

This is a transcript of The Conversation Weekly podcast 'Israel-Gaza: how opinion polls used in Northern Ireland could pave a way to peace,' published on February 22, 2024.

NOTE: Transcripts may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

Gemma Ware: Amid the death and suffering unleashed by Israel's war on Gaza and Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, prospects for lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians appear ever more elusive. But when the war eventually ends, pressure will mount for negotiations to begin for a deal.

When that day comes, how can opposing sides in such an intractable conflict find enough common ground to reach an agreement? In this episode, we hear about a method called peace polling, tried out successfully in Northern Ireland that could offer a blueprint for how to reach a deal between Israelis and Palestinians.

I'm Gemma Ware, and this is The Conversation Weekly, the world explained by experts.

To start this episode, I'm joined by Jonathan Este, senior international affairs editor at The Conversation in the UK. Hi, Jonty.

Jonathan Este: Hi, Gemma. How are things?

Gemma Ware: I'm good. Thanks, Jonty. I know you've been busy working with a lot of researchers to cover the ongoing war in Gaza after the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7. And as part of that, I know you've been thinking about what happens once the war ends. Tell me what some of the biggest questions are that academics are thinking about at this point.

Jonathan Este: There are a lot of moving parts involved here. On one hand, you've got an Israeli government that's being kept in power by its most extreme elements. At the same time, it's got this almost blank check arrangement with the

US and to an extent with the UK and other Western allies. Then you've got Hamas, which over 20 years of holding power in Gaza has militarized the strip. They've built these huge tunnel networks. It has these geopolitical ramifications because Hamas is backed by Iran and as we know, Iran and the US have been at loggerheads in the Middle East for some years.

Meanwhile, many to the right of Israeli politics have called for Gaza to be cleared completely of Palestinian people to allow settlers to claim the land there, once the war ends. Much of the international community including the UK and US backed the long-standing idea of a two-state solution which would give the Palestinians a state of their own. But the government of Benjamin Netanyahu has said it won't consider this, it wants to remain in control of security there, although it hasn't yet explained how that might work in the future.

Then there's also the question of how the Palestinian people are represented, whether Hamas will continue to have a role in government at all, which again Israel says it just won't countenance. So there are a whole lot of questions that need answering and every day brings new ones.

Gemma Ware: Yeah, it's a complicated situation. And just before October 7, we actually ran a series looking back 30 years to the Oslo Accords and the peace talks that happened there between Israelis and Palestinians. It seems almost unimaginable to me to think of that happening again anytime soon. But I know that you've been talking to a researcher who's got some interesting lessons that we can learn from another conflict in Northern Ireland. Tell us about Colin Irwin.

Jonathan Este: Well, I was introduced to Colin by one of my longstanding contributors, Stefan Wolff. He's an expert in global security issues and he's been a regular contributor to our coverage of Ukraine. Now, Colin had just won an award for his lifetime of contributions to opinion polling. And Stefan, writing to congratulate him, suggested I might be interested in talking to him, which I then did. And he told me his story. He told me about how in the 1990s, he'd been part of a team working for Bill Clinton's peace envoy to Northern Ireland, George Mitchell, who was a senator. Now Colin's worked with Mitchell and played an important role in securing the Good Friday Agreement, and that brought an end to

the troubles there. Colin also tried to bring a similar approach to the conflict in Israel and Palestine, although sadly with much less success.

Gemma Ware: Thanks, Jonty, and also for putting me in touch with Colin. When I asked him how his working conflict resolution started, he said it began “far, far away” from Northern Ireland, from Israel or Palestine, up in northern Canada, where he spent time living with the Inuit in the 1970s.

Colin Irwin: This goes back to my adventurous young man thing.

Gemma Ware: Colin set out initially to sail through the Northwest Passage. It didn't work out. So he reached out to National Geographic Magazine and suggested crossing the Arctic by dog team.

Colin Irwin: They thought that was a good idea. No one had done it for 50 years. So, I'd learned all the hunting. I got a dog team, ran a dog team, learned to live off the land, and learned to live on raw meat.

Gemma Ware: In the process, he was adopted into an Inuit family, learning their language and way of life. The trip was a success, and Colin stayed, going on to work with an organization called Inuit Tapirisat (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, previously known as the Inuit Tapirisat), which was trying to secure a land claim settlement with the Canadian government. He began to observe something remarkable about the way Inuit politics worked that would form the basis for his future work in conflict resolution.

Colin Irwin: I soon discovered that they make decisions by consensus. The point being, that if they had warfare and were running around killing each other, there wouldn't be any Inuit. For the simple reason that so many young men die from hunting accidents, they couldn't afford to have war. So in their culture, there's no word for war. You can only say, ‘Let us go and murder many people’. You cannot be a hero by killing many people. You definitely cannot be a war hero, that's for sure. You could only be a hero by being a good hunter and feeding many people.

Gemma Ware: As a result, the Inuit have lots of mechanisms in place to stop group conflict.

Colin Irwin: And the most important one, in my view, is consensus decision-making. It's a completely different political discourse to what we're used to in the west. So, with Greek rhetoric tradition, I might try and persuade you of my point of view, and you might try and persuade me and all the colleagues we're trying to influence of your point of view, and then we'd have a vote. And the person who made the best speech would get the support that you are looking for.

But in the Inuit political discourse, it's totally different. The good political contributor to the community is the person who can listen to everybody's point of view and try and find out where the common ground or the consensus might be and then try and bring everybody to that consensus because everybody has to agree. And so, if you look through the minutes of the book of council meetings, in an Inuit village, you see decided by consensus, decided by consensus, decided unanimously, decided unanimously. They might have been talking about the problem for a day or two, but in the end, they decided unanimously, and that's how the politics was done.

Gemma Ware: Eventually, the land settlement negotiations would lead, in 1999, to the creation of the territory of Nunavut, which means our land in Inuktitut, one of the principal Inuit languages.

Colin Irwin: That tradition of unanimous decision-making by consensus, they still do it in the Nunavut Assembly, which has now been established in Northern Canada.

Gemma Ware: And so politically, does it mean that those people who hold extreme positions on the edge, that they have to come to the middle to compromise? Is that what has to happen?

Colin Irwin: Yes, they have to come to the middle. A decision will not be made until everybody is on the same page. The UN does this with COP, with the climate negotiations. Pretty much everybody has to agree, but there's probably quite a bit

of bullying and pushing, but it's an unusual way of doing things and it doesn't happen very often. And it certainly doesn't happen when it comes to conflict resolution and when people are having wars, except we did it in Northern Ireland.

Newsclips

Gemma Ware: Colin had moved to Northern Ireland in the late 1980s. It was a violent time to be there. For three decades, attacks by both Republicans who wanted Northern Ireland to rejoin a united Ireland, and Unionists who wanted to maintain its place as part of the United Kingdom, had left the country in a state of civil war. More than 3,700 people were killed in a period known as the Troubles.

In the 1990s, Northern Ireland was trying to find a path to peace, and its political parties were involved in a series of negotiations trying to get a peace deal. Colin became interested in how the principles of political decision-making, that he'd seen used by the Inuit, could be put to use.

Colin Irwin: Suddenly we're not dealing with 300 people, but a population of 1.5 million. And it's not possible presently to get them all into a conversation together. So, I started using public opinion polls.

Gemma Ware: He was trying to find a way of replicating that Inuit method of arriving at consensus. For peace to work, the contours of an eventual deal needed to be acceptable to all sides of the conflict.

Colin Irwin: The way to do that is to put everybody's option into the questionnaire. So, if the Irish Republicans just want to have a united Ireland, and if the Protestant Ulster Unionists just want to have rule from London and forget about any special deal for Northern Ireland, well then you have to put those options in. But then there's a whole bunch of options in between, including various forms of power sharing. So you have to have the full spectrum of options from one extreme to the other and then put the question out and ask people, "Well, please rank order these options."

Gemma Ware: Naturally, he says, when they were asked, people from each community would put their favorite option first, be it a united Ireland or direct rule from London.

Colin Irwin: But power sharing will come down somewhere in the middle and that's the answer to your problem. And so when you start doing that for all the policies that have to be dealt with in a peace process, you can find out where the common ground is and where the consensus is. What's really interesting there is that the extremist politician will say, "My guys can't possibly agree with this." But then when you run the public opinion policy you often find their own publics actually think it's quite a good idea because they would really like to get to peace.

Gemma Ware: Colin calls these public opinion polls "peace polls" and the way they're conducted is critical to their success. Colin and his colleagues had to ensure that they had a methodologically good sample for each poll, which captured people with a broad spectrum of views across the political divide in Northern Ireland.

Colin Irwin: There's no point in running a public opinion poll and then for somebody to say "Well, that's an interesting result but I don't agree with the methodology" or "I don't agree with the sample." So, I had to make sure that the parties agreed that the polling companies that I was using, that they did good research.

Gemma Ware: Another crucial factor in these peace polls was the way the questions in each questionnaire were decided in the first place. Colin had to make sure that all sides agreed on the questions in every poll. That was possible because of the way the peace negotiations had been set up, with ten parties elected to take part in the negotiations from across the political spectrum. It included parties linked to groups responsible for many deaths during The Troubles, such as Sinn Féin, which represented the Irish Republican Army, the IRA, and the Progressive Unionist Party, which represented the Ulster Volunteer Force. More moderate, centrist parties were also at the table.

Colin Irwin: So I had 10 parties to deal with and then I would go around meeting them one by one saying: "Well, what option do you want in?" And fascinatingly,

generally everybody knew what everybody else's option was. So we would work through the questionnaire and then I would bounce it around and bounce it around until everybody said “Well, this is a fair representation of all our points of view. Let's run it, Colin.”

Gemma Ware: Once the results of the opinion polls came back, Colin published them in the Belfast Telegraph. He also gave detailed reports to the 10 parties and to the U.S. Senator George Mitchell, who is the chair of the peace negotiations.

Colin Irwin: And they would take a look at all the results and generally speaking, they would say, you know, we can see what the deal is here and they would make an agreement and then we would move it on to the next issue that had to be dealt in the formal negotiations.

Gemma Ware: It was an iterative process that went alongside the peace negotiations. As sticking points came up, Colin and his colleagues would consult on new questions, put out a poll, and publish the results. The whole process took about six months and five polls, each with 200 questions in, until finally, in March 1998, there was a draft of a deal.

Colin Irwin: The final poll that we did just before they signed the deal was ‘Would you accept this deal?’ We had a precis of the agreement and we asked people if they would accept it and within a one percentage point, we were accurate to what the final referendum was, by which time the parties knew that our polls were very accurate. So, the day that I took the reports in and published that, the Belfast Agreement, as they had penned it, would pass through a referendum. They then knew that they wouldn't be committing political suicide by signing up to the deal. So, that was probably the most important poll that was done.

Gemma Ware: So, from what you're saying there, one of the most important contributing factors that the peace polls had to the eventual negotiating was just an understanding, knowledge, transparency for those who have to make decisions on behalf of their people...

Colin Irwin: Absolutely.

Gemma Ware: ...about what's acceptable.

Colin Irwin: Yeah, absolutely, that's what it does.

Newsclip

Gemma Ware: The deal, known as the Belfast Agreement or the Good Friday Agreement, was agreed on 10 April 1998, Good Friday. It set out a framework for power sharing in Northern Ireland. When it was put to a referendum the following month, 71% of the population in Northern Ireland were in favor.

Newsclip

Gemma Ware: The ensuing 26 years have not been smooth sailing for Northern Ireland. In fact, power-sharing was only just reinstated this January after a hiatus of two years without a functioning government. But for the most part, the violence is in the past.

After Colin's work in Northern Ireland, he hoped he could try and replicate his peace polls in Israel and Palestine, working again with the Democratic Senator George Mitchell, who had led the negotiations in Belfast. But the Democrat Al Gore, lost the 2000 US election, and George Bush was elected president. Colin would have to wait until 2008 on the eve of Barack Obama's entry to the White House, before he would be invited to run a peace poll in Israel and Palestine.

Colin Irwin: It was paid for and sponsored by an NGO called One Voice, who were working in both Israel and Palestine.

Gemma Ware: He secured well-regarded pollsters both in Israel and the Palestinian territories. He had good access to Israel's parliament, the Knesset, meeting representatives from across the political spectrum.

Colin Irwin: I met with all different kinds of ministers and politicians. I met with Shimon Peres, I met with Olmert, who was then prime minister.

Gemma Ware: The NGO One Voice also had good contacts with Fatah, the political party in charge of the West Bank at that time. But they didn't have good contacts with Hamas, which had taken over control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, after winning elections there.

Colin Irwin: But then another colleague of mine, Ghassan Khatib, at that time he was director of the Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre, and he was an independent member of the Palestinian Authority. He made arrangements for me to meet with Hamas and it was just like talking to Sinn Féin. I mean they had an extreme political position as Sinn Féin did, but these things can change and these things could move and they were happy to be in the peace polls.

Gemma Ware: The one person who would not meet with Colin was Benjamin Netanyahu, who was then head of the opposition Likud Party.

Colin Irwin: Benjamin Netanyahu wouldn't meet me, he just sent his spokesperson.

Gemma Ware: Nevertheless, in early 2009, Colin did go on to conduct a poll in the same way he'd done in Northern Ireland.

Colin Irwin: I brought the results to Washington. I was in Washington in 2009 and I presented the results to various think tanks, to the House of Representatives, and to the Senate. And I met with George Mitchell, he had a copy of the results, the State Department had all the results. They knew that the deal could be done. There's no doubt about it.

Gemma Ware: And what did it say if you could summarize very briefly?

Colin Irwin: Well, Israel and Palestine conflict is the most academically researched conflict in the world, probably after Northern Ireland. So, everybody knows what the deal is.

Gemma Ware: What do you mean by everybody knows what the deal is?

Colin Irwin: The deal is the two-state solution. They know what the compromise is. Everybody knows what the compromise is. There's nothing else that's probably going to work.

Gemma Ware: The two-state solution in which a Palestinian state is created alongside an Israeli state, is still the outcome to the conflict, favored by the international community. The idea was a core part of the Oslo Peace Accords in the 1990s, but despite many attempts to broker negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians since then, very little has been done to make the two-state solution a reality. Colin still believes it's the only way to make a deal.

Colin Irwin: Everybody knows what the deal is.

Gemma Ware: Okay, I find that quite fascinating because I think a lot of people would not agree with that statement.

Colin Irwin: Oh! Hahaha.

Gemma Ware: 'Everybody knows what the deal is'. Maybe the people in the negotiating room do, but I think people outside, the rest of the world...

Colin Irwin: Yeah, in public, I mean, just over the past several months, the public discourse has got even more polarized but that doesn't change the deal. That's the thing.

Gemma Ware: Today, Arab states are discussing a plan for a longer-term settlement of the conflict, that would put in place irreversible steps for the creation of an internationally recognized Palestinian state. But on February 18, the Israeli cabinet passed a motion that rejected any unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state.

Newsclip

Gemma Ware: The cabinet declared that a settlement, if it is to be reached, will come about solely through direct negotiations between the parties without preconditions.

The Gaza war is currently still raging, but once it ends, many will push towards a new form of peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. If you were given the opportunity, how would you go about running a peace poll? And do you think it could be part of a solution?

Colin Irwin: Okay, well the first and most important thing is to learn the lessons of Northern Ireland. And I cannot take credit for this, and that is to get all the parties in the negotiations. Hamas has got to be in there, and if there is a women's coalition in Israel and Palestine, they should be in there as well. You've got to have everybody inside the tent. There are great polling companies in both Israel and Palestine who get very, very good results, very, very good samples. No one's going to dispute that. So, the peace poll can be done. The problem is, it's a question of, 'Well, you can take the horses to water, but can you make them drink?' Whether or not ... I can't see Netanyahu making a deal. He never wanted to make a deal. So, probably there would have to be a change of Israeli government before we could make a deal, unless someone's going to impose it. But the world doesn't work like that, so we are where we are.

Gemma Ware: From all of your experience with the Inuit, in Northern Ireland, in Israel, Palestine and more widely around the world, because you've worked in Syria, I know you've worked in Sri Lanka and the Balkans; what conditions need to be in place for peace polling and consensus building during conflict to actually succeed? And do you then think it's possible for it to work in any context?

Colin Irwin: The peace polling can work in any context and we can always find out what people can accept. My personal view there is that it always should be done in every conflict all the time so the world should know what the deal is and what can be accepted. I think that should be a norm at a global level. When it comes to actually doing the deal, that's up to the politicians and the international community. As one of my polling friends in Israel once put it to me, she said "Colin, you're gonna do your peace poll but whose army are gonna impose it?"

Haha. So, I don't have an army, I have no power. That's up to the politicians in the international community.

Gemma Ware: Well, thank you so much for your time, Colin. It's been really fascinating talking with you and we appreciate you sharing your insights.

Colin Irwin: My pleasure. Thank you so much for having me on.

Gemma Ware: That's it for this week's episode. Thanks to Colin Irwin for speaking with us and to my colleague Jonathan Este at The Conversation in the UK. If you'd like to keep informed of The Conversation's coverage of the war in Gaza, you can sign up to Gaza Update, a fortnightly email from Jonathan. We'll put a link for how to subscribe to that in our show notes, alongside a link to an article that Colin wrote about his experiences.

This episode was written and produced by me, Gemma Ware, and Mend Mariwany, with production assistance from Katie Flood. Sound design was by Eloise Stevens, and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Stephen Khan is our global executive editor, Alice Mason runs our social media, and Soraya Nandy does our transcript.

You can connect with us on Instagram @theconversationdotcom, on X for being known as Twitter, @TC_Audio, or you can email us directly at podcast@conversation.com. You can sign up for The Conversation's free daily newsletter by clicking on the link in our show notes. And if you like what we do, please do support the podcast and The Conversation more broadly by going to donate.theconversation.com. Please do also rate and review the show wherever you listen, it really helps us reach new audiences. Thank you very much for listening and we'll be back next week.