

Gandhi's Perspective On The Jewish-Arab Conflict In Palestine And Its Contemporary Relevance In Peace And Conflict Resolution

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Mahatma Gandhi's involvement and perspectives on the Jewish-Arab conflict in Palestine during the interwar period, contextualizing his views within the broader political dynamics of the time. Gandhi's stance on Palestine is analyzed through key phases of his engagement: his early support for the Ottoman Caliphate (1918–1936) as a means to foster Hindu-Muslim unity in India; his secret offer of mediation to the Jewish Agency in 1937; and his controversial public counsel in the article *The Jews* (1938), which reflected his commitment to nonviolence and skepticism of colonial interference. Despite his advocacy for peaceful coexistence, his positions often appeared impractical and alienated key stakeholders, such as the global Jewish community. It also explores the enduring relevance of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence, dialogue, and mutual respect in addressing contemporary conflicts. His principles are examined in the context of modern challenges, including territorial disputes, ideological extremism, systemic racism, and grassroots peacebuilding efforts. Examples such as the India-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir, the Israel-Palestine issue, and the ongoing civil war in Syria demonstrate the potential and limitations of applying Gandhi's approach to conflict resolution in the present day.

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi, revered for his philosophy of nonviolence, engaged with several complex global issues during his lifetime. Among these was the Jewish-Arab conflict in Palestine, which he addressed primarily during the interwar period. Gandhi's views on this conflict were shaped by his broader political philosophy and immediate concerns about Hindu-Muslim unity in India. Although his stance on Palestine was controversial and met with criticism, it offers valuable insights into his approach to peace and conflict resolution, which remains highly relevant today.

Gandhi's Engagement with the Jewish-Arab Conflict

Early Involvement and Support for the Caliphate (1918–1936)

Mahatma Gandhi's early engagement with the Ottoman Caliphate issue reflected his broader strategy of fostering Hindu-Muslim unity as a means of resisting British imperialism. At the end of World War I, the Ottoman Empire—the seat of the Caliphate—was defeated, leading to the dismantling of its territories and power. For many Indian Muslims, the Caliphate symbolized not only religious leadership but also political sovereignty, and its potential dissolution created widespread discontent. Recognizing this as an opportunity to bridge communal divides in India, Gandhi aligned himself with the Khilafat Movement (1919–1924), which aimed to preserve the Ottoman Caliphate.

Gandhi's support for the Caliphate was strategic. By endorsing the cause, he sought to bring Muslims into the broader struggle against British rule. He saw the Khilafat Movement as a unifying platform where Hindus and Muslims could work together for a common purpose. This solidarity was critical for Gandhi's vision of a nonviolent independence movement, which required the participation of all major communities in India.

Gandhi's support for the Caliphate implicitly aligned him with Muslim claims over Jerusalem and other Islamic holy sites under Ottoman control. At the time, he assumed that Jewish worship rights would continue to be respected within an Islamic framework. This assumption was consistent with the Ottoman Empire's historical policy of allowing religious pluralism and coexistence under its millet system, where non-Muslim communities

maintained a degree of autonomy in religious and civil matters. However, Gandhi's engagement with the Caliphate issue was not rooted in a deep understanding of the Jewish-Arab dynamic in Palestine. His focus remained on the implications of the issue for Indian Muslims and the anti-colonial struggle in India. This limited perspective would later influence his views on the Jewish-Arab conflict, where he prioritized the interests of the majority population in Palestine (Arabs) over the aspirations of Jewish immigrants. The abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who sought to modernize and secularize Turkey, marked the end of the Khilafat Movement and, with it, Gandhi's active engagement with the issue. The demise of the Caliphate removed a unifying symbol for Indian Muslims, leading to a gradual decline in the Hindu-Muslim unity that Gandhi had sought to build. In hindsight, his support for the Caliphate was a pragmatic move that yielded limited long-term success in bridging communal divisions in India.

Gandhi's involvement in the Caliphate issue demonstrated his willingness to engage with international and religious causes to further his goal of Indian independence. However, it also highlighted the challenges of navigating complex global issues with limited context. His implicit endorsement of Muslim claims to Jerusalem, while largely symbolic, would resurface in later debates about his stance on the Jewish-Arab conflict in Palestine, raising questions about his understanding of Zionist aspirations and the broader implications of his positions.

Secret Mediation Offer to the Jewish Agency (1937)

In 1937, as tensions escalated between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, Gandhi found himself drawn into the discourse surrounding the Zionist movement. The Jewish Agency, an organization that represented Jewish interests in Palestine and globally, sought Gandhi's support for their cause. This outreach came at a time when the Zionist project in Palestine was intensifying amid growing Arab opposition and British colonial involvement. Gandhi, renowned for his moral authority and advocacy for nonviolent conflict resolution, was seen as a potential ally who might lend credibility and support to the Zionist movement.

In response to the Jewish Agency's approach, Gandhi offered to mediate between Jews and Arabs. His proposal emphasized the importance of securing Arab goodwill as the foundation for peaceful coexistence, rather than relying on British colonial protection or forceful means to establish a Jewish homeland. This position stemmed from his broader belief in dialogue and mutual understanding as the basis for resolving conflicts. Gandhi argued that enduring peace could only be achieved if the Jewish community-built relationships of trust and cooperation with the Arab population, which formed the majority in Palestine. His proposal reflected his moral and philosophical stance rather than a pragmatic assessment of the political realities of the time. Gandhi's suggestion to rely on Arab goodwill, while idealistic, overlooked the depth of hostility and mistrust between the two communities, exacerbated by competing nationalist aspirations and the impact of British policies in the region.

The Jewish Agency dismissed Gandhi's mediation offer, recognizing the vulnerability of the Jewish community in Palestine and their growing dependence on British support to safeguard their position. By 1937, the Jewish population in Palestine was still a minority, facing significant resistance from the Arab majority, who opposed the Zionist project as a colonial imposition. For many Jewish leaders, Gandhi's emphasis on Arab goodwill seemed detached from the harsh realities of the conflict, where Arab opposition often manifested in violence and rejection of Jewish immigration and settlement.

Gandhi's evolving understanding of Zionist aspirations during this period was influenced by his long-standing friendship with Hermann Kallenbach, a Jewish architect from Lithuania who had been a close associate of Gandhi during his years in South Africa. Kallenbach had been a supporter of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence and shared a deep personal bond with him. Their friendship exposed Gandhi to Jewish culture, history, and the broader struggles of the Jewish people, including the plight of European Jews facing rising anti-Semitism in the 1930s. Kallenbach's influence likely shaped Gandhi's willingness to engage with the Jewish Agency and consider the Zionist cause sympathetically, even if he remained critical of its reliance on colonial powers and the potential displacement of the Arab population. Gandhi's approach sought to reconcile Jewish aspirations with Arab rights, reflecting his broader commitment to justice and equality. Gandhi's mediation offer, though ultimately rejected, underscored his attempt to navigate the complex dynamics of the Jewish-Arab conflict in Palestine through the lens of his principles. However, his idealistic approach failed to account for the entrenched divisions and the geopolitical factors that shaped the conflict. While his stance highlighted the importance of nonviolence and dialogue, it also revealed his limited understanding of the existential concerns and strategic imperatives driving both Jewish and Arab leaders.

This episode in Gandhi's life remains a significant yet underexplored aspect of his engagement with global conflicts, illustrating his attempt to extend his philosophy of nonviolence and reconciliation to one of the most contentious issues of the 20th century.

Public Counsel and "The Jews" Article (1938)

In the wake of *Kristallnacht* in November 1938—a brutal pogrom in Nazi Germany that saw Jewish synagogues burned, businesses destroyed, and thousands of Jews arrested—Mahatma Gandhi penned an article titled *The Jews*, which was published in his journal *Harijan*. This article marked one of Gandhi's most controversial interventions in the Jewish struggle against Nazi persecution and their aspirations for a homeland in Palestine.

While Gandhi expressed sympathy for the suffering of Jews, his recommendations and political positions alienated many in the global Jewish community and drew sharp criticism.

In *The Jews*, Gandhi urged Jewish people to resist Nazi oppression through nonviolent means, adhering to the principles of *Satyagraha* (nonviolent resistance). He argued that moral courage and the power of collective suffering could awaken the conscience of their oppressors and garner international support. Gandhi viewed the Jews as historically resilient and resourceful, capable of bearing great suffering with dignity. In his view, adopting nonviolence would allow Jews to transform their persecution into a spiritual and moral struggle that could ultimately undermine Nazi tyranny. Gandhi's counsel was rooted in his own experience of fighting colonial oppression in India and racial discrimination in South Africa through nonviolent means. However, his approach overlooked the unique and unprecedented nature of Nazi anti-Semitism, which sought not just to oppress Jews but to annihilate them systematically. Critics argued that Gandhi's advice, while morally idealistic, failed to grasp the existential threat faced by Jews under Hitler's regime. In the same article, Gandhi discouraged Jewish emigration to Palestine, arguing that the land rightfully belonged to the Arab population who had lived there for centuries. He criticized the Zionist movement's reliance on British support to establish a Jewish homeland, suggesting that this approach was complicit in colonial exploitation and would inevitably lead to injustice against the Arab majority.

Gandhi's stance was informed by his broader opposition to colonialism and his desire to foster solidarity between colonized peoples. He believed that the imposition of Jewish settlers in Palestine, without Arab consent, violated the principles of justice and coexistence. Instead, he advised Jews to negotiate their place in Europe through nonviolent resistance rather than seek refuge in Palestine, a recommendation that appeared detached from the immediate realities of Nazi persecution. Gandhi's positions in *The Jews* alienated many in the global Jewish community and drew sharp criticism from prominent intellectuals and leaders. Critics like Martin Buber and Judah Magnes, both Jewish philosophers and Zionist advocates, expressed dismay at Gandhi's inability to fully appreciate the gravity of the Jewish plight under Nazi rule.

1. Martin Buber's Critique: Buber, a leading Jewish thinker, argued that Gandhi's recommendation of nonviolent resistance was impractical and morally naive in the face of genocidal hatred. Buber pointed out that nonviolence could only succeed if the oppressor possessed some moral capacity to be swayed, a condition utterly absent in the Nazi regime.

2. Judah Magnes' Response: Judah Magnes, a Jewish pacifist and the first president of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, challenged Gandhi's dismissal of Jewish claims to Palestine. While Magnes shared Gandhi's commitment to nonviolence, he believed that a peaceful resolution in Palestine required mutual recognition of both Jewish and Arab rights to the land, a nuance Gandhi's position did not fully address.

3. Broader Jewish Discontent: Many Jewish leaders and communities viewed Gandhi's discouragement of emigration to Palestine as a denial of their legitimate right to seek refuge and self-determination in a land historically connected to their identity. They perceived his advice as an unrealistic moral prescription that disregarded the urgent need for a safe haven amid mounting anti-Semitic violence in Europe.

Gandhi's position in *The Jews* reflected his commitment to universal principles of justice, nonviolence, and anti-colonialism, but it also revealed his limited understanding of the complexities of Jewish history and the existential threats posed by Nazi ideology. While his counsel was consistent with his ethical philosophy, it failed to resonate with the realities of the Jewish struggle for survival and their aspirations for a homeland. This episode remains a contentious aspect of Gandhi's legacy, highlighting the challenges of applying universal moral principles to complex, context-specific political conflicts. Gandhi's article, though well-intentioned, underscored the limitations of his worldview in addressing the nuances of the Jewish question and the unprecedented horrors of the Holocaust.

Later Silence (1939–1947)

During the tumultuous period from 1939 to 1947, Gandhi refrained from making further public statements on the Jewish-Arab conflict or the broader Zionist question. This reticence coincided with escalating tensions in both Palestine and India. In Palestine, violence between Jewish and Arab communities intensified as Jewish immigration increased and British authorities struggled to maintain control. Meanwhile, India was entering its final phase of the struggle for independence from British colonial rule, a period marked by mounting communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims.

Gandhi's silence during these years can be attributed to several factors:

1. Focus on Indian Independence: Gandhi's priorities were firmly rooted in India's independence movement, particularly as World War II brought new challenges. With the Quit India Movement gaining momentum in 1942 and communal violence escalating, Gandhi concentrated his efforts on uniting diverse Indian communities to achieve self-rule.

2. Complexity of the Palestine Issue: The situation in Palestine grew increasingly volatile, with both Jewish and Arab factions resorting to violent means to achieve their goals. The complexity and intractability of the conflict may have discouraged Gandhi, whose philosophy of nonviolence and moral reasoning appeared ill-suited to address the escalating hostilities.

3. Alignment with Congress Leadership: During this period, the Indian National Congress, under leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, adopted a distinctly pro-Arab and anti-British stance on the Palestine issue. This position was influenced by India's broader anti-colonial struggle, solidarity with other colonized peoples,

and the Congress's desire to maintain goodwill with Indian Muslims, many of whom sympathized with the Arab cause.

4. International Developments: The horrors of the Holocaust and the subsequent push for a Jewish homeland in Palestine further complicated the moral and political landscape. While Gandhi likely sympathized with the immense suffering of European Jews, his silence suggests that he was unsure how to reconcile this with his earlier critiques of Zionism and support for Arab rights in Palestine.

Contextualizing Gandhi's Perspective

Gandhi's views on the Jewish-Arab conflict and the Zionist question were deeply rooted in his broader philosophical and political framework, which emphasized **nonviolence**, **anti-colonialism**, and **communal harmony**. However, these views were also shaped by the immediate political priorities of the Indian independence movement, often at the expense of fully engaging with the complexities of the Palestine issue.

1. Commitment to Nonviolence

At the heart of Gandhi's perspective was his unwavering belief in nonviolence (*Ahimsa*) as a universal principle. He advocated dialogue, negotiation, and mutual understanding as alternatives to violent conflict. Gandhi's advice to Jews in his 1938 article *The Jews*—to rely on nonviolent resistance against Nazi persecution and seek Arab goodwill in Palestine—reflected his idealistic belief that moral courage could overcome political and social injustices. However, his philosophy often seemed impractical in the face of extreme violence, such as the Holocaust and the escalating Jewish-Arab conflict.

2. Skepticism of Colonial Interference

Gandhi's critique of the Zionist movement was closely tied to his broader opposition to imperialism and colonialism. He viewed the British support for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine as a continuation of colonial exploitation, where the interests of one group were advanced at the expense of another. For Gandhi, any solution to the Jewish question in Palestine had to emerge from mutual consent between Jews and Arabs, free from the manipulative hand of colonial powers.

3. Concerns About Communal Harmony

Gandhi's position on the Jewish-Arab conflict was also informed by his concerns about maintaining communal harmony in India. As a leader of a diverse, multi-religious nation, Gandhi was acutely aware of the dangers of religious conflict. He likely feared that endorsing Jewish claims to Palestine could alienate Indian Muslims, who generally sympathized with the Arab cause. This concern became even more pressing as communal tensions in India escalated during the 1940s, leading to the eventual partition of India in 1947.

4. Impracticality of Proposals

While Gandhi's proposals for resolving the Jewish-Arab conflict were morally consistent with his broader philosophy, they often appeared detached from the realities on the ground. His calls for nonviolence and reliance on Arab goodwill failed to account for the deep-seated mistrust and competing national aspirations of Jews and Arabs. Similarly, his opposition to Jewish emigration to Palestine overlooked the urgent need for a safe haven for European Jews fleeing Nazi persecution.

5. India's Political Context

Gandhi's views were also shaped by the immediate political priorities of the Indian independence movement. The Congress's pro-Arab stance aligned with its anti-British sentiment and the need to maintain Muslim support within India. This alignment, coupled with Gandhi's commitment to anti-colonial solidarity, limited his engagement with Zionist aspirations, which he saw as being advanced through British imperialism.

Gandhi's silence from 1939 to 1947 and his earlier positions on the Jewish-Arab conflict remain a subject of considerable debate. Critics argue that his views were overly idealistic and insufficiently informed by the unique historical and geopolitical realities of the Jewish and Arab struggles. His silence during the critical years leading up to the establishment of Israel in 1948 has been interpreted as a reflection of both political pragmatism and a lack of clarity on how to address the complexities of the issue within the framework of his philosophy. At the same time, Gandhi's commitment to nonviolence and justice continues to inspire debates on ethical approaches to conflict resolution. His emphasis on dialogue, mutual respect, and anti-imperialism offers valuable insights, even if his specific prescriptions for the Jewish-Arab conflict were impractical. Gandhi's legacy in this context serves as a reminder of the challenges of applying universal moral principles to deeply entrenched political and social conflicts.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi's engagement with the Jewish-Arab conflict and the Zionist question reveals the complexities of applying moral and philosophical principles to multifaceted geopolitical issues. His unwavering commitment to nonviolence, skepticism of colonial interference, and emphasis on communal harmony shaped his positions, which often sought to reconcile the immediate demands of India's independence movement with broader ethical concerns. While Gandhi's proposals, such as relying on Arab goodwill and opposing Jewish emigration to Palestine, were grounded in his principles, they often appeared impractical given the realities of escalating

tensions, deep-seated mistrust, and the humanitarian crisis facing European Jews during the Holocaust. Gandhi's silence from 1939 to 1947 underscores the limits of his engagement with the Palestine question, reflecting both the overwhelming demands of India's struggle for independence and the increasingly polarized nature of the Jewish-Arab conflict. His reticence during this period, coupled with the Indian National Congress's pro-Arab stance, illustrates how domestic political considerations influenced his stance on global issues.

Despite these limitations, Gandhi's legacy in this context continues to provoke important discussions about the ethical dimensions of conflict resolution and the challenges of addressing competing national and religious identities. His emphasis on dialogue, justice, and anti-imperialism remains relevant, even as his specific approaches to the Jewish-Arab conflict are critiqued for their idealism and lack of practical feasibility. Gandhi's engagement with these issues, though imperfect, highlights the enduring tension between moral philosophy and political pragmatism in the pursuit of peace and justice.

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