflict. Some of these practices are established formally by the authorities, whereas others may emerge as informal norms of behavior. For example, a prominent everyday practice in Israeli society is passing through security checks at the entrances to public places such as malls, banks, educational institutions, government agencies, cultural centers, and public offices. More extensive security checks are carried out at the airports through various stages, starting at the vehicle entrance and continuing to the aircraft. Another example is local or national exercises in the use of bomb shelters during an emergency.

Israelis are also accustomed to dealing with suspicious objects, which involves the routine of areas being blocked until any danger is neutralized by police sappers. To be constantly informed about conflict-related events, many Israelis listen devotedly to the news as part of their daily routine. These conflict-related practices, prominent as they are in Israeli life, are acts that all society members perform repeatedly as part of their normative sequence of everyday activities, based on scripts of behavior (Schank and Abelson 1977) that are learned, rehearsed, memorized, stored, and retrieved, often automatically and unconsciously.

Third, the everyday experience of intractable conflict involves exposure to an intensive flow of information about the conflict, which occupies a central place in both public and private discourses. Israelis are continuously exposed to information related to the conflict in the news and through commentaries and discussions presented through various channels of communication. Radio, newspapers, television, and the Internet are overloaded with details referring to current or past events in the conflict, potential threats, and evaluations of the situation. As such, Israeli media shapes the public’s awareness of—and reaction to—the conflict, the Arabs, security, and peace (Peri 2006). In addition to public discourse, many of the private interpersonal conversations in Israeli society also relate to the conflict, since the subject involves personal aspects concerning the fate of the participants and their loved ones.

Lastly, a fourth way in which the conflict is routinized is the wide use of military language and the language of conflict in everyday speech. Societies undergoing intractable conflict, like Israel, adopt military words, metaphors, and expressions that portray the conflict and use them in public and personal discourse as part of their everyday language and slang to describe daily objects and situations that are not related to the
conflict. For example, Israel’s attempts to cope with the increase in traffic accidents are referred to as a national ‘battle’, and a particularly positive experience will commonly be described by Israelis as a ‘blast’. Tsur (2008) shows how Israeli leaders often use military terms when discussing issues that are not related to security or the conflict. In a more recent study, Tsur (2013) further analyzes the language developed in Israeli-Jewish society with regard to the Occupied Territories of 1967. Embedding the language of conflict in everyday speech thus imbues the social environment with the values, ideology, and behavior patterns of the conflict (Lakoff 1993; Mowery and Duffy 1990).

The routinization of conflict-related images, practices, information, and language has important social functions at both the individual and collective levels, as it normalizes the unusual and anomalous aspects of living with an intractable conflict, increases society members’ psychological resilience and ability to cope with this harsh reality, and strengthens their sense of unity, solidarity, cohesiveness, and shared fate. It is equally important, then, to examine the routinization of conflict as perceived and experienced by members of out-groups, who normally do not share in these conflict-related routines.

**Outsiders’ Perspectives**

Since Simmel’s original introduction of the concept of the stranger, several different conceptualizations have been suggested (see Gudykunst 1983; Rogers 1999). Most relevant to this discussion is a study by Wood (1934: 43), who describes the stranger as “one who has come into face-to-face contact with the group for the first time.” This stranger, whom Gudykunst (1983) calls a ‘newly arrived’ outsider and Levine (1977) refers to as ‘sojourner’, is someone in a foreign environment who desires residence and perhaps some degree of experience in the host group but not membership (e.g., a diplomat, business person, foreign student, or tourist).

This ‘strangerhood’ gives the newly arrived person some advantages in terms of observing the social and physical surroundings in a more objective manner. In fact, the idea that in matters of social and cultural inquiries outsiders might provide insights that members of the group cannot discern is not new (see, e.g., Banerjee 1981; Brophy 1997; Myrdal 1944; Stallings 1986). Merton (1972: 33) comments that, soon after it appeared in 1835, Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* was acclaimed as a masterly work by “an accomplished foreigner.” He further quotes Tocqueville expressing the opinion that “there are certain truths which Americans can only learn from strangers” (ibid.). In other words, due to
the detachment that comes from being less thoroughly permeated with the ‘world-taken-for-granted’ viewpoint of the in-group, outsiders may identify unique cultural characteristics in the social environment that group members are not able to distinguish (Stallings 1986). In addition, as opposed to society members, strangers do not share and are not bound to take part in the social ethos, nor are they emotionally attached to cultural symbols or to the historical narrative of the group. It appears, then, that although strangers’ perspectives may not be comprehensive, they can contribute greatly to the study of cultural aspects that characterize the local hosting society.

The Present Study

This study investigates the features of the routinization of the Israeli-Arab conflict in everyday life in Israel. For this purpose, it examines the perspective of outsiders (newly arrived foreign students) compared to that of society members (Israeli students). The basic assumption underlying the analysis is that foreign students, as outsiders who are not used to the local cultural practices and are not bound to the social ethos, are able to discern conflict-related symbols and practices characterizing daily life better than Israelis who have been born and socialized into this way of life.

Based on the four ways in which intractable conflicts become routinized in daily life, the research explores several questions: Do outsiders recognize images and symbols of the conflict in the social environment in Israel? Do outsiders notice formal and/or informal everyday behavioral practices related to the conflict in Israelis’ daily routine? Do outsiders experience or sense other aspects of routinization that characterize everyday life in Israel, such as the intensive flow of information about the conflict in public and private discourse, or the use of military language and the language of conflict in everyday speech (taking into account that they do not understand Hebrew)? Do Israelis distinguish any of these aspects of routinization within their everyday life? How is the routinization of conflict in Israel perceived, experienced, and interpreted by outsiders?

The Research Method

The study uses qualitative, phenomenological methods (Sokolowski 2000; Stewart and Mickunas 1974). As such, it focuses on the experiences of the participants in their daily lives in Israel and on the meaning that they gave to these experiences (Creswell 1998; Moustakas 1994). The use of
qualitative methodology was designed to achieve a thick, comprehensive
description of all of the participants’ experiences related to the routiniza-
tion of conflict in everyday life in Israel. It is assumed that each of these
experiences may contribute to a better understanding of routinization,
since subjective-experiential descriptions of individuals would add to the
overall knowledge about this cultural mechanism (Valle et al. 1989).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in order to dis-
cern how Israeli daily life is experienced both by newly arrived foreigners
and by Israelis and to learn about their subjective perceptions, feelings,
and interpretations with respect to these experiences (Edwards 1993). The
questions dealt with general characteristics of everyday life in Israel as
experienced and perceived by the respondents, as well as with specific
experiences related to the situation of ongoing conflict.

The Sample

The choice of newly arrived outsiders was made in order to get the initial
impressions of strangers before they adapted to new practices and images
that they encountered, and before they had forgotten the initial feelings
and thoughts that accompanied their new experiences. Interviews were
held with 11 respondents who met the following criteria: this was their
first visit to Israel; at the time of the interview they had been in Israel for
no longer than eight weeks; they are not Jewish; they have no family ties
in Israel; they have not yet learned about the Israeli-Arab conflict in their
academic studies; and they are not attached in any way to any of the par-
ties involved in the conflict. Respondents included eight females and three
males, aged 20–33, with an average age of 24. Nine of them are Christian,
and the other two, although having a Christian background, define them-
selves as having no religion. Seven are from the United States, three from
Europe, and one from Latin America.

Interviews were also conducted with six undergraduate Israeli students,
born and raised in Israel. The number of Israeli participants was smaller
than that of foreigners since these interviews were intended mainly to
provide a basis for comparison against the perspective of strangers, which
is at the focus of this study. Israeli respondents included four men and two
women, aged 24–28, with an average age of 25. All defined themselves
as secular Jews and all had served in the military (two as officers). They
study various subjects not related to the Israeli-Arab conflict, including
economics and business administration, social work, or computer science.
None of them was or is politically active, nor does any of them have a per-
sonal background related to the conflict (such as coming from a bereaved
family, having been at the scene of a terror attack, etc.).
Findings

Interviews with the main group of respondents, the foreign students, yielded considerable information, detailed and rich. Conversations with the Israelis were quite different, but they still had significant research value, as will be discussed below. Understandably, the limitations of this article do not allow an analysis of all the content raised in the interviews. The findings focus, therefore, on the four mechanisms described above whereby conflict becomes routinized in everyday life. A sample of quotes is presented to illustrate the related themes that arose in the interviews and to expose the reader to their intensity.

Exposure to Images and Symbols of the Conflict

The issue of the visible expression of conflict was very prominent in the conversations with foreign students, who perceived it as one of the most salient characteristics of everyday life in Israel. The most common images mentioned by the vast majority of foreign respondents were the massive presence of military personnel (82 percent) and the number of weapons visible in public places (91 percent). When asked about her experiences in Israel, Kira (20, US) answered: “One of the biggest things, the first thing I noticed, is that obviously Israel has a lot of soldiers, and a lot of people my age who are soldiers … The first time I called my mom, I said: ‘There are kids with guns!’”

This overwhelming impression of young soldiers with weapons being stationed everywhere was reflected in the responses of other respondents as well. Several referred to their experience of traveling on a bus or train, seemingly a normal experience, and then encountering armed soldiers, as in Rob’s (23, US) description: “When I came off the plane in Tel Aviv, I got on a train at the airport to come to Haifa, and there were guys sitting next to me with machine guns. I held my breath for like half an hour.” Some have emphasized the disturbing presence of weapons at any site, carried by non-military individuals or off-duty military personnel. Here, again, in Rob’s words: “I expected a lot of security for obvious reasons, but I did not expect that students who serve in the army could go to class carrying their machine guns or get on a train with them.”

This story told by Sara (23, US) may perhaps best sum up this experience of an outsider in Israel encountering such a massive, yet routine, presence of military forces and weapons integrated completely into day-to-day civilian life: “When I was walking to the Old City in Jerusalem, there was one shop that had toy dolls hanging on the wall right next to soldiers’ guns, and I took a picture of that. I was like, ‘This would never …’ What does this
mean? Do people even know this is happening? Is it normal everywhere [in Israel]? But then, again, what’s normal for me isn’t normal for you, so, you know.”

A conflict-related image mentioned by many foreign participants (45 percent) was seeing military aircraft overhead: “I’m always aware of them [aircraft], and I’m always wondering, like, ‘What was that?’” (Debbie, 33, US). Encountering the safe rooms at the dormitories was another unfamiliar experience for many of the foreign students (36 percent). For Anna (23, Poland), however, the presence of a safe room was not surprising and even implied the presence of further security facilities: “There is this [safe] room in every flat in the dorms … I expected it. I am quite sure that here, on campus, there is a bomb shelter.” Referring to another element of exposure to symbols of the conflict, two participants (18 percent) mentioned noticing memorials and statues. Rob (23, US) said: “Seeing the memorials around the roads … sometimes, you know, the buses there were blown up … it’s … I don’t know …."

It appears, then, that the substantial presence of images and symbols of the conflict was quite remarkable for the newly arrived foreign students. They reported exposure to these constant reminders of the conflict as a significant, unusual, disturbing, and even shocking element in their overall experience of living in Israel.

As for the Israelis, the difference between the two groups was absolutely clear: none of the six Israeli participants mentioned any of these images. Moreover, even later in the conversations, when asked specifically about images related to the conflict, it turned out that no Israeli respondents saw them as extraordinary. For example, when asked about the presence of weapons in public places, Yael (25) answered: “All these things, it’s part of the scenery, obviously, but never would I have thought to bring them up as characteristics of everyday life in Israel. I mean, sure, there are soldiers, and some carry their weapons, but I don’t consider it as something worth mentioning … I mean, why make an issue out of it, you know?”

**Conflict-Related Everyday Behavioral Practices**

Daily practices related to the conflict constituted a considerable part of the conversations with many of the foreign participants. They marked a significant difference between what outsiders considered as ‘normal’ life compared with that of a society involved in an ongoing conflict.

A vast majority of the respondents (82 percent) described the security checks as an unusual experience that characterizes daily life in Israel: “The security [is unusual]. Going into a mall, getting your bags checked. Even on campus, going into buildings and having your bags checked. I was
not expecting that, I was very surprised” (Rob, 23, US). Another conflict-related practice involved searching suspicious objects: two respondents (18 percent) described their experience when they left their bags unattended. One of them was Henry (22, Germany): “On the first day when I arrived, there was some kind of a reception. I put my bag at the door and went inside the building. Two minutes later, this woman came and she was freaking out and called from outside, ‘Whose bag is this?!’ I went back out and said, ‘It’s mine, I’m sorry.’ And then they told us all never to leave our bags unattended or they will blow them up … I’m quite sure I wasn’t the first one to make this mistake, so she was probably also thinking, ‘Oh, it’s one of those stupid foreigners again.’”

It appears, then, that unavoidably and very quickly the newly arrived foreigners encountered behavioral practices related to the lasting situation of conflict in Israel. However, almost all testified that adapting to and even acquiring these scripts of behaviors took only a few days.

The responses of Israeli participants were quite different from those of the foreigners in this case as well. Still, when asked about unusual features of daily life in Israel many (83 percent) raised the issue of security checks at the entrance to public places. All of them reported that they are totally used to it, but they could see how unusual it might appear to strangers. As Yael (25) expressed it: “I guess going through metal detectors at the entrance to the mall or having your bag checked when going to the supermarket is not something that is considered normal. It’s normal for us—things are like that here. But surely from the outside it doesn’t look quite normal.”

The Flow of Information about the Conflict

Naturally, not being able to understand the local language, large parts of this mechanism of routinization were less relevant to newly arrived strangers. Nevertheless, two of the foreign participants (18 percent) described the substantial presence of the conflict in the media and the public discourse as characterizing life in Israel and also shared some insights regarding its influence. Jack (23, US), for example, reported that the intensive flow of information made him more indifferent toward the conflict than before: “I feel like I was more aware of [the security issue] before I left [for Israel], and I was reading more about it. And here … you’re fed [information] every day. I mean, you hear about the security worries so often that it’s hard to listen to them—it just doesn’t sink in anymore.” As for the place of conflict in private, interpersonal discourses, this was a little easier for the foreign respondents (36 percent) to detect: “What surprised me a lot was that everyone here knows about the political situation, everyone is interested in politics … and they always want to talk about it” (Anna, 23, Poland).
Interestingly, as opposed to the observations above, Israeli respondents failed to identify the central place of conflict in the private discourse, or, in any case, they did not indicate that it characterized their daily lives. Instead, half of them talked about the intensive flow of information related to the conflict that is disseminated through channels of communication: “When there is an event, some kind of a military operation or if something happened, everybody sticks to the TV … I remember, one time the news started with something not related to politics or to the situation, something about the weather that was very stormy, and I was thinking, ‘What’s going on? Congratulations, at last, just like in Sweden!’” (Dotan, 26).

The Use of Military Language and the Language of Conflict

As would be expected, foreigners could not detect this last feature of routinization since they do not speak the language. However, neither did the Israelis mention it at all. Participants from both groups, though, similarly addressed some general characteristics of the common speech in Israel. Here, for example, is a typical impression of one of the foreign participants: “[Israelis] are so aggressive with each other. I can’t tell if they’re angry or not … Like, I was renting a car at Avis the other day, and these guys, I swear, they were fighting! Just yelling at each other, hands are flying everywhere, and I asked, ‘What’s going on?’ [And someone said,] ‘Oh, they’re just talking’” (Rob, 23, US). A similar observation was made by Shira (24) from Israel: “Our language is very crude, very direct. No flattering and no skirting. People shout a lot.” However, neither of them referred specifically to military language or to conflict-related expressions, nor did they connect the almost violent atmosphere of speech with the circumstance of living in a conflict situation.

The Routinization of the Conflict in Israel through Outsiders’ Eyes

Beyond their informative impressions, the responses of the newly arrived students also revealed some of their emotional reactions and personal perceptions concerning the various conflict-related images, behavioral practices, and media information that have been routinized in daily life in Israel. Some, for example, reported anxiety and a sense of insecurity, as reflected in this response of Jenny (23, Germany): “I don’t feel safer from [the security arrangements] … If you see the soldiers, if you see someone that wants to check your bag, you feel that there must be something wrong in someone else’s bag. The soldiers must be around because there must be someone who could do something. So it makes me feel more insecure.”
Many foreigners referred to the fact that Israelis do not even notice these reminders of conflict surrounding them. Sara (23, US) stated: “I think Israelis are definitely used to it. I mean, the fact that I even notice them [i.e., arms and weapons, aircraft, checkpoints] or think about them is probably … You know, it’s like where I grew up there are trains that go by all the time, [and] I don’t even hear them anymore. But people coming to live with me for like a week, they’ll probably be like, ‘Oh my gosh, all those trains!’ But I would say, ‘What trains?’” Amanda (24, US) concluded: “I guess Israelis just got so used to it that they don’t even see the guns anymore. They don’t even think about their bags being checked.”

Other foreign students got used to at least some of these conflict-related routines quite quickly. As Debbie (33, US) put it: “I think [the security issue] has turned into a kind of ‘white noise’ in the background of life here—for everybody, not just myself.” Henry (22, Germany) expressed it as follows: “I don’t think it’s even possible to stay alert all the time. Whatever extraordinary feelings there are, after some time you have to somehow get used to it. I mean, there’s always some kind of a routine.”

Thinking about this reality, and referring mainly to security arrangements, some participants tried to explain the need for those institutionalized everyday practices. Anna (23, Poland) saw the necessity of maintaining a secure feeling for citizens in a conflict situation: “It’s just a sign: we watch you, we can see you, and you’re not going to be harmed because we are looking out for you all the time.” Sara (23, US) thought that it serves the function of keeping society members constantly alert: “I think [conflict-related day-to-day routine] definitely instills a feeling of national defense as a necessity … I think it makes you expect some sort of fear or expect some sort of action that may or not take place, so it’s kind of just creating this perceived threat.”

Another aspect that foreign respondents referred to was the implications of the constant presence of conflict in everyday life, on which they expressed various opinions and insights. Jenny (23, Germany) stated: “I’m not as used to all that stuff as everybody living here is, so it probably gives me different thoughts … Of course, there are people who think about [the state of ongoing conflict], but I think the majority don’t because they got used to it, and it’s just easier.” Jack (23, US) added: “Something that I had kind of wondered about is if being around such a military presence—weapons, patrols, and things like that—if you’re around that, does it make you more comfortable with the idea of conflict?” Sara (23, US) had another interesting observation: “There is a lot of nationalism here that I haven’t really seen in other countries … plus the huge national identity.”
Discussion and Conclusions

This study has aimed to characterize distinct features of the routinization of the Israeli-Arab conflict into daily life in Israel, as reflected in the observations of foreign students, assuming that, as newly arrived outsiders, they would be able to discern cultural characteristics of everyday life in Israel. It has also compared their points of view to those of Israeli students born into the day-to-day reality of a society that has been engaged for decades in an intractable conflict.

The first feature of routinization—the daily exposure to images and symbols of the conflict—was the one most noted by foreign participants and was perhaps the most overwhelming and difficult for them to adapt to. In sharp contrast, Israeli respondents appeared to be oblivious and absolutely indifferent to these visual expressions of the conflict in their everyday lives. The significant difference between the two groups emphasizes the smooth assimilation of images and symbols of conflict into the scenery of daily routine to the extent that the local eye can no longer identify them as extraordinary. This notion is consistent with a study conducted by Dagan (2013), who attempted to examine empirically the effect of exposure to symbols and images of the conflict on various beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of the ethos of conflict. Referring to the results, which showed that the exposure of the participants to visual expressions of the conflict had no effect on their responses, Dagan suggests that Israelis are so used to these conflict reminders that they do not even notice them anymore.

The fact that for the foreign students this experience involved a mental burden or emotional response also highlights the distinction between societies in extreme, intractable conflict and those that are not, in terms of the exposure of their members to violence-related cues. This issue may have important socio-psychological implications. Studies show, for example, that the presence of a weapon and other aggression-related cues increase the likelihood of aggressive thoughts and belligerent behavior (Anderson et al. 1998; Berkowitz and LePage 1967; Carlson et al. 1990). Furthermore, the fact that society members do not consciously notice these cues and treat them with indifference might even intensify this psychological effect (Turner et al. 1977).

A second way in which the conflict is routinized concerns everyday practices that are conflict-related. In this case, the differences between the in- and out-groups were more moderate. Perceived as formally required by law or by safety regulations, security checks were more easily recognized by Israelis as an unusual characteristic of day-to-day life, and foreigners adapted to them quite easily as well. Most of the newly arrived students looked on security measures as a necessary technical matter
and acted accordingly, as in the famous phrase ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do’. However, it was more difficult for Israeli students to identify informal acts as common, conflict-related norms of behavior, although they participate in some of these as well.

A third aspect of routinization involves the vast amount of information regarding the conflict to which society members are exposed. Obviously, Israelis could more easily tell that the public discourse was overloaded with conflict-related information since the foreign students do not speak Hebrew. Still, the fact that a couple of them noticed the central place of the conflict in channels of information may indicate the intensity of this element in everyday life. Also quite fascinating is the fact that some respondents, both foreigners and Israelis, suggested that this flood of information about the conflict is in the interests of the ruling establishment, whose goal is to keep the public prepared, alert, and defensive. These perceptions are in line with the notion that governments intentionally propagate the societal beliefs of the ethos of conflict through public channels of communication in order to motivate society members to cope with the conflict and to keep them armed and ready (Bar-Tal 2013).

Regarding everyday private discourse, only the foreign respondents noted the central place of the conflict in it, while the Israelis, who carry on these interpersonal conversations, did not recognize it at all. In fact, foreigners were quite surprised to find in Israel an open atmosphere that allows people to speak freely about political issues. In a country involved in a protracted conflict, they were perhaps expecting a tougher governmental policy concerning freedom of speech and a more closed attitude on the part of society members.

As to the fourth feature of the routinization of conflict, which relates to the use of military language and conflict-related expressions in everyday language, while the foreign respondents did not react to it for obvious reasons, Israelis did not find this aspect of common discourse unusual. This observation applies also to the results of the study by Dagan (2013), who found that Israelis do not distinguish between heavily loaded military language and non-military language in texts presented to them.

Having reviewed the responses of the participants with respect to the four ways in which conflict-related elements are introduced into daily life in Israel, it appears that, as expected, outsiders did indeed identify various instances of the routinization of conflict and, in most cases, did so better than the Israelis. Furthermore, outsiders’ responses also implied the functionalities of routinization as they were observed and perceived with regard to Israeli society. Some of the foreign participants referred to the fact that those constant reminders saturating the physical and social spaces make Israelis oblivious to the conflict, as it becomes their natural
and usual way of life. Indeed, the transformation of conflict-related rou-
tines to normalcy eventually renders the entire conflict ‘normal’, since it
becomes a banal part and parcel of everyday living (Bar-Tal et al., forth-
coming; Billig 1995; Mitzen 2006).

Another function of the routinization of conflict that foreign respondents
addressed was the creation of a particular mind-set of constant alertness
that prepares society members to cope with life characterized by threat
and danger (Bar-Tal 2013). The daily routines also provide coherence and
order and give meaning to the conflict, so that along with the continuous
awareness and alertness comes a sense of constancy and confidence that
enables society members to adapt to the lasting situation of conflict, mak-
ing it surmountable.

A third function of the routinization involves its contribution to streng-
thening the sense of unity and solidarity among society members and to
the formation of a unique collective identity (see Bar-Tal and Ben-Amos
2004; David and Bar-Tal 2009). This was evident in the foreign students’
recognition of the strong national character of Israeli society and of the
central role that the conflict plays in the collective identity. The shared
routines that derive from the conflict draw boundaries of belonging and
differentiate between society members and outsider groups.

Quite fascinating is also the fact that some respondents described pos-
sible implications of the routinization of the conflict, beyond its function-
alities. It was suggested, for example, that getting used to these everyday
conflict-related routines causes society members to avoid thinking about
the conflict in general and particularly inhibits alternative, critical thoughts
regarding it. Indeed, in the process of routinization the situation of conflict
becomes the standard prism through which society members observe and
interpret their social reality, and thus it reduces openness to other ideas,
knowledge, perceptions, and worldviews that might replace those that
have become normalized (Bar-Tal 2013; Laclau 1990; Skey 2009).

Moreover, these continuous rehearsals of conflict practices and dis-
courses allow the conflict to be absorbed into everyday life while erasing
traces of its construction and its negative consequences. This means that,
in practice, the routinization of conflict enables the culture of conflict to
penetrate into both collective and individual lives of society members
and to consolidate its dominance more vigorously while facilitating the
perpetuation of the conflict.

Perhaps it is the gap between outsiders’ perspectives and those of in-
group members that best reflects the essence of routinization. Israelis live
with conflict from birth and encounter its signs on a daily basis throughout
their lives. Even in quieter periods, the conflict is present in public spaces,
discourse, language, and daily practices as it is being routinized. However,
since the symbols and experiences of conflict are so intertwined with day-to-day life, they become ‘transparent’ to society members. In fact, Israelis need these familiar, trusted, and well-practiced conflict-related routines in order to gain certainty and a sense of ontological security (Mitzen 2006).

In summary, the findings indicate the power of routinization in Israeli society, suggesting that the reality of living with the conflict has become so banal that the conflict itself has turned into a routine prism through which Israelis view their world. Ironically, this mind-set that enables adaptation to the harsh realities of conflict, along with conflict-related routines that have been integrated into everyday life, may actually prevent movement toward a situation of peacemaking, as this would entail risk taking and uncertainty. Often perceived as an insecure and dangerous path, peacemaking involves moving away from the familiar into a new and unknown arena. It is thus not surprising that it is so difficult to persuade societies in conflict to embark on the road of peace.

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NOTES

1. The term ‘intractable conflict’ is used to describe conflicts that are violent, fought over goals viewed as existential, perceived as being ‘zero-sum’ and unsolvable, occupy a central position in the lives of the involved societies, require immense investments of material and psychological resources, and last for at least 25 years (Bar-Tal 1998, 2013; Kriesberg 1993, 2005).
2. This infrastructure includes the ‘collective memory of conflict’, which presents a clear, coherent, and meaningful description of the course of conflict from the in-group’s perspective (Bar-Tal 2010; Cairns and Roe 2003; Paez and
Liu 2011; Tint 2010); the ‘ethos of conflict’, which is defined as a configuration of shared central societal beliefs that provide the society a particular dominant orientation for the present and the future, and includes eight major themes: (1) the righteousness of the goals of conflict, (2) personal safety and collective security, (3) positive collective self-image, (4) self-perception as the victim of the conflict, (5) delegitimization of the opponent, (6) patriotism, (7) unity, and (8) the desire for peace (Bar-Tal 2000, 2013); and ‘collective emotional orientations’, which refer to emotional characteristics of the society embedded in the societal beliefs and in the collective memory. It has been suggested that typical emotions that arise in the context of intractable conflict and are experienced by most members of society mainly include fear, hatred, anger, revenge, and pride (Bar-Tal 2001, 2013; Bar-Tal and Halperin 2011; Halperin 2008).

3. See Bar-Tal (2007) for a review of these features of the culture of conflict as manifested in Israel during the 1950s–1970s.

4. The term ‘world-taken-for-granted’ is being used in the sense of Berger and Luckmann (1966).

5. With regard to the issue of insiders’ versus outsiders’ points of view, Merton (1972: 36) concludes: “[W]e no longer ask whether it is the Insider or the Outsider who has monopolistic or privileged access to social truth; instead, we begin to consider their distinctive and interactive roles in the process of truth seeking.”

6. According to Guest et al. (2006), theoretical saturation is achieved with 12 in-depth interviews conducted with participants who share similar characteristics, while basic central content categories of the investigated phenomena shared by the interviewees can be consolidated with 6 in-depth interviews.

REFERENCES


