

Stephen Van Evera / December 23, 2002
Memory and the Israel-Palestinian Conflict: Time for New
Narrative

ABSTRACT

Israelis and Palestinians have clung to false historical narratives in an effort to bolster support for their struggle in their own community and abroad. Both narratives blame the other side for the conflict while claiming innocence for their own side. The party most guilty for the Arab-Israel tragedy--the Christian west--receives far less blame than it deserves in both narratives, largely for tactical political reasons.

These mythical narratives are well-designed for waging combat but are major impediments to peacemaking. While they persist peace may be impossible. To make peace the two communities should now embrace an honest narrative that puts blame where it belongs: on the Christian west and the vast cruelties it inflicted on the Jewish diaspora over the past millennium.

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MEMORY AND THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT: TIME FOR NEW NARRATIVES

I. ASSUMED HERE: HISTORICAL NARRATIVES MATTER

A. Disputes over the role of historical narratives:

1. Some hold that historical narratives are merely an excuse for doing what one already has chosen to do. In this view preferences and goals of groups are not elastic to the history that groups believe.
2. Others hold that groups' sense of entitlement depends on their historical narratives. Narratives that justify large aims will generate large aims; narratives that support only modest aims will produce smaller goals. Preferences depend on narratives.

B. Evidence:

- >>1920s German narratives of innocence in 1914 and wrongful oppression in 1919--baseless historically but widely believed--produced Naziism in the 1930s. Hitler rose to power by echoing and exploiting the German innocence narrative.
- >>Serbs vs. Croats 1991: a conflict driven by mutual innocence narratives about the 1940s. The Croat myth of innocence, in particular, incited Serbs to expect that Croatia again planned mass murder of Serbs.
- >>Russia vs. Baltics today: Russian myths of innocence ("we did not invade the Baltics in 1941") have poisoned Russian-Baltic relations. See David Mendeloff's MIT Ph.D. dissertation.
- >>Arab-Israeli: both sides have maintained combat narratives. Only recently has there been any convergence, and even then not much.
- >>Europe since 1945: commonized historical narratives have brought deep peace. Germany in particular has embraced historical truthtelling. This has helped it reconcile with its former victims.

versus

- >>Asia since 1945: Japan's innocence narrative still poisons Japan's relations with China and Korea.

C. How narratives affect conflict:

1. Narratives shape perceptions of the other's intentions. Specifically, an aggressor that denies its past aggression thereby signals others that it may aggress again, whereas an aggressor that acknowledges its past aggressions and expresses regret is less likely to recidivate.
2. Narratives **convey contempt or respect** to others. This emotional aspect is centrally important. People take contempt very badly and cannot reconcile with those who display it. (Political science students of conflict have generally overlooked emotional factors like this one.)

D. Psychology vs. Opacity vs. Cozenology. False historical narratives illustrate misperceptions that stem not from psychology but from active deception--a phenomenon political science downplays.

II. TWO PROBLEMATIC HISTORICAL NARRATIVE PATTERNS

- >> **Pattern #1:** An actor, Party A, shifts blame for its crimes from itself to its opponent, Party B. For example, Germany started World War I but blamed Britain for it.
- >> **Pattern #2:** An actor, Party A, shifts blame from a third party (Party C) to its opponent, Party B. We see this pattern in **conflicts among victims**, in which both were brutalized by a third party but blame the other for their suffering. Israeli and Palestinian narratives feature this pattern: both were victims of the Christian West but

blame each other for its crimes.

Pattern #2 has four sub-patterns.

- a. Party A can directly blame Party B for the crimes of Party C--"you did it!"
- b. Party A can blame B for crimes that C compelled A to commit--"we didn't do it, you did!" In one view Israel blames Arabs for an Arab-Israeli conflict that the West compelled Israel to trigger.
- c. Party A can blame B for crimes that C compelled B to commit--"C didn't do it, you did!" Palestinians blame Israel alone for crimes against Palestinians that the Christian west compelled Israel to commit.
- d. Party A can deny that crimes that C made it commit were ever committed--"there was no crime!"--making B's response seem unprovoked. Israel denies crimes that it committed (for example the expulsion of 1948) under duress from the Christian West.

Pattern #2 occurs when the victims have strategic reasons for deflecting blame from their oppressor onto others. For example, they may now depend on the oppressor for assistance--as Israel has depended on the British, French and later Americans--and so may wish not to offend it by adopting an honest narrative that puts blame where it belongs. Or they may feel, like many Palestinians, that they legitimate their adversary's cause by conceding that the adversary acted to escape oppression.

III. TODAY'S PALESTINIAN/ISRAELI NARRATIVES

- A. The dominant narratives on both sides are highly self-glorifying and other-blaming.

The mainstream Israeli narrative holds that Israel was a movement of national renewal that did little injury and much good for the Arabs. It offered peace to the Arabs early and often, expelled few Palestinians in 1948 (they fled on advice from their leaders, goes the narrative), brought prosperity to the Arabs of Palestine, and now faces Palestinian hostility that is unprovoked and rooted in anti-semitism.

The mainstream Palestinian narrative holds that Zionism is a predatory movement of Jews who had good lives in Europe but decided maliciously to join the European powers in colonizing the Mideast. No necessity drove the Jews to the Mideast. Moreover, the European Zionists had no direct historic tie to the Mideast--they were descendants of Jewish converts from Khazaria. The wars of 1948 and 1967 were begun by Israel, not the Arabs.

Neither narrative puts much blame on the Christian West for the conflict.

- B. These narratives have converged modestly in the 1990s with the rise of the Israeli "new historians" and the Palestinian authority's adoption of less inflammatory Palestinian texts. But change has been modest and past progress made may now be reversed. Limor Livnat, Sharon's Minister of Education, said recently that she will "dedicate her life to root out the influence of the revisionist historians" on Israeli textbooks.

A new mythical Israeli narrative emerged after Camp David II failed in the summer of 2000: "Israel offered generous peace terms; the Palestinians rejected these and launched war." This narrative powerfully fuels Israeli hardline policies today by supporting the inference that "they only want to destroy us." And new mythical Palestinian narratives of an Israeli massacre at Jenin in 2002 has also lately emerged.

- C. Peace is impossible while these narratives remain intact. The search for peace since 1979 has failed partly because this was unrecognized by both sides, by the Americans, and by international players in the peace process. A key blunder!

IV. A NEEDED NEW NARRATIVE: BLAME THE CHRISTIAN WEST

A. New narratives would promote peace and also have the virtue of being true.

>> Each side should take responsibility for its aggressions and wrongdoings. This is the standard commonization-of-history format, as in Europe since 1945.

>> Both sides should also **put main blame for the conflict on the truly guilty party: the Christian West.**

The Christian West made Zionism necessary by a thousand years of relentless oppression of the Jewish diaspora in the West. During the Crusades Christians viciously massacred thousands of Jews in many parts of Europe. Jews then were expelled from Britain, France (three times) and Spain during 1290-1492, mass-murdered under the Spanish inquisition, ghettoized throughout Europe in following centuries, horribly massacred again in Eastern Europe in 1648, subjected to pogroms in Russia in the 19th century and then to Hitler's holocaust in the 20th century. Stalin was planning another great killing of Jews when he died. Those fleeing these horrors were often refused refuge by nearby states. Even after the Holocaust thousands of Jews were driven from Poland by the Poles. Europe's Jews tried self-reform, socialism, and even assimilation to appease the rage of the Christians. Nothing worked.

This relentless Christian oppression, and despair that it would ever end, drove Pinsker, Herzl and others to launch the Zionist enterprise. These early Zionists were secular Jews who were animated by desire to free the Jews from oppression, not by Jewish religious or historic claims to the land of Israel, but they mobilized Jews around these claims to build Jewish support for Zionism.

In this view the misdeeds of Zionism--most importantly the expulsion of 700,000 Palestinians from their homes in 1948 and later dishonest Israeli denials of this expulsion--are really the last in a long series of crimes by Western Christians who, by their oppressions, blackened the Jews' hands by cruelly forcing them to commit such dark deeds.

B. **Both sides today reject this narrative because it is not a suitable combat narrative.**

>> Israelis are loath to alienate their Christian Western supporters by assigning them ultimate blame for Israel's brutalities. This in turn makes Israelis loath to admit these brutalities in the first place--for example, to deny Israel's 1948 expulsion of the Palestinians.

>> Israelis are uneasy granting that Zionism was required by Western Christian anti-semitism because they fear that the Christian West will respond by saying: "We're better people now; we've tamed anti-semitism and won't return to it," and will conclude: "So Zionism is no longer necessary." Israelis justifiably don't trust that the Christian West has durably tamed its anti-semitic demons.

>> Palestinians are loath to legitimate Zionism by agreeing that the Jews needed a state to survive and came to the Mideast from desperate necessity.

Yet the main task for both sides is now peacemaking, not war-winning. Both sides should change their narratives accordingly.

Israelis should be willing to offend the west; Palestinians should be willing to admit history that legitimates Zionism. This will leave both sides less able to win fights but better able to make peace.

Israelis complain that they cannot admit their ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in 1948 as this would admit Israel was born in "original sin." This they say they cannot do without delegitimizing Zionism. Hence they refuse to offer the Palestinians any apology for their 1948 expulsion of Palestinians. But Israel's sin of 1948 is not nearly as dark if Israel committed it with a gun to its head, as in fact it did.

Israel's deeds of 1948 were dark but were deeds that any people would have committed if faced by similarly desperate conditions.

Palestinians still need their old narrative--shaped as it is to delegitimize Israel--only if they still cling to their discarded goal of destroying Israel. They have now embraced a more limited goal of creating a Palestinian state in part of Palestine that coexists with Israel. A narrative that accepts Israel's legitimacy--but contests its right to an empire--is perfectly suitable to support this lesser project. Accordingly the Palestinians have plenty of room to replace their old Zionism-delegitimizing narrative with a truer narrative that accepts the prime responsibility of Christian haters for the Mideast conflict. Such a narrative legitimates the Jews' right to a secure state, but not to an empire based on religious or historic claims. As such it leaves plenty of room for Palestinians to claim that continued Israeli control and colonization of the West Banks and Gaza are illegitimate. Thus the common Palestinian claim that Palestinians need their old combat narrative until they win their state is false.

- C. The new narrative won't solve everything. But it would recast history in terms that would compel each side to admit that it would have done what the other did had it walked in the other's shoes.
 - >> Israelis who accept that Zionism required and conducted mass ethnic cleansing can better accept that they would have resisted Zionism were they on its receiving end. What people have not resisted being colonized or cleansed? (Vladimir Jabotinsky, the great Zionist Revisionist leader, said exactly this in "The Iron Wall.")
 - >> Palestinians who accept that Zionism was required by a thousand years of Christian murder can better see that Zionism was a movement of necessity, not the movement of malicious contempt described in the traditional Palestinian narrative. They may also concede that they would have been Zionists had they faced the same oppression. And if they concede this they must rethink their condemnation of Zionism, as they cannot condemn others for responding as they would have responded under like conditions.
 - >> The Christian West will recognize its responsibility for the conflict, and accordingly accept greater responsibility for ending it. The West's help is badly needed. For example, someone needs to compensate the Palestinian expellees of 1948 in exchange for their acceptance of a settlement that grants them no return to Israel, and only the West has the money.

Without the new type #2 narrative all apologies and words of contrition will ring hollow. Both sides will say "I'm sorry" but will silently still refuse to agree that what it did was wrong or that it would act as the other did if it walked in the other's shoes. The new narrative lets each say "I'm sorry for what I did--I did it under compulsion, and so would do it again if I faced the same conditions, but I am sorry, it was a crime," and also compels them to acknowledge that "I acknowledge that I would have done as you did had I faced your situation."

V. OTHER OBSTACLES TO PEACE HAVE FADED--SO NARRATIVES MAY REALLY MATTER

- A. The security problems that long impeded Israeli-Palestinian peace have largely abated. Israel would today be far safer within the 1967 borders than it was in 1967; and is far less safe outside those borders than it was in 1967. Today all security arguments favor Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories--not their retention.
 - 1. An Israel confined to the 1967 borders would now be vastly more secure than in 1967. (1) Israel has developed a large nuclear deterrent. This deterrent makes the conquest of Israel essentially impossible. (2) The Soviet Union, which was the main arms supplier to Israel's main Arab opponents, has collapsed and disappeared. (3) These Arab opponents (Syria especially) have stagnated economically. Net result: vast Israeli conventional

military superiority over its neighbors. (4) Israel has formed a strategic alliance with the United States. (5) Egypt and Jordan have made peace, are off line, no longer likely to participate in the main fear scenario--an Iraqi-led attack from the East. (6) The Palestinians have indicated willingness to demilitarize the West Bank and to allow Israel to maintain military installations on the West Bank. (These security measures were not controversial at Camp David II or Taba). And remember: Israel handily won the 1967 war, so Israel has improved on a workable situation. New security threats to Israel have arisen since 1967--most particularly of WMD attacks from Iraq and Iran, and of grand terror. But these risks are increased, not decreased, by Israeli retention of the occupied territories.

2. Israeli security in borders that include the occupied territories has vastly diminished over the past decade. Remaining in these expanded borders is now a grave threat to the safety of Israelis.

(1) Arab independent television has appeared since the mid-1990s.

This means that conflicts in the occupied territories are now televised to millions. Once upon a time Arabs saw none of the battle; now they see it all. (2) A Palestinian insurgency has emerged in the territories. This gives Arab TV something incendiary to televise. (3) A frighteningly skilled Islamic terrorist network, with Al Qaeda at its center, has emerged. (4) The collapse of the USSR and the development of nuclear programs in Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan. These last two factors raise the risk of a terrorist nuclear or biological or chemical attack on Israel. The first two factors together create a public climate in the Arab world that makes it easier for these terrorists to operate, and thus further raises the risk of a WMD attack. And finally, the rise of a Palestinian insurgency raises the costs of occupation by ensuring that the Israeli military will be demoralized and weakened by occupation duty--turned into a police force less capable of fighting the Syrians or Iraqis.

- B. Palestinian expectations and goals have reduced markedly since 1988. Before 1988 the Palestinians adhered to the goal of destroying Israel. Since 1988 their leaders have repeatedly signalled willingness to settle the conflict essentially on the borders of 1967--accepting only 22 percent of historic Palestine as their home.
- C. Arab incentives to end the conflict have sharply increased with the rise of Arab satellite TV, such as Al Jazeera and the other new Arab satellite stations. These stations' reporting on the Palestine conflict are politically mobilizing Arab publics. Undemocratic Arab regimes, notably Egypt and Saudi Arabia, fear this mobilization and accordingly are willing to take strong steps for peace.
- D. What other obstacles to peace remain? Aside from incendiary narratives, the main remaining obstacle to peace is religious extremism on both sides. Israel's settler movement will not abandon its settlements, largely for religious reasons, but peace is impossible while these settlements stand. And the Palestinian community is increasingly infected by a religious extremism, manifest in Hamas and Islamic Jihad, that cannot be moderated by new narratives.