

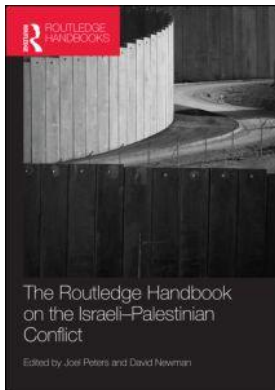
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Part II

Narratives and key moments

Competing Israeli and Palestinian narratives

Paul Scham

*Traditional Israeli narrative
(1882–1949)*

a) The legitimacy of the Zionist enterprise of returning Jews to Eretz Yisrael is based on Jewish descent from the ancient Israelites. The Jewish people inherited their right to the land religiously, legally, and historically. Jews have always looked and prayed towards Zion (Jerusalem), have never relinquished their relationship to the land, and, despite expulsions, have always maintained a presence since ancient times. Jews were treated as foreigners and persecuted wherever they were during their long Exile.

b) Zionism was an authentic response to the persecution of Jews over millennia around the world. Jews did not come as colonizers, but rather as pioneers and redeemers of the land, and did not intend to disrupt the lives of the current inhabitants of the Land of Israel. All land for Jewish settlement was legally bought and paid for, often at inflated prices.

c) The Arabs of Palestine were not a national group and never had been. They were largely undifferentiated from the inhabitants of much of Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, with no authentic tie to the Land of Israel. Many came

*Traditional Palestinian narrative
(1882–1949)*

a) Judaism is a religion of revelation, like Christianity, and has no inherent tie to a particular land. Jews are not a nation but rather a community of believers. In any case, any Israelite presence was a short period in the long history of Palestine. Ultimately, religious myths, without presence and possession, are incapable of creating an ownership right. Palestinians are, in fact, descendants of all previous inhabitants, including Israelites. Those Jews living in Palestine and the Muslim world before 1882 were well treated by Muslim neighbors and rulers.

b) Zionism was a European colonialist enterprise like many in the late nineteenth century and continues to be a European ideology superimposed on the Middle East. Moreover, it is an ideology of expansion directed towards robbing Arabs of their ancestral land. Arabs have been systematically expelled by Zionist settlers from the beginning.

c) The ancestors of today's Palestinians (Canaanites, Jebusites, and others mentioned in the Bible) were there before the Israelites, as shown by both biblical and archaeological evidence. Palestinians have lived continuously

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<i>Traditional Israeli narrative (1882–1949)</i>	<i>Traditional Palestinian narrative (1882–1949)</i>
<p>for economic opportunity only after the Zionist movement began to make the land fruitful and the economy to thrive. In all the years of Arab and Muslim control, from the seventh century, Palestine was never a separate state and Jerusalem was never a capital.</p>	<p>in the land since then. Certainly by the 1920s, and likely much earlier, there was a Palestinian identity and nationality that differed fundamentally from those of other Levantine Arab peoples.</p>
<p>d) Zionist diplomacy legitimately sought a Great Power patron since Herzl, and found one in Great Britain. True, Britain had its own imperial agenda, but this does not detract from the righteousness of the Zionist cause. The Balfour Declaration was ratified by the League of Nations, constituting a statement of international law approving a Jewish homeland in Palestine.</p>	<p>d) The British foisted Zionism on the Palestinians, beginning with the Balfour Declaration, as part of their imperial strategy, with no right whatsoever in international law, and this was illegally ratified by the League of Nations. “He who did not own gave a promise to those who did not deserve.” Zionists worked hand in glove with Britain to subjugate the Palestinian people.</p>
<p>e) The riots of 1920, 1929, and 1936 were instigated by unscrupulous Arab leaders for their own nefarious purposes, particularly the mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini. The “Palestinian” population had increased rapidly through immigration of Arabs who were attracted by Zionist economic successes, and the Arab population’s living standards rose rapidly during this period. The British frequently stood aside when Arabs murdered Jews.</p>	<p>e) All the disturbances were justified and spontaneous revolts by the Palestinian people against the British/Zionist alliance and increasing immigration. The increasing Jewish immigration, facilitated by the British, created the resentment that led to the revolts. The British backed the Zionists, who were responsible for and had provoked the disturbances, and punished Palestinians harshly and illegitimately.</p>
<p>f) The British, who had initially been supportive of the Zionist enterprise through the Balfour Declaration and the early Mandate, began to backtrack early, as reflected in the splitting off of Transjordan in 1922, the issuing of the Passfield White Paper of 1930, and many other incidents. They definitively repudiated the Balfour Declaration with the White Paper of 1939, and were unabashedly pro-Arab after that point.</p>	<p>f) The British were always pro-Zionist, except when occasionally forced to behave otherwise by Arab pressure. They conspired with the Zionists to destroy Palestinian leadership in the 1936–9 revolt, thus making it impossible for Palestinians to prepare for the coming war with the Zionists. The White Paper of 1939 had no effect as it was not enforced. The British deliberately trained Zionist soldiers during the 1936–9 revolt and World War II.</p>
<p>g) The Zionist movement accepted the UN partition resolution of 1947 in good faith. War was forced on the <i>Yishuv</i> (Jewish national community) by the Arabs. In self-defense, the Haganah (later the Israeli Army) took over more land than had been allotted in the partition resolution and was justified in holding it, as it would inevitably have become a base for attacks on Israel.</p>	<p>g) The UN partition resolution of 1947 was illegitimate, as the UN had no right to give away the homeland of the Palestinians. The Palestinians cannot be blamed for trying to hold on to what was rightfully theirs. Compromise was out of the question. The Jewish leadership never genuinely accepted the idea of partition; in any case, expulsion (transfer) was always the plan.</p>

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(Continued)

<i>Traditional Israeli narrative (1882–1949)</i>	<i>Traditional Palestinian narrative (1882–1949)</i>
<p>h) The <i>Yishuv</i> was numerically vastly inferior to the combined Arab population; it bordered on a miracle that Israel survived the war (“the few against the many”). The War of Independence was fought primarily against the Arab armies from five states. Jews realized they would be massacred if they lost, and fought with absolute determination to prevent another Holocaust. Arab atrocities proved they had no other choice.</p>	<p>h) The Jews had planned for the war, had organized politically and militarily, had strong support abroad, and were in a much more favorable position when war came. Their armed forces outnumbered all the Arab armies. Palestinians had no infrastructure or military training and were attacked and massacred repeatedly by Jewish gangs. Arab “aid” consisted primarily of attempted land-grabs by other Arab countries of Palestinian land.</p>
<p>i) The Palestinians were not expelled. They fled, in most cases, because they were ordered and cajoled by their leaders and the Arab states, in order to make room for conquering Arab armies. In many cases Jewish officials pleaded with the refugees to stay. The Israeli decision to prevent refugees from returning was justified, as otherwise Israel would be destroyed by a hostile Arab internal majority. Ultimately, the responsibility and blame rests with the Arab leadership for rejecting the partition resolution.</p>	<p>i) Beginning soon after the adoption of the partition resolution in November 1947, the Zionists began to expel Palestinians from their homes, almost certainly according to a plan (Plan Dalet). Deir Yassin was a planned massacre that succeeded in forcing Palestinians to leave. The <i>Nakba</i> (Catastrophe) was planned and carried out as ethnic cleansing, reminiscent of the Holocaust. The Zionists recognized that a Jewish state could not exist until most Arabs were expelled, and history proves this was the plan that was carried out.</p>
<p>j) The refugee issue was artificially kept alive by the Arab states, which deliberately used the refugees as pawns against Israel and forced them into refugee (concentration) camps. The real reason for the continuation of the conflict is the refusal of the Arab states to recognize Israel’s existence. Israel has repeatedly offered peace, but not at the price of its own destruction, which has been the Arab goal since 1948. The “right of return” is a measure invented in order to destroy Israel as a Jewish state, and will never be accepted.</p>	<p>j) The Palestinian people have never ceased to protest against the illegality and immorality of their expulsion, and Palestinians continue to identify themselves as belonging to their real homes in Palestine. The Arab states have repeatedly betrayed the Palestinians and only grudgingly gave them space in refugee camps. There can never be a settlement without Israel recognizing its guilt and providing appropriate redress, including the right of all Palestinians to return to their homes enshrined in Resolution 194. Palestinians in other Arab countries are still in exile.</p>

Revised and excerpted from Scham *et al.* (2005). This version © 2009 by Paul Scham.

Israeli historical narratives

It is not an overstatement to assert that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is fueled largely by different understandings of history. Of course, the conflict is ultimately about land. But the rights to the land that are asserted by Israelis and Palestinians respectively rest on how they interpret the events of the past – some ancient, some very modern. Most of the “facts” – i.e., names, dates, the bare bones of events – are not seriously in dispute. But the interpretation and very meaning

of those facts have been exacerbated by later events and, especially in the last few decades, by their association with theological perspectives.

To comprehend the nature of historical narratives, it is essential to distinguish between “history” and “narrative,” at least as used in this essay. History is *not*, as is often assumed, “what happened in the past.” If you reflect for a moment, it is clear that, on any given date, literally trillions of events occur on Earth, most of them trivial even to the individuals involved. The job of the historian is to cull from those that are known and use them selectively to illuminate and create a coherent understanding of some aspect(s) of the past. What we know about the past, therefore, is primarily what historians say it is. Of course, every historian puts their personal and ideological stamp on what they write, and one of the most important stamps is the national interpretation of the historian’s own nation. Too strongly stamped, though, and it may be referred to as propaganda. And, to be sure, there is no clear differentiation between history and propaganda in this sense; we rely on professional (and sometimes amateur) historians to help us make this distinction.

However, as a practical matter, individuals or nations do not really consult historians for most of their ideas about their collective past, and especially not for important events of the last few generations. They learn these stories from older relatives, from teachers, from what they see around them (monuments, ruins, etc.), from street names in certain cases, from newspapers, and from politicians, among others. When we generalize about this highly unscientific view held by a nation about its own past, we can refer to it as “narrative.”

“History” and “narrative” intersect at certain points, and each influences the other. But, not infrequently, some schools of history at times interpret history in a fundamentally different way than the majority of the population of that nation. The Israeli “new” or “revisionist” historians, discussed below, exemplify that process.

Of course, national narratives tend to glorify the nation’s past and emphasize its heroism. If there is a villain in the story, such as a traditional national enemy, that nation (or sometimes a person) is painted in the blackest colors. The further the narrative extends into the past, the more it is likely to shade into myth, or into religion in certain cases, partly because less is known about the distant past even by professional historians.

It is essential to understand that there is no “correct” history against which narrative can be judged. Of course, as noted above, if basic and generally known facts are misrepresented, that is out-and-out falsification. But usually that is not the important issue, as those facts can be and often are pointed out and eventually corrected. Rather, the issue is almost always the interpretation, and, in this, most professional historians of two warring nations disagree as well. However, in many cases, their disagreements are less sharp than those reflected in their respective narratives.

This essay examines the interplay between narrative and history among Israelis and Palestinians and focuses on the crucial role that narrative plays in Israelis’ understanding both of themselves and of their adversaries, and how this often tends to exacerbate the conflict. The two basic narratives for the crucial period 1882–1949 are laid out at the beginning of the chapter. For those who grew up with either narrative, one side is comfortably familiar and the other reads like propaganda. Neither one could legitimately be called history.

Origins of the narrative

The Israeli narrative begins with the Jewish narrative as told in the Bible, plus the important addition of the exile of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel/Palestine and their suffering of the last 2,000 years. However, Zionism reframes the story in national terms, explicitly acknowledging the influence of nineteenth-century European political thought and events.

Moreover, since most of the early Zionists were secular, and they understood politics in secular terms, the divine aspects were generally seen in symbolic and historical terms. Jewish return to the land from which their ancestors were expelled was denominated primarily as rectifying a historical injustice. Of course, religious Zionism, which has its own ideology, interprets the return very much in theological terms, but religious Zionism became the primary face of the Zionist movement only well after 1967.

Palestinians see the Jewish return, by contrast, as a naked land-grab dressed up in historical terms but much more akin to colonialism than to justice. They point out that, if every nation laid claim to the land in which its ancestors lived, no country would be secure in its borders – an argument that is hard to refute. Moreover, when Zionism was being formulated and for decades afterwards, there was an almost complete ideological obliviousness to the current inhabitants of the land – i.e., the (Arab) Palestinians. The reason for that is not difficult to find. The Palestinians (a term not then in use) were invisible, for the most part, to Zionists, whether in or outside of the Land of Israel. A popular slogan, indeed, was “A land without a people for a people without a land,” sometimes misquoted as “A land without people for a people without a land.”

The missing particle is crucial to the Jewish/Israeli narrative. The concept of Jews as a distinct people, or nation, was and is crucial to the Zionist worldview. In German, which was the language of many of them, the word is *Volks*; in Hebrew it is *Am*. The German and Hebrew terms convey an almost mystical connection of blood, history, and collective consciousness. Zionists did not, and some still do not, see the Arabic-speaking inhabitants of the land as a “people” and certainly could not imagine that they had the same religious, historical, and existential relationship to Palestine that Jews have to Eretz Israel.

Few Zionists imagined that the Arabs on the land could threaten their enterprise.¹ Theodore Herzl himself, the founder of the Zionist movement, who spent all of three days in the land, fantasized in his book *Altneuland* (Old-New Land) that they would be grateful for the blessings of civilization and wealth the Zionists would bring to them. This wishful attitude also stayed with the Zionist movement for decades, though it was eventually swept away by the violent opposition to Zionism in which Palestinians increasingly engaged over the decades of the British Mandate.

Palestinians have, since the establishment of Israel, and especially in the 1990s, attempted to counter Zionist ideology based on the Jewish historical relationship to the land with their own version of early history. They have claimed descent from various peoples who, according to the Bible, preceded the Children of Israel in the land, such as Philistines (from whom the name “Palestine” derives), Canaanites, and Jebusites. More plausibly, many claim descent from all of the nations and people who have passed through the land since antiquity, including the Jews. Some have even claimed they are really the descendants of the Jewish people, and the current “Jews” have stolen the religion as well as the land.

These attempts have received little attention outside Palestinian circles. It is the Jewish fortune, and the Palestinian misfortune, to have the foundations of the Jewish narrative enshrined in the single most important book in Western civilization. The Jewish claim therefore resonates with much of the Christian world.

Palestinian academic historians have contributed to the Palestinian enterprise by emphasizing the settled nature of Palestinian society, commercial growth, and agricultural development in the last few centuries, in contrast to the Zionist picture of a desolate wasteland populated largely by nomadic Bedouin. Here, the Zionist narrative has been supported by the romantic paintings of David Roberts and travelers’ accounts such as Mark Twain’s *Innocents Abroad*. A later generation of post-modernists termed this “Orientalism,” after the notable book by Edward Said.

Early settlement

The early years of Zionist settlement (1882–1914) are for many Israelis suffused in a romantic glow. Their narrative tells of a small minority of those Jews streaming out of Russia to America having the idealism instead to come to the land of the forefathers, and to suffer extreme hardship and deprivation while “redeeming the land.” During this period, they invented the unique institution of the *kibbutz* (communal settlement), revived Hebrew as a spoken language (the only example in history of a dead language being renewed sufficiently to become the daily language of a country), formed a self-defense force against “Arab depredations,” established dozens of settlements (villages), and developed the ideology of rebuilding the Jewish people from its centuries of “parasitism” by engaging in productive agricultural labor. This gave rise to an insistence on “Hebrew labor,” the principle that Jewish landowners and employers should hire only Jews, even at higher wages, as a subsidy to the national enterprise.

Arabs regard this period as beginning the process of clearing Palestinians off their land that culminated in the 1948 *Nakba*. In fact, even Palestinian historians acknowledge that comparatively few Palestinians were dispossessed in this period, as many Jewish settlements were built on hitherto unused land. However, most non-academic Palestinians have little use for such distinctions. For them, the whole point of the Zionist enterprise was to rob Palestinians of their land; many will not countenance facts that detract from that narrative.²

The Balfour Declaration, the British Mandate, and the Holocaust

Ever since the Zionist movement was founded by Herzl, it had sought a powerful national patron. In 1917 it found one in Great Britain, which believed its postwar aims coincided with Zionist hopes. The Balfour Declaration put the movement on the map and recognized its aspirations.

Palestinians were and remain outraged by the Declaration. They correctly point out that the British were simultaneously promising Sherif Hussein (of the Hashemite family, ancestors of the current Jordanian royal family) an Arab empire and also dividing the postwar spoils with France (the Sykes–Picot agreement). Arab anger was only heightened by the ratification of the Declaration by the League of Nations, as part of awarding the Palestine Mandate to Great Britain. It was only slightly assuaged by the fact that the British immediately divided the Mandate, giving the eastern part to the Hashemites as Transjordan (now the Kingdom of Jordan).

Zionists point out (correctly) that the Declaration was intended primarily to stake a British claim in the region, especially vis-à-vis their erstwhile allies, the French. At the same time, they acknowledge that the romance of the Jewish return struck a biblically inspired chord in many Englishmen, including Prime Minister David Lloyd George. Most of all, however, they see the Declaration and its subsequent ratification as a recognition in modern international law of the Jewish claim to Palestine, thus adding a legal aspect to the existing historical and biblical rights.

Historically, the British remain villains for both Zionists and Palestinians.

Zionists and Arabs agree that British policy shifted in 1929–30 to being more favorable to the Arabs. Zionists regard the Mandate as the stage during which they built their state-in-waiting. The Jewish Agency Executive, headed by David Ben-Gurion, was prepared to take over (as it did in 1948). Immigration, after stagnating in the 1920s, boomed starting in 1933, thanks to German Jews who emigrated, recognizing the danger posed to them by Hitler and Nazi Germany. The true villain of this period for Zionists is Haj Amin al-Husseini, the British-appointed mufti (chief religious officer) of Jerusalem.³ Zionists argue that he incited Arabs, who would have recognized the economic benefits of the Jewish presence, against the Zionists and the British, leading to the riots of 1929 and 1936–9. Without his intervention, they claim to believe Arabs and Jews would likely have been able to find a *modus vivendi*.

The “revolt” of 1936–9 was the first sustained period of Palestinian–Zionist violence, and, in retrospect, Palestinian strategy then bore marked similarities to the two *intifadas* of 1987–93 and 2000–04. Palestinians regard them as tragic and heroic enterprises and as inspiration for a struggle that will never be defeated and will inevitably triumph. Israelis view them primarily as murderous rampages, with few goals except for killing Jews. In fact, all three revolts involved significant intra-Palestinian violence and settling of scores, as well as attacks on Jews and, in the first, against the British.

Both sides use this period to foment their resentment against the British. Palestinians accused the British, with justification, of brutal repression, using modern arms against a poorly armed population, and, in the later stages of the revolt, allying with the Zionist militia, the Haganah, to attack Arab villages. Zionists, who shared an interest with the British in suppressing the revolt, felt betrayed immediately after its suppression by the issuance of the White Paper of 1939, a document which repudiated the notion of Palestine as a Jewish homeland and virtually ended Jewish immigration on the eve of the Holocaust.

The Nazi Holocaust is seen as central by both sides, though both narratives are somewhat ambivalent about its real effect. For Jews, it is the final proof that the Zionist diagnosis of the Jewish condition was correct, and that only an independent state can protect the Jewish people. At the same time, there is a reluctance to credit the Holocaust as a necessary element in the creation of the Jewish State. Zionists tend to insist that, even without the Holocaust, Israel would have been created one way or another, as Zionist momentum was unstoppable. The Holocaust is, nevertheless, employed as a justification, while, simultaneously, Jews often resent others who use it as the primary reason for Israel’s establishment.⁴

On a deeper level, the Holocaust provides an almost reflexive standard both for Israelis and for the Jewish diaspora by which to measure their enemies. Most of Israel’s enemies since 1948 have been referred to by many Jews and Israelis as Hitler. Among these foes have been Hajj Amin al-Husayni, Egyptian Presidents Nasser and Sadat (before the latter made peace with Israel), Yasser Arafat, and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinajad. This identification equates these present-day enemies with ultimate evil, and thus justifies virtually any measure taken against them. And those who make this identification deploy an unanswerable argument: “No one thought Hitler really would try to do what he advocated.” Of course, it is inherently impossible to prove conclusively that these or other enemies of Israel are *not* bent on annihilating the Jewish people.

The Arab narrative is not uniform with regard to the Holocaust. There is a strong strain of Holocaust denial, exemplified by Mahmoud Abbas’s doctoral dissertation for Moscow University in 1982 – since repudiated – and, more recently, the statements of Iranian President Ahmadinajad. Younger Palestinians tend to eschew Holocaust denial, realizing that it often harms their own cause. Rather, they tend to equate Israeli actions with those of the Nazis and to separate Zionism from the Holocaust justification, thus mirroring the argument of some Zionists. However, all Palestinians agree that they have been unfairly made to pay the price for European anti-Semitism, which had nothing to do with them. “If you want to establish Israel,” they say, “do it in Europe.”

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Nazi/Holocaust analogy is the frequency with which it is used, often implicitly by Jews and increasingly explicitly by Arabs and other Palestinian supporters. One might have thought that, as the Holocaust recedes from living memory, its use as a political tool would likewise erode. This does not seem to be the case.

The *Nakba*/War of Independence

For Palestinians, the *Nakba*, encompassing all the events surrounding the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the creation of the Palestinian refugees, is the seminal event in their history. To

make a very rough analogy, it is comparable in their consciousness to the events in Jewish history and collective memory stretching over 3,000 years, from the Exodus from Egypt to the Holocaust. This is not, it should be clear, in any way equating the magnitude of the Holocaust and the *Nakba* but, rather, the role they play in the historical consciousness of Israelis and other Jews, on the one hand, and of Palestinians and other Arabs and Muslims, on the other.

Palestinians see the *Nakba* as the logical and intended culmination of Zionism. For them, Zionism has always been directed towards the creation of a Jewish state, which necessarily means getting rid of the Palestinians. Palestinians, and some Israeli “new” historians, have collected statements by Zionist leaders from the beginning of the movement which advocate “transfer” (a frequent euphemism for expulsion). They point specifically to Plan Dalet, a strategic plan drawn up by the nascent Israeli military leadership in early 1948, which discusses clearing out Arab villages wherever they might pose a threat to Jewish settlement. This they consider to be a blueprint for what actually occurred.

Palestinians also blame much of the rest of the world for the *Nakba*. Israel’s establishment was authorized by the United Nations in its 1947 partition resolution, with the concurrence of most Western nations together with the Soviet bloc. Even the Arab nations, who resisted and voted against partition, are blamed first for their diplomatic ineptitude in failing to stave off the resolution and then for their almost complete lack of success in their war against Israel, beginning on May 15, 1948. Moreover, it is clear that all the Arab states, except for Lebanon, which did virtually nothing in the war, had agendas of their own vis-à-vis Palestine and the Palestinians. While of course Palestinians have cooperated with the Arab countries and the former Soviet bloc over the years, they never forget these initial acts of betrayal. Interestingly, these feelings run parallel, to a significant degree, to those of Jews who blame the West both for not preventing the rise and rearmament of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and for not bombing the extermination camps during World War II.

The Israeli narrative of 1948, its “War of Independence,” could not be more different. Israelis are convinced that they did all they possibly could to compromise with the Palestinians, notably accepting the partition resolution which divided the country. For them, the war was purely defensive. When the Palestinians and Arab states refused to accept this international decision, Israel defended itself from annihilation (and Israelis are uniformly convinced that the Jewish population would have been massacred had they lost). They argue that Plan Dalet was primarily a contingency plan, not a blueprint. And they claim that the Arab leaders told the Palestinians to leave their homes to allow the Arab armies to invade, with the plan of returning weeks later after the victory. The last point was the original justification for Israel refusing to allow the approximately 700,000 Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, since they left “voluntarily” and would constitute an immense fifth column if they actually lived in the Jewish state. The Israeli narrative has generally rebutted any claims of massacres or expulsions, though more recent archival work has convinced many Israeli historians (but fewer lay people) that they indeed took place.

It is notable that Palestinians emphasize the first part of the war, until May 15, when Israel was fighting primarily against Palestinian irregulars, and Israelis emphasize the period after May 15, when the armies of five Arab countries entered Palestine.

Post-1948

The period from 1881 until the establishment of the State of Israel in its 1948–67 boundaries and the creation of the Palestinian diaspora constitutes the main battleground for the respective historical narratives. Both sides remain firm in their rectitude, convinced that their behavior

was generally consonant with international moral and legal norms. Thus, neither side is able to countenance those who question their narrative, as its elements seem blindingly obvious to each.

With the conclusion of the truces between Israel and the Arab countries that had sent forces into Palestine (except for Iraq), Israelis assumed that, within a generation or two, the Palestinian problem would be solved, since the refugees would be absorbed into the Arab world. Israel therefore defined the remaining problem as the refusal of the Arab states to accept such a solution.

The majority of, though by no means all, Palestinian refugees initially lived in refugee camps in Arab countries. Instead of being absorbed, they carefully nurtured their Palestinian identity, a task made much easier by their living together, generally apart from the natives of the countries in which the camps were located. Israel charges that the camps were set up and maintained so that, instead of permitting the refugees to begin normal lives, Arab countries could use them as a propaganda weapon against Israel. Arabs countered that all Arabs were not the same, and that the refugees preferred to live with their own compatriots. Indeed, in many camps, Palestinians from the same towns or villages lived next to one another, thus perpetuating the memories of their lost homes. Children, even those three or four generations removed from Palestine, would answer with the name of their village when asked where they were from. Many refugee families retained the key to their home in Palestine as a symbol of their intention to return.

For most of the world, the issue of Palestinian refugees seemed closed. Palestinians spent the next twenty years recovering from their experience. Israel assumed its hopes would be fulfilled and continued to deny there was any such thing as a Palestinian. Most notably, Prime Minister Golda Meir scoffed at the notion of the existence of Palestinians, displaying her Mandate-era identification papers describing her as a Palestinian, which was the pre-1948 designation of all inhabitants of the Mandate. (Only after 1948 was the term “Palestinian” reserved solely for Arabs. Jewish inhabitants were henceforth called “Israelis.”)

The 1967 war, dubbed the June War by Arabs and the “Six Day War” by Israel and most of the West, thus emphasizing its near-miraculous short time span and its humiliating defeat of Arab armies, has its own separate set of narratives. For Israel, it was again purely defensive. Most Arabs believed it was deliberately and duplicitously instigated by Israel, which fits into their understanding of Zionism as inherently aggressive and expansionist. After this war, Israel and the rest of the world discovered that there was a new generation that considered itself solely Palestinian, and that was ready to fight for its right to return. Israelis defined this as “terrorism,” and for several decades, for them, the term “Palestinian” was virtually synonymous with “terrorist.”

The latest great Battle of the Narratives concerns the Oslo process of 1993–2000, culminating in the failed second Camp David summit. Both sides tend to regard themselves as well-meaning dupes of the other. For Israelis, the recognition of the PLO and of the Palestinian people was a major concession. The fact that Yasser Arafat and the Palestinians spurned their “generous offer” at Camp David was proof positive to them that the Palestinians would settle for nothing less than Israel’s destruction. They regard the outbreak of the Second *Intifada* two months later as carefully planned in order to force Israel into concessions that would endanger its security.

The Palestinian view is almost a mirror image of this. They see the Oslo process as occasioned by their willingness to make a “historic compromise.” They would accept the 22 percent of Palestine that lay outside Israel’s 1948–67 borders, East Jerusalem as their capital, sovereignty over the Haram al-Sharif (which Jews refer to as the Temple Mount), and, of

course, the right of Palestinians to return to their homes. Perhaps some trimming around the edges of this package could be accepted, but this was understood as the basic framework. Israel's refusal of all of these terms without major modifications, and especially its unwillingness even to discuss the right of return, convinced most Palestinians that what Israel wanted was simply to rearrange the nature of the Occupation, with the Palestinian Authority as its enforcer.

Historical "revisionism"

Of course, belief in the narratives has never been uniform; political and religious differences provided some significant differentiation, especially on the Israeli side. However, in the late 1980s, there arose the first substantial movement challenging Israeli historical orthodoxy, known as the "revisionist" or "new" historians. All came from the political left and coupled their historical views with critiques of current Israeli policies towards Palestinians. The best-known figure was and is Professor Benny Morris, a historian specializing in the events of 1948 who, without changing his historical revisionism, around 2002–04 switched his political views and now is a vigorous exponent of a hawkish Israeli policy.

There are as many critiques of the narrative as there are historians, and significant variation between them. However, if there is one theme running through revisionist history, it is that Zionist and, later, Israeli government policy was much more hard-line towards Arabs than the traditional narrative contends, and that there were many possible opportunities for peace that Zionist and Israeli leaders ignored, deliberately or not. Likewise, they frequently find a flexibility on the Arab side that the traditional narrative denies.

In the 1990s, the revisionist arguments coincided with the Oslo peace process, and elements of Israeli society showed a willingness to suspend their traditional views, though by no means accepting most revisionist contentions. However, after the beginning of the Second *Intifada* in 2000, opinion swung back in many instances. Also, following Professor Morris's more recent contentions, many right-wing Israelis now accept there was indeed Israeli brutality in 1948 and afterwards, but insist that Israel had no choice because of its enemies' implacable hatred.

Nevertheless, despite the hardening of attitudes, few if any Israeli historians today believe that Palestinians fled "voluntarily," for example, and they accept that Israeli history is far less pristine than generally portrayed in the traditional narrative. However, among ordinary, non-academic Israelis, the traditional narrative seems almost impervious to the attacks it has received.

Israelis ask why there has been no similar movement on the Palestinian side. While a few Palestinian historians, especially those living abroad, have made some efforts to accept elements of Israeli contentions,⁵ the basic outline of the Palestinian narrative remains the same. Perhaps the best explanation is to compare the huge changes in every aspect of Israeli society since it achieved independence in 1948, with the lot of Palestinians, who still lack independence and for whom many aspects of life have deteriorated. Israel has been able to develop in many directions since then; Palestinians are stuck still trying to achieve self-determination, and their historical explanations have also been unable to develop further.

Thus, the changes that have taken place have not really impacted the views of most members of either society.

Conclusion: the use and future of the narratives

Both peoples are introduced to their respective narratives as fundamental parts of their individual and collective identities. Thus, it is impossible for many on both sides to see their

adversaries as *not* historically deceptive, and themselves, as Professor Morris (1999) aptly put it, as “righteous victims.” Substantial elements in both populations have no frame of reference to understand the grievance of the other side; rather, they see themselves as deserving compensation and the other side as deserving punishment.

On both sides, understandings of history shape and are shaped by ongoing political events. Israeli demands for security are based on a historically shaped set of perceptions that Palestinians have never reconciled themselves to Israel’s existence and will seek to destroy it even if they proclaim they accept it. Many Palestinians now despair of the two-state solution because they see Zionism as a movement that has historically been bent on dispossessing them. The distrust that both sides show, and which is perhaps currently the biggest obstacle to peace, is based on each one’s perception of its historical experience with the “other.”

Can the conflicting narratives be reconciled? Or, can the two peoples live next to each other while still maintaining their narratives?

In this author’s view, the latter is more possible and likely than the former. The historical narrative of each side embodies how it understands itself. Without its narrative, neither would be recognizable even to itself. And experience has shown that both narratives are immensely resilient. Thus, what is needed is an “acknowledgement” of the other narrative, not an acceptance of one or an attempt to reconcile contradictions.

However, it is hard to imagine that such a development is imminent.

Notes

- 1 One of the few who realized this was Yitzhak Epstein, who in 1903 wrote a prescient article entitled “The Hidden Question,” warning that, if Zionists did not formulate a policy to deal with the land’s inhabitants, their whole enterprise would be endangered. His concerns were not heeded. A. Dowty, “A Question That Outweighs All Others: Yitzhak Epstein and Zionist Recognition of the Arab Issue,” *Israel Studies*, 6/1 (2001), pp. 34–55.
- 2 For an illustration of this dynamic, see Discussion 2 in Scham *et al.* (2006), pp. 84–91.
- 3 For a balanced treatment of this controversial personality, see Philip Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement* (rev. ed., New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
- 4 See, for example, the reaction to President Obama’s speech of June 4, 2009, when he used the Holocaust as a primary justification for Israel’s existence, in Martin Peretz, “Narrative Dissonance: What the Cairo Speech Got Wrong,” *The New Republic*, July 1, 2009, www.tnr.com/article/narrative-dissonance
- 5 While their approaches are very different, two of the best-known examples are Philip Mattar and Rashid Khalidi, both of whom have lived in the United States for most of their lives. Dr. Mattar refers to himself half-seriously as “the first Palestinian revisionist historian” (conversation with the author, 2003).

Further reading

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