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# ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS: CONTESTED NARRATIVES

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## **Introduction**

Israeli scholar Yossi Klein Halevi begins the introduction of his book, *At the Entrance of the Garden of Eden, A Jew's Search for God with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land*, published in 2001, by saying: "In early winter 1998, I set out to discover *my country, the Holy Land*."<sup>1</sup> A Palestinian scholar embarking on reading this book would take issue by the proposition *my* preceding the word *country* that describes Halevi's attachment to the Holy Land. This sense of belonging to the Holy Land by an Israeli clashes with the similar sense of belonging by a Palestinian, illuminating the crux of the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation and struggle.

Historically, the conflict began with the assertion: "This land is mine", and ever since the struggle focused on the question: "To whom does this land belong?" The way the question is constructed is in itself conflictual – "The land belongs to one and not the other!" This assumption gave rise to diametrically opposed conflicting national narratives that presented the claims of one against the other.

This paper aims at confronting the Israeli and Palestinian constitutive historical clash of national narratives and their significance in shaping identities of "self" and "other" in the conflict and in constructing obstacles to conflict resolution. It looks into the historic junctions of decision-making and appraises processes that left their imprint on collective memory and perceptions. Some of the major themes and histories will be analyzed and explained within their own historical context in order to deconstruct demonized images. The emphasis on the 1948 episode and Jerusalem is meant to bring about deeper awareness of the events that play a role in shaping individual and collective consciousness of two highly controversial issues. It is hoped that the mutual exposure to each other's insights and perspectives will serve the purpose of further educating us about our own narrative as well as the other side's narrative in the conflict.

### **Constructing national narratives**

Narrative as a term is new. It implies that the story being told by one side is not identical to the story told by the other side. Narratives are designed to support certain positions. Once endorsed by a critical mass of people, then they become national narratives. Whenever a conflict arises, narratives diverge. The sharper the conflict, the wider the narratives diverge. There is more than one competing narrative in a conflict. Moreover, the prevailing narratives may change, evolve, and fluctuate in time, particularly in crisis situations. The past narratives rekindle future narratives. “Whoever controls the past controls the future; whoever controls the present, controls the past”, wrote George Orwell in his novel *1984*.

Narratives are not mutually exclusive and one side may have more than one narrative making the resolution of the conflict more complex. The way that narratives are fashioned and disseminated in society through political leaders and the media may result in the perpetuation of the conflict. Some narratives change over time while others remain static. Both Israelis and Palestinians have maintained static narratives because what their historians and leaders tell them makes sense to them. Both people have a living memory of their own narratives and it becomes taboo to change the narrative and public debate is not accommodated. There has been an absence of a common sense approach to the issue of narratives but rather the emotional approach dominated the discourse and the structure of the narrative.

Memory and history should not be taken as one thing. The construction of collective memory and narrative is very difficult to compose. One of the biggest impediments in changing tracks from war to peace is the collective memory that stands as an impediment to peace. The question is: How to overcome this hurdle to conflict resolution?

### **Constructing perceptions**

In his classic study of Western perceptions of the Orient, *Orientalism*, the late Palestinian-American intellectual Edward Said describes the life cycle of a mind-set in a graphic way. “Fictions”, he observes, “have their own logic and their own dialectic of growth and decline”. Learned texts, media representations, any supposedly authoritative body of knowledge have a reinforcing tendency. Having gained a certain perspective from something they have heard or read, Said maintains, audiences come to have particular expectations that in turn influence what is said or written henceforth.

Israeli commentator Meron Benvenisti, in his 1995 book *Intimate Enemies: Jews and Arabs in a Shared Land*, notes that national myths, made up of a mixture of real and legendary events, are “the building-blocks from which a society constructs its collective self-image” and, once absorbed, “become truer than reality itself”.

Similarly, the late scholar of the modern Arab world, Malcolm Kerr in his book, *America’s Middle East Policy: Kissinger, Carter and the Future* (1980), identifies “two elements as constituting the conventional wisdom relating to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: (a) the notion that Palestinian national claims are “artificially and mischievously inspired” and thus may be ignored; (b) the notion that the only real issue in the Arab-Israeli conflict is an unreasonable Arab refusal to accept Israel’s existence – not, as Arabs contend, a real grievance against Israel arising from the Palestinians’ displacement.

This perception that the Palestinians have no rational basis for their hostility to Israel and no legitimate national claim to the land of Palestine is fundamental to the misconceptions surrounding this conflict.

The Palestinians have consistently contested the Jews' inherent right to exist in Palestine and maintain that they as a native population with centuries of residence and title deeds to the land have their own claim to patrimony in Palestine.

The assumption that the Palestinian position was "mischievously inspired" has constituted the frame of reference within which the conflict has been contained. The frame of reference defines and sets boundaries around thinking on Palestinian-Israeli issues. It is Israel-centered, approaching the conflict generally from an Israeli perspective and seldom recognizing the existence or the legitimacy of a Palestinian perspective. As Edward Said once wrote, "Palestinians long ago lost to Zionism the right even to have a history and a political identity".

### **The 1948 conflicting narratives**

No doubt, the Palestinian narrative of the 1948 episode contrasts very sharply from the Israeli narrative. Both blame each other as to who is responsible for launching the hostilities that evolved into the 1948 war and who is guilty of starting the war. Neither would admit that perhaps both parties might be equally guilty in wanting conflict in 1948. Both traditions have virtually nothing in common and each reflects a passionately partisan perspective that neither makes any effort to hide. The most serious dispute relates to the 1948 establishment of Israel, the simultaneous uprooting of the Palestinians, and the thwarting of their right to self-determination. While the birth of Israel in 1948 is widely understood, the destruction of Palestine that this birth required remained for quite sometime dimly perceived.

From the start, the Palestinian scholars, as well as others sympathetic to their perspective, have challenged the Israel/Zionist interpretation of what happened in 1948. Their efforts benefited from the revisionist history of 1948 published since the mid-1980s by such Israeli historians as Benny Morris, Tom Segev, Simha Flapan, Avi Shlaim, and Ilan Pappé.

Let me begin by addressing the question: Why does the Palestinian narrative conflict and contrast sharply from the Israeli narrative? Then due to the time limitation I will confine myself to looking at two of the most controversial central issues of the 1948 episode: The Arab Invading Armies, and the Palestinian Exodus.

### **The Exodus narrative**

The dispossession and dispersal of the Palestinians in 1948 has always been and to a great extent remains "an unrecognizable episode", even for most informed scholars – unrecognizable in the sense not only that the dispossession has been forgotten but also that it is seldom recognized to be the ultimate cause of the conflict.

Furthermore, terminology played a major role in shaping perceptions of the 1948 events. Terminology has become basic for constructing the framework through which we view any situation, shaping our cognition and patterns of thinking. For instance, the term Palestine is in dispute. The Palestinians, among them historian Aref al-Aref, call the 1948 dispossession *al-nakba*, *al-karithah*, the calamity, the catastrophe, the disaster, in recognition of the national tragedy caused by their expulsion and flight from their Palestine homeland. The Israelis, and even third party scholars such as Bernard Reich, in his book *An Historical Encyclopedia of the Arab Israeli Conflict*, call the 1948 war, the War of Independence.

In his article "The Debate about 1948", the well-known Israeli historian Avi Shlaim remarks that history is in a real sense "the propaganda of the victors", and because Israel won the contest for Palestine, Israel's version of that contest, of the rights and claims that underlay

it, and of the justice of the outcome, has prevailed in most international discourse. For most Israelis, the Palestinians have never had a history and they have never had a just cause, and were responsible for all the tragedy that has been inflicted on them. Their conventional wisdom holds that the conflict originated in 1948 not because Palestinians lost land, homes and national identity but because they hate Jews and do not want to coexist with them. That over seven hundred thousand people were displaced from their homes and native land was blamed on others, particularly the Arab states.

### **MYTH 1: the Arab invading armies**

Palestinian Professor Walid Khalidi in *From Haven to Conquest* maintains that the Arab capitals had neither the will, nor the intention, nor the force to destroy the newly-born Jewish state. The long-awaited Arab states' "invasion" of Palestine began on 15 May; the invasion backfired with further disastrous territorial losses. Among the invading armies Trans Jordan had the largest, best trained, and most strategically placed Arab army of about 4,800 men, in addition to nearly 10,000 Arab troops (4,000 Iraqis, 3,000 Egyptians, 2,000 Syrians, 1,000 Lebanese) under no unified command, to destroy more than 50,000 troops of the *Haganah*. Military experts confirm that this three-to-one ratio suggests troops needed to defend the territory allocated to the Arabs rather than to invade the Jewish state, and even this responsibility they performed very poorly, since a good part of the territory designated by UN Partition Resolution 181 for the Arab Palestinian state was wrested from the Jordanian Arab Legion, and the Egyptian and Syrian armies.

Moreover, the Arab armies at times undermined the Palestinian guerrillas. Avi Shlaim in his 1988 book *Collusion Across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine*, states that a senior intelligence officer in the Haganah gained a tacit agreement from Fawzi al-Qawukji, commander of the Arab Liberation Army, to stay aloof from Haganah attacks on rival Palestinian guerrilla forces. That agreement facilitated the Haganah offensives against Jaffa and the Jerusalem corridor in April 1948.

### **MYTH 2: the 1948 Palestinian exodus**

The 1948 Palestinian exodus was used by Israel to demonstrate that the Palestinians' attachment to their land and homes was weak, that by clearing the way for Arab military forces to "drive the Jews into the sea" Palestinians showed that they were bent on Israel's destruction, and that in the end Israel bore no responsibility for the Palestinians' displacement and homelessness.

Why did the Palestinians leave? One major example of fiction becoming actual history through the process of constant repetition is the widely believed but untrue story that Palestinian civilians left their homes in 1948 because the Arab governments and the Palestinian leadership broadcast instructions over the radio that they leave in order to give Arab military forces a clear field to drive the Jews out of Palestine. In fact, no broadcast orders from any Arab or Palestinian authority were ever issued to the Palestinians to leave their homes.

The first major challenge to conventional wisdom about Israel's birth and Palestine's destruction came from the Irish journalist Erskine Childers, in his famous article that appeared in *The Spectator* on 12 May 1961, which refuted the broadcasts myth. Childers asserts that he found no evidence of any broadcasts or blanket orders from Arab governments or Palestinian leaders calling on Palestinians to leave their homes. But his was a lonely voice in the wilderness.

Dan Kurzman in his 1970 book, *Genesis 1948: The First Arab-Israeli War*, recounts the events of 1948 as seen by both Arabs and Israelis. He searched Israeli military archives and the British Broadcasting Corporation's radio monitoring files and found no record of either Arab military communications ordering a civilian evacuation or any broadcast radio instructions.

Among the Palestinian scholars, Nafez Nazzal, in his book *The Palestinian Exodus from Galilee, 1948* (1978), relates the expulsion narrative from a Palestinian perspective, asserting that the Palestinians were expelled from their homes. Confirming this, Elias Sanbar, in *Palestine 1948: The Expulsion* (1984), perceives the eventual eviction of the Palestinians in 1948 as a logical consequence of the triumph of Zionism in Palestine. He asserts that for Zionism to achieve its goal, it had to take Palestinian land without the Palestinian people, and thus fulfill Israel Zangwil's premise of "a land without a people for a people without a land".

However, it was in 1987 that three detailed accounts appeared that challenged cherished myths of the 1948 events: One was *The Palestinian Catastrophe: The 1984 Expulsion of a People From Their Homeland* by the American scholar Michael Palumbo, who demonstrates the absurdity of the myth. Palumbo tells the story how the Zionist conquest of Palestine involved not only the occupation of the territory and the displacement of its people, but also widespread plunder and looting of the property of its Palestinian Arab inhabitants, not only their land, but also their shops, their homes and the possessions within, and the women's jewelry.

The second was *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* by the late Zionist sociologist Simha Flapan who concludes that Israel's statement about Arab and Palestinian culpability for the refugees is simply a myth.

The third was *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* by Israeli historian Benny Morris, who concludes that no Arab authority issued "blanket instructions, by radio or otherwise, to Palestine's Arabs to flee", that Palestinian flight was induced to a great extent by a "general sense of collapse" that permeated Palestine, and that a "small but significant proportion" of the flight resulted from explicit expulsion orders issued by Jewish forces. Using declassified Israeli archival material, Morris discusses Operation Dani to take over Ramle and Lydda. He notes that when Allon asked: "what shall we do with the Arabs?" Ben Gurion made a dismissive, energetic gesture with his hand and said: "Expel them (*garish otam*)".

Palestinian scholars maintain that the massacre of Palestinian civilians at the village of Deir Yassin in which 240 people were brutally murdered played a major role in the Palestinian exodus. Others give much weight to the devastating impact of the death of Palestinian leader Abdel Qader Al-Husayni on Palestinian society. (Palestinian historians maintain that Husayni died "as he led a successful counterattack at Castel", while Israeli historians maintain that "he was shot by a Jewish sentry as he approached Castel, which he apparently believed was already in Arab hands".) In my view, the horrors and ravages of war and the war psychology of fear are the principle causes of the Palestinian civilian population's search for safe haven.

In an article which appeared in *The Transformation of Palestine*, published in 1971, Professor Ibrahim Abu-Lughod states: "In the case of Palestine, had the world not been confronted with a familiar yet bizarre interpretation – that which attempts to demonstrate the culpability of Arab leadership in the removal of the Palestinians [...], as well as the individual responsibility of the Palestinians for being refugees – it would be sufficient to call the attention [...] to the fact that a bicomunal war occurred and that, as in all such wars, some people were dislocated as a result."

### **Conflicting narratives over Jerusalem**

The conflict over Jerusalem has given birth to a number of conflicting narratives – Jewish narrative, Christian narrative, Moslem narrative, Israeli narrative, Arab narrative, European narrative, etc. This raises the question: how do all these narratives diverge from one another and why? The current conflict over Jerusalem is a classic case of two competing national narratives – the Jewish narrative that God promised the Jews the land of Israel and the Palestinian narrative that they have settled on the land since the Canaanites settled in Palestine – and the interpretation of these conflicting narratives brought the present conflict over the city.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the question one may pose is: will or can an authoritative interpretation of the 1948 events emerge that would be acceptable to both Israelis and Palestinians?

Simha Flapan, in the introduction to his book *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities*, indicates that his principle purpose is to “debunk a number of Israeli myths, not as an academic exercise but as a contribution to a better understanding of the Palestinian problem”. He adds: “I am restricting myself to an analysis of Israeli policies and propaganda structures. I choose to do it this way not because I attribute to Israel sole responsibility for the failure to find a solution [...], the Palestinians, too, were active players in the drama that brought upon them the calamity of defeat and the loss of their homeland. But a review of the contributing Arab myths and conceptions, [...] must be done by an Arab. [...] Certainly the ideal way to fulfill this undertaking would have been a joint project by an Israeli-Palestinian Historical Society. I hope this is not wishful thinking, and that some day such a common effort will produce a study free of the deficiencies and limitations of this one.”

However, as the late Palestinian Professor Ibrahim Abu-Lughod maintains, even with the best of intentions, control of the data, and skilled analysis, it is doubtful that Palestinian and Israeli scholars – as well as third party scholars – can arrive at a consensus either on the facts or on their interpretation. The difficulties are not only those of national identity and perspective; nor are they of language and skills, or access. They are much more complex and relate simultaneously to values, beliefs, attitudes as well as the national and historical experiences of both people.

It is of considerable value to look back on the 1948 traumatic events from both standpoints, from the standpoint of the victor – the Israelis –, as well as from the standpoint of the vanquished – the Palestinians. Why? Because attempts to resolve the conflict would remain futile and doomed to failure as long as the way we look at the conflict is understood or misunderstood.

Also, the lesson we may learn from the 1948 episode is that the tactical and strategic inflexibility of the Palestinians led to the catastrophic confrontation with Israel, and the tactical and strategic inflexibility of the Israelis led to losing the opportunity of peace with the Arabs.

Why do the Palestinians object to the Jewish aspiration of having Jerusalem as their eternal capital? Is there a solution to the conflicting claims and is this solution attainable peacefully and without force and violence?

The first step for conflict resolution is for each party to examine and evaluate and be critical of all its dominant narratives. The second step is for each to have the courage to dis-

card the false perception, myth and fiction from the reality. The third step is to acknowledge, understand and appreciate the genuine narratives of the other, particularly those of religious origins, though one may not agree with it. Thus, the Palestinians need to understand the Jewish attachment to the Promised Land and the Israelis need to appreciate the Palestinian roots in the Holy Land since bridging narratives in a conflict is essential to conflict resolution.

In his classic work, *Democracy in World Politics*, published in 1955, Lester Pearson concluded that humans were moving into “an age when different civilizations will have to live side by side in peaceful interchange, learning from each other, studying each other’s history and ideals and art and culture, mutually enriching each other’s lives. The alternative, in this overcrowded little world, is misunderstanding, tension, clash, and catastrophe”.

More than four decades later, Samuel Huntington affirms in his highly controversial book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, published in 1997: “The futures of both peace and civilization depend upon understanding and cooperation among the political, spiritual, and intellectual leaders of the world’s major civilizations.”

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## Notes

1. My italics. PECDAR published a tourist guide entitled: *Palestine: The Holy Land* while the Israeli Ministry of Tourism published a tourist pamphlet entitled: *Israel: The Holy Land*.