

## US Strong Ties with Israel, Weak Ties with Palestine

By Byron A. Ellis - 2007



The importance of relationships, or at least the perception of a balanced relationship, is essential in mediating conflict resolution. Therefore, it is paramount that the belligerent members view the conflict mediator as honest and fair.

Thus, when the US mediates between Israel and Palestine, both must perceive the US as an honest and fair broker of peace. Otherwise, they will mistrust the mediator. So, what is the relationship between Israel, Palestine and the United States? Can the ties between them explain the current outcomes?

In a balanced triadic relationship, with strong ties between members, the level of conflict, if any, is low. Conversely, in an unbalanced triadic relationship, where strong ties exist between two members and weak ties with the third, we expect greater conflict. The strong tied members will often have similar interest and they will disregard the interest of the weak tied member. As a result, conflict between weak and strong tied members will be high.

When we examine the structure of the relationship between the US, Israel and Palestine, we see strong ties between US and Israel, and weak ties between US and Palestine and between Palestine and Israel. Thus, the structure of the relationship is unbalanced and therefore conflict prone.

Some social scientists (Granovetter) believe that strong ties exhibit four elements: (1) more interacting time, (2) emotion intensity of the interaction, (3) mutual confiding, and (4) reciprocal services. Others, however, believe that trust is what makes strong ties strong.

Involvement perceived or real, with one of the triadic member often creates a likeness for that member, causing the involved party to inflate their assessment of that member. For instance, if the US were involved with Palestine instead of Israel, the US would view the actions of Palestine more favorable than the actions of Israel. This is a self-enhancing tendency; the more involvement, or influence we have, or believe we have, with a member of the triad, the more favorable is our view of their actions and performance. Clearly, this built in bias often has a strong cultural component, which can lead to erroneous attributions. It is difficult for a biased mediator to successfully facilitate conflict resolution.

The US, nevertheless, has a unique opportunity to suppress the individual interest of both actors, Israel and Palestine. However, it can only exploit this opportunity by being an honest broker of peace, and its honesty must be transparent and consistent. For example, the US can isolate any of the other two members if their behavior towards regional peace and civility is inappropriate. Such isolation, if even-handed, will constrain the ongoing

violence and demonstrate the mediator's commitment to the peace process. Furthermore, it will reduce the deep contrast between the two enemies.

The peace broker is, in essence, the change agent, who must be able to change the dynamics of the relationship between the conflicting groups. The current inability to change the dynamics of the relationship is a direct result of the unbalanced ties and the level of inclusiveness in the negotiation process. In seeking to resolve a conflict, the mediator must be impartial and should signal willingness to communicate with all groups influencing the conflict. It is counterproductive to exclude the views of any actor that can positively or negatively influence the peace process, whether they are from Israel or Palestine.

Research in social psychology suggests that including a wide array of interested parties in the change process facilitates adaptation. Thus, although it is politically expedient to exclude some "extremists" from the negotiations, particularly those associated with the weak tied member. Such expediency contributes to regional instability.