

Pseudo-ZOPA in Israeli–Palestinian Conflict Negotiations: A Positive Peace Critique of Technical Compromise

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ABSTRAK

Proses negosiasi Israel–Palestina masih menemui kebuntuan dalam menyentuh akar permasalahan konflik. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana ruang kompromi yang tampak tersedia dalam negosiasi Israel–Palestina dapat dievaluasi melalui konsep Zone of Possible Agreement (ZOPA) dan perdamaian positif. Masalah utama yang dikaji adalah kapan ruang kompromi yang secara historis muncul dalam proses perdamaian berubah menjadi Pseudo-ZOPA, yaitu ruang kompromi yang tampak produktif tetapi tidak menghasilkan transformasi struktural. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi pustaka, analisis konseptual-kritis, serta analisis konten kualitatif terarah. Alih-alih memperlakukan kebebasan bergerak, akses ke tempat-tempat suci, dan pembebasan tahanan sebagai kompromi teknis sejak awal, penelitian ini menempatkannya sebagai area kompromi yang sering diajukan, lalu mengujinya melalui tiga indikator perdamaian positif: pengurangan ketidakadilan struktural, perluasan pengakuan politik, dan transformasi konflik. Analisis terhadap Oslo II, Camp David 2000, Annapolis 2007–2008, serta pemetaan ZOPA terkini menunjukkan perbedaan antara ZOPA substantif yang menyentuh isu status akhir tetapi gagal dikonsolidasikan dan ZOPA teknis yang dapat mengurangi ketegangan, namun tidak otomatis mengubah akar konflik. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa Pseudo-ZOPA berguna untuk menjelaskan kompromi yang tampak produktif secara prosedural, tetapi tetap tidak transformatif terhadap perdamaian positif.

Kata kunci: Israel–Palestina; Negosiasi konflik; Perdamaian positif; Pseudo-ZOPA; ZOPA.

ABSTRACT

Israeli–Palestinian negotiations remain constrained by their limited capacity to address the roots of the conflict. This study examines how an apparently available space for compromise in Israeli–Palestinian negotiations can be evaluated through the concepts of the Zone of Possible Agreement (ZOPA) and positive peace. The central problem is to identify when a historically recurring space for compromise turns into a Pseudo-ZOPA, namely a bargaining space that appears productive but does not generate structural transformation. The study employs a qualitative approach based on library research, critical-conceptual analysis, and directed qualitative content analysis. Rather than presupposing that freedom of movement, access to holy sites, and prisoner releases are technical compromises, the study treats them as recurrent areas of proposed compromise and then tests them through three positive-peace indicators: reduction of structural injustice, expansion of political recognition, and contribution to conflict transformation. The analysis of Oslo II, Camp David 2000, the Annapolis 2007–2008 process, and recent ZOPA mapping demonstrates a distinction between substantive ZOPA that engages final-status issues but fails to be consolidated, and technical ZOPA that may reduce tensions without necessarily transforming the roots of conflict. The study concludes that Pseudo-ZOPA is useful for explaining compromises that appear procedurally productive but remain non-transformative for positive peace.

Keywords: Conflict negotiation; Israeli–Palestinian conflict; Positive peace; Pseudo-ZOPA; ZOPA.



INTRODUCTION

The Israel–Palestine conflict is one of the most complex international conflicts because it cannot be reduced to a territorial dispute alone. Territorial issues constitute its most visible dimension, yet beneath them lie interconnected layers of national identity, security claims, political recognition, refugee status, Jerusalem, civil rights, memories of violence, and historical trauma transmitted across generations. From a realist perspective, such a conflict can be understood as a struggle for security and survival within an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979). However, this approach does not adequately capture the social and humanitarian dimensions embedded in the everyday experiences of both Palestinian and Israeli communities. The Israel–Palestine conflict is therefore better understood as a multilayered conflict that encompasses material, symbolic, legal, and psychological dimensions.

The various Israel–Palestine negotiation processes have fundamentally rested on the expectation that the parties retain a negotiable space for compromise. Within the logic of negotiation, a peace process can advance only when interests overlap in ways acceptable to the conflicting parties. Nevertheless, the experience of Israel–Palestine negotiations shows that diplomatic forums, proposed agreements, and partial compromises do not automatically produce substantive peace. Arévalo (2023) cautions that the design of a peace process must be capable of managing complexity rather than merely bringing political elites together at the negotiating table. Bell and Wolf (2023) similarly demonstrate that negotiation systems in the Middle East and North Africa operate within multilayered political environments, where formal agreements frequently confront complex dynamics of power, legitimacy, and implementation capacity.

The concept of the Zone of Possible Agreement, or ZOPA, is commonly used to describe the bargaining space that emerges when one party's minimum threshold and the other party's maximum threshold overlap. In international negotiations, ZOPA is useful because it lets actors assess whether a particular option is preferable to the status quo or to failed negotiations. Loizides et al. (2022), for example, demonstrate that zones of agreement can be identified not only at the elite level but also through citizens' preferences in divided societies. Nevertheless, the existence of a ZOPA should not be treated as an automatic indication that peace is within reach. Yao et al. (2020) emphasise that when a ZOPA is absent or extremely narrow, actors require integrative complexity and negotiating creativity. Conversely, when a ZOPA appears to be available, the substantive quality of the resulting agreement must still be critically examined.

In the Israeli–Palestinian case, several issue areas have historically recurred as possible spaces of negotiation, including freedom of movement, access to holy sites, prisoner releases, territorial arrangements, Jerusalem, refugees, sovereignty, and security. This study does not assume these areas have the same analytical status. Instead, it treats them as issue domains to test through the ZOPA framework and then evaluate against positive-peace standards. Recent findings by Cavatorta et al. (2024) are particularly relevant because their representative 2022 Israeli and Palestinian samples identify 55 prospective peace-agreement configurations, out of 256 possibilities, that both groups rated more favourably than the status quo. Their study shows that some forms of common ground can still be mapped, but it does not, by itself, establish whether that common ground is substantively transformative.

Freedom of movement, access to holy sites, and prisoner releases are important because they directly concern human security, family reunification, worship, symbolic dignity, and the alleviation of everyday suffering. The OCHA (2026) report on movement and access in the West Bank, for example, documents the continuing centrality of mobility restrictions to Palestinian daily life. Studies by Rijke and Minca (2018) and Hammami (2019) further show that checkpoints function not merely as security mechanisms but also as spaces that shape vulnerability, bodily discipline, and inequality. Yet the immediate negotiability of these issues does not determine their analytical classification. Whether they become technical ZOPA, substantive ZOPA, or Pseudo-ZOPA depends on whether they address the conflict’s structural roots or merely manage its symptoms.

The critique of limited compromise must therefore be situated within the perspective of positive peace. Galtung (1969) distinguishes negative peace, understood as the absence of direct violence, from positive peace, which involves transforming structures to promote justice and reduce structural violence. From this perspective, the success of negotiations should not be assessed merely by whether an agreement has been reached, but by the agreement’s capacity to transform the conditions that perpetuate recurring conflict. Lederach (1997) maintains that sustainable peacebuilding requires reconciliation, rebuilding social relationships, and long-term transformation within divided societies. Nilsson and Svensson (2023) further argue that inclusion and nonviolent action can open the way for broader negotiation processes. A ZOPA that operates only at the level of procedural accommodation is therefore insufficient to constitute a pathway towards positive peace.

This study addresses an academic gap: limited scholarship explicitly connects ZOPA with the critique offered by positive peace in studies of Israel–Palestine negotiations. Negotiation scholarship generally treats ZOPA as an opportunity for compromise, whereas

positive peace scholarship emphasizes conflict transformation and structural justice. Ari (2023) highlights the importance of examining peace negotiations through empirical data and variations in negotiation processes, while Majer et al. (2021) demonstrate that conflicts are often interdependent across actors and over time, making partial solutions insufficient. Setiawan (2024) and Setiawati (2024) examine escalation dynamics and diplomatic responses to the Israel–Palestine conflict. Scholarship on grassroots diplomacy and public opinion has also continued to develop, but it has not yet critically assessed the quality of ZOPA as a potentially illusory space for compromise (Hakim et al., 2025; Mutmainah & Mahdi, 2025; Usman, 2025).

Building on this gap, the study investigates how a ZOPA in Israeli–Palestinian negotiations can become a Pseudo-ZOPA when an available area of convergence fails the positive-peace test. The study aims to analyse the limitations of ZOPA as a framework for understanding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict by employing positive peace as an evaluative standard. The article’s central argument is that a space of agreement must be examined through a sequence of questions: whether a ZOPA is available, whether the issue addresses the roots of conflict, and whether it reduces structural injustice, expands recognition, and contributes to transformation. The article’s novelty lies in developing Pseudo-ZOPA as a negotiation-specific analytical concept that distinguishes procedural convergence from substantive-transformative compromise.

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

This study’s analytical framework is built on two principal concepts: the Zone of Possible Agreement (ZOPA) and positive peace. ZOPA identifies whether a space for compromise exists within the Israel–Palestine negotiation process, while positive peace assesses whether that space has the substantive capacity to transform the conflict. From this position, the study does not reject ZOPA as an analytical tool for examining negotiations. The issue lies not in the existence of a ZOPA, but in its limited analytical capacity when applied to a protracted, asymmetrical, and structurally rooted conflict. Within an anarchic international system, actors tend to prioritise their security and survival (Waltz, 1979). Nevertheless, a peace process also requires a design capable of managing sociopolitical complexity rather than merely calculating opportunities for technical compromise (Arévalo, 2023; Richmond, 2020).

In negotiation theory, ZOPA refers to the range of possible agreements that emerges when the parties’ interests continue to overlap. In conflict settings, a ZOPA exists when actors cannot obtain their maximum demands but can still identify options more acceptable than

continuing the conflict or maintaining the status quo. Loizides et al. (2022) show that actors' preferences in divided societies can identify zones of agreement, meaning a ZOPA does not necessarily belong exclusively to negotiating elites. Nevertheless, its existence depends on actors' perceptions of the costs of conflict, the legitimacy of compromise, and the political benefits of reaching an agreement. Yao et al. (2020) emphasise that creativity and integrative complexity become particularly important when a ZOPA is narrow or unavailable. ZOPA should therefore be understood as an opportunity for negotiation rather than a guarantee of peace.

This study distinguishes between technical ZOPA and substantive ZOPA to ensure that the analysis does not end with the simple question of whether a space for agreement exists. Technical ZOPA refers to compromises concerning operational, humanitarian, or procedural issues, such as territorial access, prisoner releases, humanitarian assistance, and limited security arrangements. By contrast, substantive ZOPA addresses the roots of the conflict, including sovereignty, political recognition, territory, justice, the status of Jerusalem, refugees, and long-term security. This distinction is particularly important in the Israel–Palestine conflict because its history encompasses not only negotiations but also competing narratives and struggles for political legitimacy (Caplan, 2020; Khalidi, 2024). The study by Cavatorta et al. (2024) indicates the possible existence of zones of agreement, whereas Bouris and Fernández-Molina (2018) caution that political recognition remains a fundamental issue.

Positive peace is employed as an evaluative standard for determining whether a compromise genuinely transforms the structures underlying the conflict. Galtung (1969) explains that peace cannot be understood merely as the absence of direct violence, because structural violence may continue through domination, unequal access, and institutional injustice. Lederach (1997) similarly conceptualises peacebuilding as an ongoing process of reconciliation that requires transforming social relations, not merely ending hostilities. Richmond (2020) further argues that peace in international relations must be understood through the relationship among institutions, justice, and communities' everyday practices. In this context, inclusion is essential because an exclusive peace process risks disregarding the voices of affected groups (Nilsson & Svensson, 2023). Technical agreements therefore do not automatically meet positive peace standards.

In this study, Pseudo-ZOPA is defined as a space for compromise that appears to be available within a negotiation process but remains illusory because it addresses only technical and procedural issues while failing to resolve the structural roots of the conflict. The author uses the term as an analytical concept rather than an established term in negotiation theory.

Pseudo-ZOPA does not indicate the complete absence of compromise; instead, it refers to a compromise with limited transformative capacity. Pseudo-ZOPA differs from negative peace because it focuses not merely on the absence of direct violence, but on the failure of a space for compromise to progress from conflict management to conflict transformation. It also differs from a conventional interim agreement because the concept assesses whether a temporary agreement opens a pathway towards substantive issues or instead normalises the continued postponement of core issues.

Pseudo-ZOPA is also distinct from the established distinction between conflict management and conflict resolution or transformation. Conflict management generally refers to efforts to contain, regulate, or reduce the destructive effects of conflict without necessarily resolving its underlying causes, whereas conflict resolution and transformation seek bigger change in relationships, structures, and unmet needs (Burton, 1990; Ramsbotham et al., 2011). Pseudo-ZOPA does not replace these concepts. Its added value lies in diagnosing the negotiation space itself: it asks whether a seemingly available ZOPA is being misread as evidence of substantive peace. In other words, conflict management describes a type of peace practice. At the same time, Pseudo-ZOPA identifies a bargaining illusion that can arise when technical convergence is presented as structural transformation.

The analytical framework is operationalised through four stages. First, the study identifies a negotiation issue or peace-agreement component and asks whether a ZOPA appears to be available. Second, it determines whether the issue addresses the conflict's root causes or primarily concerns operational, humanitarian, or procedural matters. Third, it evaluates the issue through three positive-peace indicators: whether the compromise reduces structural injustice, expands political recognition, and contributes to conflict transformation. Fourth, it classifies the issue as substantive ZOPA, technical ZOPA, or Pseudo-ZOPA risk. This approach aligns with Majer et al. (2021), who argue that conflicts are often interdependent across actors and over time. When a compromise merely reduces tensions without opening the way for structural change, it may become a Pseudo-ZOPA.

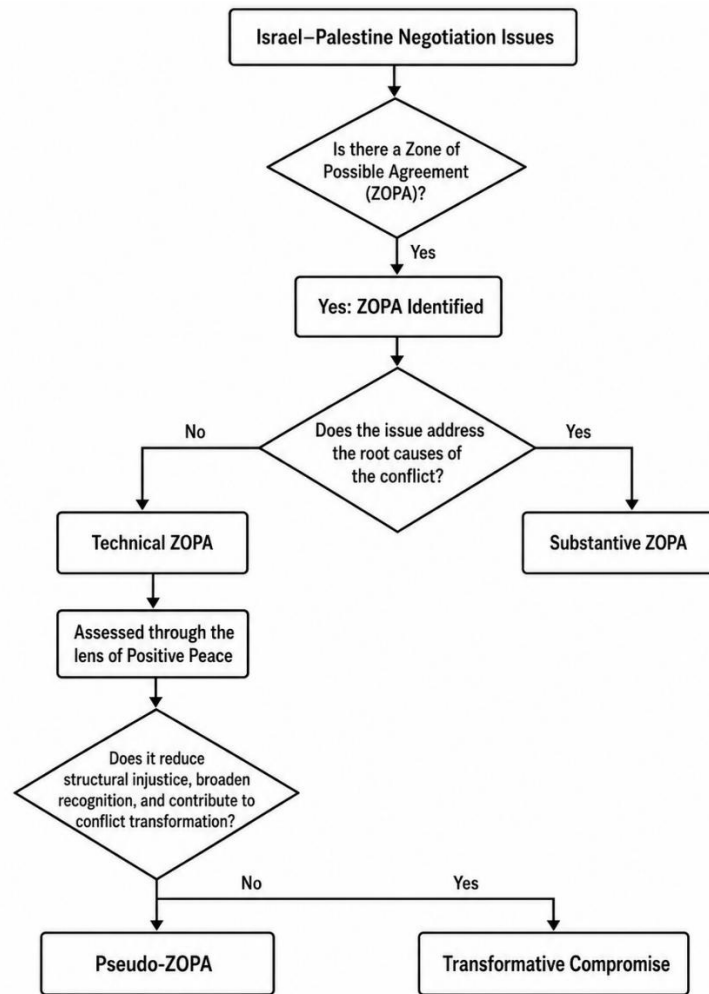
Table 1 – Operationalisation of Concepts in the Analysis of Pseudo-ZOPA

Category	Operational definition	Analytical indicators	Analytical status
Technical ZOPA	A space for compromise concerning operational, procedural, or humanitarian issues.	Reduces tensions, facilitates access, or builds initial trust, but does not yet address the roots of the conflict.	May become a Pseudo-ZOPA when treated as substantive progress.
Substantive ZOPA	A space for compromise directly related to the	Addresses sovereignty, territory, refugees,	Can become a transformative

	structural sources of the conflict.	Jerusalem, long-term security, and political recognition.	compromise when it meets the standards of positive peace.
Pseudo-ZOPA	A space for compromise that appears to be available but merely manages the symptoms of the conflict.	Does not reduce structural injustice, expand recognition, or transform power relations.	Explains compromises that appear productive but ultimately preserve the conflict status quo.
Substantive ZOPA attempted but not consolidated	A negotiation space that engages root-cause issues but fails to produce an agreed and implemented settlement.	Raises final-status questions but remains deadlocked, rejected, or unimplemented.	Shows that the framework does not automatically label every negotiation issue as Pseudo-ZOPA.

Source: Author's conceptualisation based on Galtung (1969), Lederach (1997), Loizides et al. (2022), Yao et al. (2020), Burton (1990), and Ramsbotham et al. (2011).

Figure 1 – Analytical Process for Identifying and Evaluating ZOPA in the Israel–Palestine Conflict



Source: Author's elaboration based on the analytical framework developed in this study.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative approach using a library research design and critical-conceptual analysis. This approach was selected because the study did not seek to measure public opinion or test statistical relationships, but rather to assess the quality of the space for compromise in Israel–Palestine negotiations through the concepts of ZOPA and positive peace. The material object of inquiry was the dynamics of compromise in the Israel–Palestine conflict, while its formal object concerned the limitations of technical ZOPA and its transformation into Pseudo-ZOPA when assessed from the perspective of positive peace. Library research enabled the researcher to examine, compare, and synthesise established academic debates on conflict negotiation, ZOPA, and positive peace. Snyder (2019) explains that a literature review can serve as a research method when researchers seek to map existing knowledge, evaluate arguments, and construct a conceptual framework.

The study drew upon academic literature and supporting documents relevant to its research focus. The research corpus included academic books on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, peace, and international relations theory; journal articles on negotiation, ZOPA, conflict, recognition, peacebuilding, checkpoints, diplomacy, public opinion, and grassroots movements; and institutional or official documents that anchor the analysis in concrete negotiation issues. These documents include the 1995 Israeli–Palestinian Interim Agreement, the 2000 Camp David trilateral statement and official background material, the 2007 Annapolis Joint Understanding, OCHA material on movement and access, UNRWA humanitarian reports used for contextual background, and recent empirical ZOPA mapping by Cavatorta et al. (2024). These boundaries ensured the analysis remained coherent with the sources actually consulted.

We collected data through a purposive literature search. We selected sources based on four principal keywords: ZOPA, Israeli–Palestinian conflict, conflict negotiation, and positive peace. The inclusion criteria encompassed academic works addressing negotiation theory, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, peacebuilding, structural violence, conflict management, conflict transformation, or peace process design. The exclusion criteria covered popular writings without scholarly references, personal blogs, Wikipedia, opinion pieces without clearly identified authors, and sources that did not specify a publication year. This selection process ensured the data were relevant and grounded in credible academic scholarship. In qualitative research, the data selection process must demonstrate a direct relationship between the sources, the research question, and the analytical categories developed by the researcher (Kibiswa, 2019; Lungu, 2022).

The data were analysed using directed qualitative content analysis. The analytical process involved data reduction, conceptual coding, issue classification, and theoretical interpretation. Data reduction involved selecting sections of the literature and documents that addressed opportunities for compromise, the limitations of compromise, and the roots of the conflict. The coding process employed five principal categories: technical ZOPA, substantive ZOPA, Pseudo-ZOPA, conflict management, and positive peace. The authors then assessed each issue using three indicators: whether the compromise reduced structural injustice, expanded political recognition, and promoted conflict transformation. Alyaqoub et al. (2024) explain that directed qualitative content analysis is particularly useful when researchers have preliminary concepts that guide data interpretation. The authors established the analysis's validity through conceptual consistency, theoretical coherence, and support from the relevant literature.

To avoid circular reasoning, the study did not only examine issues likely to fall into the technical category. It also included final-status negotiation attempts, particularly Camp David 2000 and the Annapolis 2007–2008 process, because these cases addressed substantive issues such as territory, Jerusalem, refugees, sovereignty, and security. These cases function as analytical contrasts against mobility, holy-site access, and prisoner releases. This contrast enables the framework to distinguish between substantive ZOPA that may fail to be consolidated and technical ZOPA that may be negotiable but insufficiently transformative. The study's principal limitation remains its lack of interviews and confidential negotiation transcripts. Its findings should therefore be understood as a conceptual contribution to negotiation and peace studies rather than as an official evaluation of the entire Israeli–Palestinian diplomatic process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Context of the Israel–Palestine Conflict and the Analytical Sequence

At its core, the Israel–Palestine conflict is not merely a diplomatic dispute that can be resolved through conventional negotiation formulas. Rather, it is a structural conflict in which territory, identity, security, recognition, and political rights are intertwined in a complex and enduring nexus. Caplan (2020) demonstrates that the history of the conflict has continuously been contested through competing narratives, while Khalidi (2024) interprets it as a protracted process of conquest, dispossession, and resistance. From the perspective of peace theory, such a conflict cannot be understood solely in terms of the absence of a ceasefire, since violence also operates through institutions, restrictions, and recurring inequalities (Galtung, 1969). Technical agreements may therefore alleviate immediate pressures, but they do not automatically transform the structures that reproduce the conflict.

The results and discussion follow the analytical sequence presented in Figure 1. The analysis begins by determining whether a ZOPA appears to exist in a specific negotiation issue. It then asks whether the issue addresses the conflict's root causes. Finally, it evaluates the issue through the positive-peace indicators of structural justice, political recognition, and conflict transformation. This structure ensures that the study does not pre-label mobility, holy-site access, and prisoner releases as technical compromises. Instead, the classification emerges from applying the analytical framework to a range of negotiation issues, including substantive final-status attempts and more limited operational or humanitarian arrangements.

Table 2 – Empirical Cases and Issue Domains Used to Apply the Analytical Framework

Case/issue domain	Negotiation or documentary anchor	What was negotiated or assessed	Role in the analysis
Camp David 2000	Camp David summit, July 2000; U.S. Department of State material; Caplan (2020)	Permanent-status issues, including Jerusalem, refugees, borders, settlements, security, and relations with neighbouring states.	Contrast case: an attempt at substantive ZOPA that directly engaged root-cause issues but failed to produce an agreement.
Annapolis 2007–2008	Annapolis Joint Understanding, 27 November 2007; U.S. Department of State material	Good-faith bilateral negotiations toward a peace treaty resolving all outstanding core issues without exception.	Contrast case: a substantive agenda that sought final-status progress but was not consolidated into a final agreement.
Mobility	OCHA (2026); Rijke and Minca (2018); Hammami (2019); Cavatorta et al. (2024)	Movement permits, checkpoints, access to work, education, healthcare, family members, and daily life.	Test case for technical ZOPA because it can reduce suffering while leaving territorial control and sovereignty unresolved.
Holy-site access	1995 Interim Agreement; Hebron access arrangements; Caplan (2020); Cavatorta et al. (2024)	Access, protection, freedom of worship, visiting arrangements, and site security.	Test case for technical-symbolic ZOPA because it may reduce immediate religious tension without resolving Jerusalem's political status.
Prisoner releases	1995 Interim Agreement; Cavatorta et al. (2024)	Release of detainees and prisoners, prisoner exchange, or amnesty as confidence-building measures.	Test case for technical-humanitarian ZOPA because it has humanitarian value but does not transform the structures behind recurring detention.

Source: Author's qualitative synthesis based on U.S. Department of State (2000, 2007a, 2007b), The White House (2007), Government of the State of Israel and Palestine Liberation Organization (1995), UNISPAL (1997), OCHA (2026), and Cavatorta et al. (2024).

Applying the Framework to Substantive ZOPA Attempts

The first step in avoiding circular reasoning is to test the framework against cases that are not merely technical. Camp David 2000 and the Annapolis 2007–2008 process are therefore important contrast cases. The Camp David summit took place from 11 to 24 July 2000 under the auspices of President Bill Clinton, with Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Chairman Yasser Arafat seeking an agreement on permanent status (U.S. Department of State, 2000). U.S. Department of State background material identifies the permanent-status agenda as including Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees, Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, final security arrangements, borders, and relations with neighbouring states (U.S. Department of State, 2007). These issues directly concern the roots of the conflict and therefore cannot be reduced to technical compromise.

Following Figure 1, the Camp David case can be assessed in sequence. Was a ZOPA being sought? Yes, because the summit sought an agreement preferable to continued conflict and diplomatic failure. Did the agenda address root causes? Yes, because it engaged territory, Jerusalem, refugees, security, and political status. Did it satisfy the positive-peace test? It had the potential to, but the summit did not produce a consolidated agreement. The classification is therefore not Pseudo-ZOPA, but substantive ZOPA attempted and not settled. This distinction matters because Pseudo-ZOPA is not a label for every failed negotiation. It refers to a different problem: technical convergence presented as structural transformation.

The Annapolis process offers a similar contrast. The Joint Understanding of 27 November 2007 committed the parties to launch good-faith bilateral negotiations to conclude a peace treaty resolving all outstanding issues, including all core issues without exception (The White House, 2007; U.S. Department of State, 2007). This agenda points to a substantive ZOPA because it explicitly aimed at a permanent two-state settlement rather than temporary access or humanitarian relief. Nevertheless, the process did not produce a final agreement by the end of 2008. Through the positive-peace framework, Annapolis therefore demonstrates a substantive agenda that failed to consolidate, not a technical arrangement that disguised itself as peace. This contrast confirms the discriminatory capacity of the Pseudo-ZOPA concept.

Testing Mobility through the ZOPA and Positive-Peace Sequence

Freedom of movement represents a possible ZOPA because the issue can be framed as a practical compromise between Palestinian demands for access and Israeli claims concerning security. For Palestinians, mobility concerns access to employment, education, healthcare services, family members, and everyday social life. OCHA (2026) reinforces the empirical significance of this issue by documenting 925 movement obstacles that permanently or intermittently restrict the movement of approximately 3.4 million Palestinians across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Cavatorta et al. (2024) also identify freedom of movement as a component that can enter mutually acceptable Israeli–Palestinian peace-agreement configurations.

Applying Figure 1, the first question is whether a ZOPA appears available. The answer is yes, because movement arrangements can be adjusted, expanded, restricted, or coordinated without requiring immediate agreement on all final-status issues. The second question is whether the issue addresses the conflict's roots. At this point, the classification changes. Rijke and Minca (2018) demonstrate that checkpoints shape a geography of vulnerability in Palestinian life, while Hammami (2019) illustrates how Palestinian bodies and agency are

constituted through everyday experiences at military checkpoints. A compromise on mobility may improve access, but it remains technical when it does not alter the structures of territorial control, spatial fragmentation, and unequal movement. Through the positive-peace test, mobility becomes a Pseudo-ZOPA risk when a limited access arrangement is interpreted as substantive peace.

Testing Holy-Site Access through the ZOPA and Positive-Peace Sequence

Access to holy sites similarly shows how the framework classifies an issue only after applying the analytical test. A ZOPA may exist because access, visiting procedures, site protection, and security coordination can be negotiated as practical arrangements. The 1995 Interim Agreement included provisions on religious sites, while the 1997 Hebron Protocol applied access arrangements to holy sites in the Hebron area (UNISPAL, 1995, 1997). Cavatorta et al. (2024) also identify unrestricted access to holy sites and freedom of worship as components that may enter mutually acceptable peace-agreement configurations.

The positive-peace test reveals the limitation of this ZOPA. Access arrangements can reduce immediate symbolic and religious tension. Still, they do not by themselves resolve the political status of Jerusalem or the competing claims to sovereignty that make the issue structurally charged. Caplan (2020) emphasises that the history of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is shaped by contested narratives and claims. Therefore, the classification is technical-symbolic ZOPA rather than substantive ZOPA. It becomes a Pseudo-ZOPA risk if procedural access is treated as evidence that the Jerusalem question or the politics of recognition has been resolved.

Testing Prisoner Releases through the ZOPA and Positive-Peace Sequence

Prisoner releases constitute another issue in which a ZOPA can plausibly appear. The 1995 Interim Agreement placed the release of Palestinian prisoners and detainees among its confidence-building measures, and Cavatorta et al. (2024) include mutual amnesty and the release of an agreed number of prisoners as components of prospective peace agreements. These measures possess clear humanitarian and political value because they affect detainees, families, and the broader atmosphere surrounding negotiations.

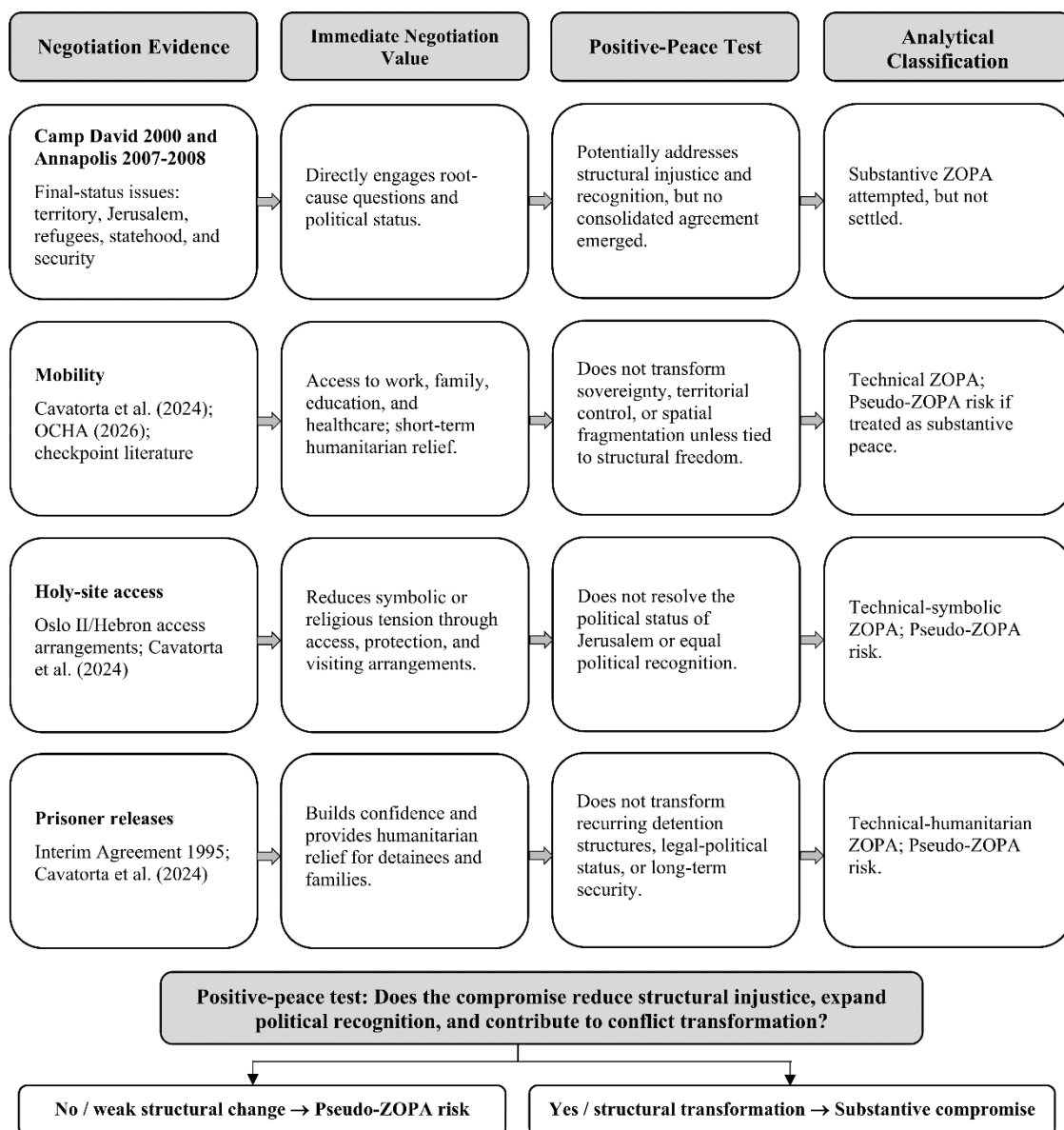
The flowchart test again produces a conditional classification. A ZOPA is available because releases, exchanges, or amnesties can be negotiated in limited numbers and phases. However, the root-cause question produces a different assessment. Prisoner releases do not necessarily transform the legal, political, and security structures associated with recurring

detention. They can build trust, but they may remain a technical-humanitarian ZOPA if they are disconnected from wider institutional change. From a positive-peace perspective, they become a Pseudo-ZOPA risk when the humanitarian value of releases is used to imply that deeper questions of justice, political status, and long-term security have been settled.

Table 3 - Classification of Compromise Issues in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

Issue	Form of compromise	Nature of ZOPA	Positive-peace assessment	Analytical status	Supporting sources
Camp David 2000 / Annapolis 2007–2008	Negotiation of permanent-status issues, including territory, Jerusalem, refugees, sovereignty, and security.	Substantive ZOPA attempted but not consolidated	Addresses root-cause issues and therefore differs from technical compromise, but it did not produce an agreed and implemented settlement.	Not Pseudo-ZOPA in itself; rather, it functions as a contrast case showing the difference between substantive deadlock and technical convergence.	Caplan (2020); U.S. Department of State (2000, 2007a, 2007b); The White House (2007)
Mobility	Arrangements concerning movement permits, checkpoints, and access to employment, healthcare, education, and family members.	Technical ZOPA	Alleviates everyday suffering but does not transform structures of control, territorial fragmentation, or unequal movement.	May become a Pseudo-ZOPA if treated as substantive peace without linkage to sovereignty and structural freedom.	Cavatorta et al. (2024); Hammami (2019); OCHA (2026); Rijke and Minca (2018)
Holy-sites	Arrangements concerning access, visiting schedules, site protection, and restrictions intended to prevent confrontation.	Technical-symbolic ZOPA	Reduces symbolic and religious tension but does not resolve Jerusalem's political status or the issue of equal recognition.	May become a Pseudo-ZOPA if it merely regulates access without addressing sovereignty and political recognition.	Caplan (2020); Cavatorta et al. (2024); UNISPAL (1995, 1997)
Prisoners	Limited releases, exchanges, amnesty, or confidence-building measures.	Technical-humanitarian ZOPA	Has humanitarian value but does not transform the legal and political structures that reproduce recurring detention.	May become a Pseudo-ZOPA if it remains a temporary concession disconnected from wider institutional transformation.	Cavatorta et al. (2024); UNISPAL (1995)

Source: Author's qualitative synthesis.

Figure 2 - Evidence-to-Interpretation Map of ZOPA Classifications

Source: Author's qualitative synthesis of the evidence and analytical framework.

Figure 2 visualises the evidence-to-interpretation pathway used in this study. The figure shows that substantive final-status negotiations are analytically different from technical or humanitarian arrangements. Camp David and Annapolis engaged the roots of the conflict but failed to consolidate a settlement. By contrast, mobility, holy-site access, and prisoner releases show negotiable areas that may reduce tensions but become Pseudo-ZOPA risks when their limited gains are treated as evidence of substantive peace.

From Technical ZOPA to Pseudo-ZOPA

Against this background, a technical ZOPA becomes a Pseudo-ZOPA when a limited area of convergence is interpreted as substantive progress, even as the structural sources of conflict remain largely unchanged. The mechanism operates through agenda narrowing: issues with comparatively greater scope for agreement are prioritised, while core questions are deferred. Such an approach may be pragmatically useful for de-escalation. Still, from a positive-peace perspective, it becomes non-transformative when technical success substitutes for meaningful progress on sovereignty, territory, refugees, Jerusalem, long-term security, and political recognition. Arévalo (2023) cautions that peace-process design must be capable of managing complexity rather than merely producing procedurally ordered negotiations.

Pseudo-ZOPA does not imply that technical agreements are unimportant. Such agreements retain humanitarian value because they can alleviate suffering, facilitate access to essential services, and reduce the risk of direct violence. The problem arises when technical agreements are treated as though they sufficiently represent the peace process as a whole. From the perspective of positive peace, stability that does not reduce structural injustice merely produces fragile tranquillity rather than peace. Galtung (1969) conceptualises structural violence as a condition in which people are prevented from realising their potential because of unequal sociopolitical arrangements. Richmond (2020) similarly rejects an excessively institutional and procedural understanding of peace when it is disconnected from justice in everyday life. Technical compromises should therefore be understood as preliminary steps rather than as the ultimate measure of substantive peace.

Power asymmetry further increases the relevance of Pseudo-ZOPA in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In an unequal conflict, the stronger party has greater capacity to set the agenda, define the limits of concessions, and determine the criteria for assessing success. Consequently, an apparently agreed ZOPA does not necessarily emerge from balanced bargaining positions. It may arise from pressure, restricted options, urgent humanitarian needs, or calculations of political survival. Bouris and Fernández-Molina (2018) demonstrate that diplomatic practices involving contested entities frequently operate in hybrid and unequal ways. Yao et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of creativity when a ZOPA is narrow, but negotiating creativity remains insufficient when the existing power structure determines who is entitled to bargain and who is left merely to accept the available terms.

Pseudo-ZOPA may also preserve the status quo because technical successes create the impression that the peace process remains active. When mobility marginally improves, access to particular sites opens, humanitarian assistance is permitted to enter, or some prisoners are released, international actors may interpret the situation as evidence of progress. Yet, without

change on substantive issues, such developments amount only to conflict management. Turner (2015) notes that peacebuilding practices in the Palestinian territories may become entangled in the logics of security and counterinsurgency, meaning the language of peace is not necessarily synonymous with transformation. Pseudo-ZOPA therefore helps explain how compromises that appear procedurally productive may gradually perpetuate the same conflict structures in new forms.

Assessing Israel–Palestine ZOPA through Positive Peace

Positive peace provides the principal evaluative standard for distinguishing a transformative ZOPA from a Pseudo-ZOPA. According to Galtung (1969), positive peace requires transforming structures that generate injustice, not merely ending direct violence. Lederach (1997) further argues that sustainable peace requires reconciliation, new social relationships, and long-term transformation within divided societies. Every ZOPA in the Israel–Palestine conflict must therefore be assessed through three questions: whether the compromise reduces structural violence, expands justice, and establishes more equal political relations. When the answer is negative, the space for compromise remains technical. When that technical space is used to obscure the failure to address the roots of the conflict, it becomes a non-transformative Pseudo-ZOPA.

Palestinian sovereignty constitutes the most decisive indicator for assessing the failure to establish a substantive ZOPA. As long as negotiations do not seriously address the status of Palestinian sovereignty, technical compromises cannot be regarded as positive peace. Sovereignty concerns a political community's capacity to determine its future, govern its territory, establish institutions, and obtain recognition. Khoirunnisa and Jubaidi (2025) identify the tension between self-determination, state sovereignty, and international law as a persistent issue in separatist conflicts and contemporary political conflicts. Bouris and Fernández-Molina (2018) similarly demonstrate that recognition is not merely symbolic but is constituted through everyday political practices. Humanitarian assistance, access, or mobility without changes in political status therefore continue to produce shallow compromises that can easily be controlled.

Security issues also demonstrate the limitations of technical ZOPA. For Israel, security is frequently formulated as the protection of the state, its population, and its territory from attack. Security is equally important for Palestinians, but encompasses protection from direct violence, movement restrictions, displacement, economic uncertainty, and vulnerability in everyday life. A substantive ZOPA must integrate state security and human security rather than

sacrificing one for the other. Waltz (1979) explains that states tend to pursue security within an international system lacking a central authority. Richmond (2020), however, cautions that a just peace cannot be founded solely on state security; it must also be reflected in the social experiences of affected communities. Positive peace cannot be achieved when one party monopolises security.

The issues of refugees and the right of return demonstrate why Pseudo-ZOPA is insufficient for adequately understanding the conflict. Refugees do not merely constitute an administrative issue involving residence, humanitarian assistance, or population registration. They also represent questions of identity, loss, memory, justice, and historical recognition. Khalidi (2024) demonstrates that Palestinian dispossession cannot be separated from the prolonged history of struggles over land and the formation of power structures. From the perspective of positive peace, the refugee issue forms part of inherited structural violence because it involves the loss of homes, legal status, and a political future. Technical compromises may address humanitarian needs, but they do not resolve the principal questions: whether the loss is acknowledged, whether rights are restored, and whether displaced communities are given a place within the political settlement.

Jerusalem and political recognition further demonstrate that the Israel–Palestine conflict possesses not only material but also symbolic dimensions. Access to holy sites can be negotiated through visiting schedules, entry routes, or security supervision. Still, access management alone cannot resolve Jerusalem's political status. This issue reveals the clearest limitations of technical ZOPA. Caplan (2020) emphasises that the conflict's history has been shaped by contested claims and memories, meaning symbols are never neutral. Hakim et al. (2025) demonstrate that digital public opinion also influences how the conflict and Palestinian–Israeli diplomacy are perceived. Political recognition is therefore not a supplementary consideration but a substantive requirement. Without more equal recognition, compromises on access remain temporary arrangements that govern a deeper symbolic conflict.

Theoretical and Academic Implications

This study's theoretical contribution is developing Pseudo-ZOPA as an analytical tool for distinguishing genuinely transformative compromises from those that remain merely procedural. The concept contributes to international negotiation scholarship by demonstrating that not every area of convergence can be interpreted as progress towards peace. Pseudo-ZOPA also clarifies the distinction between an interim compromise that creates a pathway towards substantive issues and a technical compromise that instead postpones the core agenda.

Cavatorta et al. (2024) matter because they show that zones of agreement can be identified empirically. This study, however, advances a further question: whether such zones transform the structures underlying the conflict. By integrating ZOPA and positive peace, the article argues that compromise without transformation risks becoming a way to postpone conflict.

For the study of International Relations, this discussion is relevant because it connects negotiation, conflict resolution, power asymmetry, public opinion, and peacebuilding within a single analytical framework. Conflict cannot be understood solely as an interaction among actors pursuing their interests. Still, it must also be examined as a structure of relations that determines who possesses power, who has meaningful choices, and who bears the costs of conflict. Nilsson and Svensson (2023) demonstrate that inclusion and nonviolent action can create opportunities for broader negotiations. Mutmainah and Mahdi (2025) and Usman (2025) illustrate the importance of grassroots diplomacy and women's roles in Israel–Palestine peace efforts. Setiawan (2024) and Hakim et al. (2025), meanwhile, emphasise that domestic, regional, and digital arenas also shape perceptions of the conflict.

The practical implication is clear: international mediators should not merely identify technical areas of convergence, but must ensure that these areas create a pathway towards substantive settlement. Negotiations that pursue temporary stability may help prevent direct violence, but they become problematic when they substitute for an agenda of structural transformation. Setiawati (2024) shows that diplomacy on Middle Eastern conflicts operates between normative consistency and strategic calculation. Mediation agendas must therefore connect technical issues with justice, human security, political recognition, and collective rights. Pérez-Yus et al. (2020) show that effective negotiation requires the capacity to manage the process reflectively, while Lederach (1997) cautions that peace can be sustainable only when it addresses damaged social relationships.

CONCLUSION

The Israel–Palestine negotiation process has produced several limited compromises, but it has not yet resolved the roots of the conflict or established sustainable peace. This study demonstrates that Israeli–Palestinian negotiations contain both substantive ZOPA attempts and technical ZOPA arrangements, but these spaces differ in their relationship to positive peace: Camp David 2000 and the Annapolis 2007–2008 process engaged final-status issues such as territory, Jerusalem, refugees, sovereignty, and security yet failed to consolidate an agreement, whereas mobility, holy-site access, and prisoner releases show areas of possible convergence that can alleviate suffering or build confidence but do not necessarily transform structural

injustice, unequal recognition, or the political roots of conflict. The key result is therefore not simply that technical compromises exist, but that their meaning changes when they are tested through the positive-peace indicators of structural justice, political recognition, and conflict transformation; when technical gains are treated as evidence of substantive peace, they become Pseudo-ZOPA. This finding contributes to International Relations and peace studies by preventing ZOPA analysis from equating procedural convergence with transformative settlement, while also offering mediators a more critical tool for linking humanitarian or confidence-building measures to substantive political agendas. Future research should test Pseudo-ZOPA in other protracted conflicts and compare whether technical agreements become pathways towards substantive settlement or mechanisms that stabilise the conflict status quo.

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