Why This Top Expert on Ethnic Conflicts Has Hope for Israelis and Palestinians

The way to win a war is to vanquish the foe, but the way to end a conflict is to allow the rival side to share positions of power, according to sociologist and political philosopher Andreas Wimmer, a world authority on ethno-political conflicts

Andreas Wimmer. "Even if it seems impossible to imagine an end to the cycle of bloodshed right now, it will eventually happen."Credit: Aishia Sampson

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"It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart. It's utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more."

It's best to start this article from the end: This war too will reach its conclusion, however remote and uncertain that prospect may seem at present. Andreas Wimmer, one of the most prominent and prolific scholars in the fields of nationalism and ethnic conflicts, even hints – cautiously – at a possible peace after the guns fall silent in Israel and the Gaza Strip.

"I am optimistic about you. Even if it seems impossible to imagine an end to the cycle of bloodshed right now, it will eventually happen one way or another," Prof. Wimmer says. "The big question is whether the solution will be one that we can support politically and morally. It is indeed difficult under the current conditions look through the fog of war for a path that leads to the end of the conflict. But the research literature shows that it is possible to establish a stable peace even between parties that have been fighting each other for a long time."

One of the graphs in Wimmer's 2012 book, "Waves of War," subtitled "Nationalism, State Formation, and Ethnic Exclusion in the Modern World," shows that wars are more likely to break out in the period beginning two decades before the establishment of a new nation-state – typically, those are wars fought for nationalist or anti-imperialist reasons – and ending some four decades after a nation-state's founding – taking the form of ethno-political conflicts or wars between states. On this timeline, Israel is on a downward trajectory, being in the middle of its eighth decade of existence – from which point the probability of war supposedly declines even further, until the 17th decade after the establishment of a new state, when the likelihood of a violent conflict stands at close to zero, on average.

"The literature points to several ways of how violent conflicts end," Swiss-born Wimmer, the Lieber Professor of Sociology and Political Philosophy at Columbia University, explains in one of the video conversations we held earlier this month. "One of them is through external intervention, as in the case of NATO's entry into the Balkan wars of the 1990s."

However, he notes, "This is a rare possibility, if only because few countries are willing to risk the lives of their soldiers for a conflict that is not theirs. Another rare possibility is the slow fading away of the conflict, despite the lack of an agreement or a solution to the underlying problems that caused it.

"Another option," the 61-year-old scholar continues, "is that the warring parties continue to cause harm to each other, where both suffer ongoing loss of life and economic destruction, with no victory in sight. When such a 'mutually hurting stalemate,' as scholars call it, is reached, outside mediators may help to find an agreement, ensuring both parties that its terms will be implemented. Twenty percent of the world's conflicts ended this way. Guatemala is one example, where a United Nations-sponsored peace agreement was signed in 1996 between the government and the guerrilla forces.

Ethnic Armenians flee Nagorno-Karabakh, on their way Kornidzor, Armenia in September. Credit: Stepan Poghosyan/AP

"But the most common way to durably end a war is through victory by one side," Wimmer notes, "for example, when the Sri Lankan army won the battles against the Tamil separatists in the early 2000s. Another recent example is Azerbaijan's victory in September this year over the separatists in the Nagorno Karabakh enclave, which caused thousands of people to leave their homes, most likely forever."

However, for peace to be lasting and to effectively end recurring rounds of hostilities, it is essential to address the roots of the conflict. "The main underlying reason for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the lack of political power of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. They are a minority deprived of citizenship rights," he elaborates. "This situation represents an extreme form of political discrimination that is extraordinarily

rare in today's world. The probability that such a situation will lead to violence of one form or another is very high, as comparative research shows."

What are the possible solutions to the present round of fighting?

"From a purely military point of view, Israel's idea of [eliminating a terrorist organization like Hamas](#) is certainly possible. There are many examples in history where a state won decisively against an armed insurgency. In Sri Lanka, to return to this example, the government crushed the Tamil Tigers completely, but with steep costs in terms of civilian deaths. The same goes for Russia's brutal wars against Chechen separatists and jihadists. In the case of Israel and the Gaza Strip, the whole world is watching, however. The operation the Israel Defense Forces is carrying out now is under a global magnifying glass, so to speak, and for every Gazan child killed, Israel loses thousands of friends around the world. I see it in the United States, where I live – every day that passes there is an erosion of support for Israel, which was very high after the horrific massacre of that Saturday (October 7).

I would characterize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a struggle against an extreme form of political discrimination, which arises from a quasi-colonial situation.

Andreas Wimmer

"It is important to remember that a complete victory by one side leads to a sustainable peace only if it is accompanied by sharing government power with representatives of the other side. Yes, even if the population supported the uprising. After the Tamil Tigers were defeated, political parties representing the Tamil population arose, and they began to take part in the regional government in the northern provinces."

Is it realistic that Fatah will control the Gaza Strip after the war, assuming that Hamas is indeed eliminated?

"The problem with Fatah is that it suffers from a very severe legitimacy problem among the Palestinians themselves. One can only hope that a revolution will occur within the organization, that a new generation will take the reins and that it will be less corrupt and more democratic than the current leadership. On the Israeli side, as well, the government has a serious legitimacy problem in the eyes of the Israeli citizens. In order to reach a sustainable solution to the conflict through a negotiated settlement, both negotiating parties must receive enough support from the populations they represent, in order to convince them to accept the necessary concessions and to keep radical and violent extremists under control who will likely want to torpedo a long-term solution."

Civilians fleeing an area in Sri Lanka held by Tamil Tiger separatists, in 2009. "The government crushed the Tamil completely, but with steep costs in terms of civilian deaths."Credit: Reuters/Sri Lankan Government

What about long-term solutions?

"I do not think that the vision of a 'whole Land of Israel' and the [forced removal of the Palestinians](#) is achievable, nor will it lead to sustainable peace. The ethnic cleansing that some people in Israel openly talk about – some of them members of the current government – is unfeasible today. It might have been possible, or even received international support, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when such ideas were 'acceptable,' but not in the 21st century.

"From a comparative point of view, it is necessary to empower the Palestinians so that the root of the conflict is addressed. Therefore, I think the two-state solution, with all the difficulty and complexity with regard to Jerusalem and the settlements, is the least difficult solution to achieve and the most promising for prolonged peace. In the language of scholars, this is called 'partition.' When two or more nations compete over the same territory or over who controls the state, partition is, historically speaking, the most common solution. It creates two or more new states, each ruled in the name of a different ethnic nationality."

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But let's go back to the basics. Wars, too, have their science. As horrific and shocking as they may be, and no matter where they take place, wars have recurring patterns that can be researched, quantified, measured and analyzed – as long as one leaves emotional and moral considerations out of the discussion, and "deals only with the facts, with minimum moral judgement."

That's not an easy task, but it produces interesting results. Thanks to an interdisciplinary field known as "conflict research," it's possible today to make statements like the following: "Until World War II, the partition of empires into a series of nation-states, combined with ethnic cleansing, was the most common way to achieve peace after ethno-nationalist wars."

Wimmer and his students have been collecting data that dates back as far as the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1816, and covering most of the countries in the world, to discover patterns relating to where, when and why wars break out. From the vast quantity of data they have analyzed, it is possible to see, for example, how the reasons for going to war have shifted over time. Since World War II, the share of wars fought with the aim to conquer and permanently absorb new territories beyond the borders of a state has dropped to almost zero. By contrast, from the end of the 20th century until the present, about 75 percent of the wars in the world have involved struggles over political power between ethno-nationalist movements, whether separatist or not. Moreover, 25 percent of the countries that exist today have experienced at least one such ethno-political war since their establishment (most have experienced more), including Burma, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Sudan, Thailand and Israel.

"One of the main factors driving these wars is the lack of political representation of ethnic minorities," the scholar argues, "which contradicts the basic principle of self-rule that is now widely accepted. When, in a hypothetical country, the share of minorities that are not represented in the national government increases from 6 percent to 32 percent, the prospect of an armed conflict rises by 25 percent."

And so on. Thanks to his research and his book, "Waves of War," Wimmer has become somewhat of an oracle in this field of knowledge – that is, the comparative study of armed violence and war. In 2018, he published another book that made waves in academia and beyond, titled "Nation Building: Why Some Countries Come Together While Others Fall Apart."

"Andreas is a legend in this area. He has no equal when it comes to the breadth of his comparative knowledge, in terms of the types of conflicts he studies, the geographic scope and the historical depth," says Ronit Levine-Schnur, a law professor at Reichman University, Herzliya. She is also the cofounder, with Prof. Daphna Joel, a neuroscientist from Tel Aviv University, of the new Day After the War Forum, which they established to discuss the legal and geopolitical goals of the current war in Gaza. A few weeks ago, Wimmer delivered a fascinating talk within the framework of the forum's weekly lecture.

Andreas Wimmer. Credit: Evan Mann

"We invited him to speak to a broad Israeli public, because he offers research-based, comparative analysis of the conflict in which we are all immersed," Dr. Levine-Schnur explains. "What I learned from Wimmer is that, unfortunately, our conflict checks off all the most problematic items on the list: It's a conflict over territory and also over independence, it involves religion on both sides, including jihadist-Islamist terrorism, and it also reflects a global conflict between the U.S.-West axis and the Russia-Iran axis."

According to Wimmer's research, one of the simplest predictors of whether a conflict will erupt in a certain place is whether that place has experienced conflict in the past. That is, violent conflicts have a tendency to recur over time – for several reasons. One is that violence leads to the spatial and social distancing between the groups in conflict; there is thus less exposure to the rival group, which enhances mutual stereotyping.

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Violence also dehumanizes, demonizes and denigrates the Other, augmenting the possibility of future conflict by lowering the threshold when it comes to killing the Other. A third factor, very relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian war, is that in a protracted conflict, the belligerent parties may often perceive their own attacks as a preventive action, which leads to endless cycles of violence, in which offense is considered defense and vice versa.

However, despite such tragic spirals of bloodshed throughout history, no conflict lasts forever, Wimmer observes, adding: "During the last 200 years, there have been three patterns according to which ethno-political conflicts come to an end. They all achieve, in one way or another, the national aspiration for self-governance for the majority of people, and bring about an end to political exclusion on ethno-political grounds.

"The first way is to share positions of government power – that is, to build an inclusive governing coalition that includes both the majority and minorities. The second way is through the division of territory; namely, to give each group its own state, in which it represents the dominant majority. The third way is through violent or nonviolent ethnic cleansing (or, more subtly, through cultural assimilation), which create clear patterns of demographic dominance. Usually the population of deportees or refugees is assimilated into the population of a neighboring country, where they form the majority. Historically, we see a combination of the three ways and especially the combination of partition and ethnic cleansing."

Ethnic cleansing sounds terrible. Even in the language of social science, it's difficult to use that term.

"It's important to distinguish between explanation and justification; these are separate ways of using our brain. In the case at hand, analyzing the causes and consequences of ethnic cleansing does not mean in any way that we justify it. If I say that many conflicts in history ended through partition and ethnic cleansing, it doesn't mean that I think it's a good thing in any way, it's just a historical fact. When scientists explain a certain disease, that doesn't mean they encourage it."

Following that clarification, Wimmer explains that the concept of ethnic cleansing does not refer to genocide, but rather to the transfer of a population, usually from one state to another, with or without violence. For example, during the Balkan wars Serbs were forced to move to Serbia, Croats to Croatia and so on. In the war between Turkey and Greece (1919-1922), each population moved to the country where they formed the majority, as was also the case during the war between India and Pakistan (1947-1949). According to this understanding, the term ethnic cleansing can be applied to the war of 1947-1949, when Palestinians were forced to leave their homes, and also to the case when Jews were forced to leave various Muslim-majority Arab countries for the nascent State of Israel or voluntarily immigrated there.

Serb tanks move towards the city of Pec west of Pristina in 1998. External intervention, as in the case of NATO's entry into the Balkan wars, is one way to end a violent conflict.Credit: JOEL ROBINE / AFP

Although the practice of ethnic cleansing is no longer legally or morally "accepted," he says, it is still occurring across the world, such as in Nagorno Karabakh, Sudan or Timor,

and to a lesser degree in the West Bank as well: In the past month alone, approximately 800 Palestinians left their homes due to harassment by settlers.

Wimmer: "There are currently two ideas of ethnic cleansing in the Middle East. There are those in Israel who fantasize about the 'whole Land of Israel' and whose project is to cleanse the West Bank of Palestinians and annex it to the State of Israel. Such a solution will create a massive legitimacy problem for Israel; Israel will lose the support of many countries, including the United States, which may no longer be willing to deter Iran and Hezbollah. It will also inflame tensions with neighboring Arab states, leading to new rounds of war. Therefore, I think this is a disastrous idea for Israel and a major obstacle to sustainable peace .

"On the other side, there is the vision of radical Palestinian terrorist organizations to get rid not only of the Israeli occupation, but of Israel as a state. This is also a radical ideology of ethnic cleansing. It is unacceptable from a moral point of view and inconceivable from a military and political point of view, in light of Israel's military power and its alliances with Europe and the United States."

Consequently, Wimmer continues, "the two visions of ethnic cleansing are not feasible, which leaves us with two other possible solutions for sustainable peace in your region: either the two-state solution (partition), or one state in which Palestinians will share power. For either of these two solutions to be realized, Israeli politics would have to change, because Israel is currently ruled by a government that is not interested in such solutions and even actively works against them. And on the Palestinian side, it will be necessary to find representatives with more legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinian public that are at the same time committed to a peaceful future."

Asked how he personally categorizes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general, Wimmer shifts uncomfortably but addresses the question (and all our other ones) despite the fact that it is emotionally charged and politically complex. He divides his response into several parts, starting with the Arab citizens of Israel. "There are many countries with ethnic-national minorities that are comparable to Israel," he says. "I would not define them as discriminated against, but as powerless. In such cases, there is a higher probability of violence compared to groups that are part of the ruling coalition. To reduce the probability of violence, the solution here is both clear and easy: to share power and give them a seat at the table of government."

As for the situation in the West Bank, he says, "If I have to place the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in some kind of comparative framework, I would say that it is closest to a colonial situation. The Palestinians who are under Israeli occupation are not citizens of Israel and therefore cannot be characterized as an ethno-national minority of Israel. They have no sovereignty in matters of security, they have no control over the land, they don't have citizenship – and are all the while subject to the authority of Israel. This is a quasi-

colonial situation, something akin to indirect rule in a colony, which represents an extreme form of political discrimination. It is very rare today in the world.

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Comparatively speaking, political discrimination, including its less severe forms, doubles the probability of violence either in the form of armed conflict or terrorism."

Wimmer continues with the historical analogy: "Are the occupied territories in the West Bank a case of 'settler colonialism'? Yes, in the sense that the Palestinians in the territories are displaced and dispossessed to make room for settlers, who hail from the dominant group and are protected by the state. But also no, because Israeli settlers think about their own project as a 'return to the homeland' and not as the conquest of new territory. In light of these facts, I would characterize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a struggle against an extreme form of political discrimination, which arises from a quasi-colonial situation."

But when Hamas enters the picture, a clarification is needed: "It's important to emphasize that the analogy to anti-colonial struggles is only meaningful as long as it is assumed that Israel's right to exist is accepted by the Palestinians, and that their struggle refers only to the liberation of the occupied territories – as the Algerians, for example, struggled against French rule over Algeria (1954-1962). But if the struggle is not only against the occupation but also against the very existence of the State of Israel, as the Hamas charter makes clear, then the conflict takes the form of a threat of ethnic cleansing or even genocide, since the Israelis have nowhere to go. They have no 'mother' state, as in the case of the French settlers who left Algeria and returned to France."

Algerians demonstrating against French President Charles de Gaulle's self-determination policy for their country, in 1960.Credit: AP

And as if this predicament isn't complicated enough, there are other elements that distinguish the Israeli-Palestinian case from other conflicts, Wimmer notes. The first: "Unlike any other cases I know of in the history of ethnic cleansing, the one in 1948, when Palestinians were forcibly expelled from the future territory of the State of Israel, did not lead to their integration in the receiving countries with a similar population. When Greeks left Turkey for Greece, they integrated into the general population of Greece, and today it is difficult to distinguish between Greek-Turks and 'original' Greeks. What's more, the Greeks who left Turkey have no ambition to return and occupy the lands they left. The same goes for Muslims who fled from India to Pakistan and Hindus who fled from Pakistan to India. In the case of the Palestinian refugees, the Arab countries housed them in refugee camps, where their will to return to their home was nourished."

The second distinguishing feature, he says, is that "Israel is surrounded by hostile countries, and this is one of the reasons the latter did not naturalize and assimilate the Palestinian refugees. The hostility of neighboring countries is unique and massively heightens Israel's security problems. Why are these countries hostile? Well, this is related to the third singularity. When the project of establishing the State of Israel started, after World War I, only 10 percent of the people who would eventually become citizens of the country lived in Israel. In all other nation-states that emerged over the last 200 years, the

majority of the nation had already lived for many generations in the territory on which its state was founded."

And fourth: "Israelis are at the heart of regional and global power struggles, between Iran, Arab countries, the United States and Europe. These global and regional forces complicate any solution, because there are so many actors and interests that can destroy possible long-term solutions. It doesn't help that all these forces are so intimately tied to your conflict. There are also regional forces operating in other conflicted places, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Chad or Sudan, but in Israel these regional actors are also joined by global forces."

I asked Wimmer about another prominent factor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the major role religion plays in it. On one hand, there is Judaism and the belief that Jews have been "promised" ownership of this land. On the other hand, there is radical Islam, which revealed its most brutal side on that infernal Saturday. Wimmer says the religious aspects of the conflict do not make it unique or fundamentally different from conflicts between linguistically defined groups. But he notes that religion adds an additional element here that is important to acknowledge.

"There are recurring characteristics of Islamist radicalism around the world, such as that of Hamas, Daesh [Islamic State], Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Shabaab in Somalia or Al-Qaida in the Maghreb. These groups are connected on a global level and maintain relations with each other, both actual and ideological. This is not the case with other ethno-national movements," he says. "The Tamils in Sri Lanka, for example, were not connected to the Chechens of Russia, to go back to two of the examples. But Islamist organizations do share resources and often receive funds from the same sources. In addition, they share a jihadist ideology that legitimizes or even glorifies violence against civilians."

Wimmer, as noted, was born in Switzerland – a country that is a historical amalgamation of four nationalities that are maintaining one of the longest-lasting and impressive partnerships in world history. Each minority speaks a separate language – French, German, Italian or Romansh – has its own culture and practices its own customs. Concurrently, Switzerland maintains a highly decentralized governing system that is combined with direct democracy. It's not by chance that the Swiss army is known primarily for inventing the pocketknife and less for its combat history. Since 1848 the Swiss have not fought against anyone or even among themselves.

Your homeland arouses envy, I tell Wimmer – just before an air-raid siren sends me scurrying to the safe space and severs our video conversation.

"The Swiss case is successful because from the beginning there was an informal agreement between all the language groups in Switzerland to share power and to each occupy a seat

at the government table," he observes. "As a result, the differences between these groups never became politicized, let alone escalated into a violent conflict."

Coming soon to this part of the world, too? If only we could harbor such hope.