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The Israel Palestinian conflict: contrasting narratives

by SYLVAIN EHRENFELD

Because this is a very difficult and emotional subject, I think its helpful for you to know something about my background. It is at least in part, a basis for my point of view. I grew up in Antwerp, Belgium, and lived there until the age of 11. I came to New york in 1940 in what I think was the last boat before Germany invaded. The reason I'm alive and here is because of my mother. She was organizing a soup kitchen feeding refugees from Germany, and she heard the stories and convinced my father to leave. I was aware of anti-Semitism from my early years.

As a young academic, I spent three years helping to develop a Department of Industrial Engineering at the Technion in Haifa, Israel on a project supported by the Israeli and America government.

Each side in the Israeli- Palestinian conflict has its own narrative telling some of the truth.What is important for understanding of both sides is to know what they leave out . Each side interprets events in terms of their own story, demonizes the other and omits their own contribution to the conflict. Each side is in a state of denial, ignoring the response to their own actions.

The Palestinian story focuses on victimhood,their suffering and dispossession and their deep sense of injustice at being punished because of Europe's treatment of Jews. They leave out the history of initiating wars, their violence, their faulty leadership and their constant refusal to take opportunities for accommodation.

The Israeli story emphasizes their long time historic attachment to the land, the legitimacy granted by the UN partition plan, the hostility and constant threat of wars coming from their neighbors, and the rejection of their peace offers. Underlying it all is the ever present trauma of the holocaust. They leave out their own role . They rationalize and downgrade the cruelties of the occupation. They further aggravate the situation by the historic western attitude of both condescending to and mostly disregarding the local Palestinian population.

In order to have some insight into past, present and possible future, we need some history and background. Then we return to the importance of narratives

A first question--why choose that particular corner of the Middle East as a haven for the Jewish people? Given the long attachment of Judaism to the Holy Land, and the disastrous history of Jewish suffering in Europe, the Jews needed to have a place to go where they would be accepted as Jews. Where would they have gone after World War 2? Chaim Weizmann, the first President of Israel said, "the world seemed to be divided into parts--those places where Jews could not live and those where they could not enter."

At present Jews are the majority in Israel. 5.5 million citizens of Israel are Jews and 1.3 million are Arabs. Arabs compose 20% of the Israeli population. They are second class citizens suffering a great deal of discrimination. Most Israelis would not deny this, while allowing for the fact that there are Arabs in the Knesset. The press in Israel is among the freest in the world, and most certainly in the Middle East. The Israeli judiciary is really independent. Still the large numbers of Arab citizens may become a problem.

They have recently become more vocal.

I am concerned about the current situation in Israel and the situation of the Palestinians. It is at a political and military impasse that is becoming increasingly dangerous. Given the attacks by Hezbollah from Lebanon, and the steady influx of a complicated mix of weapons that are becoming ever more sophisticated and far reaching, given the fact that these weapons are used by a guerrilla army that mingles with the general population, Israel's military strength is less effective. Hezbollah is generously supported by Iran.. Armed Israeli response only increases the anger of Arab populations all over

the world.

In my opinion this anger has long been very convenient for autocratic Arab governments, serving as a distraction from the poverty, frustration and powerlessness of what commentators call the "Arab street." In my view, it is both to Israel's benefit, and an urgent need, to settle the bitter relationship with the Palestinians. The consequences of not doing so are too serious.

Why hasn't this conflict been settled for the past 100 years? The history of Israel has always been intertwined with the UN. The partition plan of 1947 was the source for the creation of the State of Israel by the UN. The Arabs revolted against partition, a civil war began, the Arab governments joined the war, and the borders were decided by an armistice in 1949.

The struggle between the State of Israel and the Arabs living within the area has always come before world attention within the context of the UN. We need to know this background to see what is possible and where we go from here. When Ben Gurion came to Palestine in 1906, there were about 700,000 inhabitants, of whom 55,000 were Jews. Only about 550 could be defined as Zionist pioneers. The Jewish population was 8%. Demographically, Palestine was overwhelmingly Arab. In a British census of 1922, the percentage of Jews rose to something like 11%. By 1947 it had risen to 33%. Jerusalem was always mostly Jewish.

Israel Zangwill, a writer and early Zionist, said, "Israel was a land without people, for a people without land." This was clearly not the case. Not all Zionists saw it this way. Asher Ginzberg, better known by his literary name, Ahad Ha'am (One of the people) was a distinguished cultural Zionist. As early as the 1890's he called attention to the presence of the Arabs on the land. He said the relationship would be difficult and enduring. The problem wouldn't go away.

The Arabs saw an increasing number of Jews coming to what they saw as their land--buying up property and becoming more organized--a serious threat that made them feel increasingly dispossessed. Many Jews preferred to ignore the signs, until riots broke out in 1921 and 1929. They attacked Jewish neighborhoods. The Arabs call it a popular uprising, not riots. Some observers began to view the problem as two groups competing for the same land and population dominance.

Chaim Weizmann, First President of Israel, saw the difficulty of the problem in tragic terms, as a conflict between two rights. Even Ben Gurion at times, acknowledged that the Arabs had legitimate rights. For example, Ben Gurion to the Jewish agency in 1936, "I want you to see things--with Arab eyes--they see immigration on a large scale--they see lands passing into our hands. They see England identifying with Zionism." So did Jabotinsky, the founder of the Herut movement, who was more outspoken. What he said was, "It's them or us." Then came the British Mandate, the Balfour Declaration, giving the Jews a National home, and expanding Zionism. In the late 30's the feelings of the Arabs boiled over in a revolt which was ruthlessly suppressed by the British, aided by some Jews and some wealthy Arabs. To placate the Arabs, Britain restricted Jewish immigration. This was, of course, strongly opposed by Jewish groups.

Britain organized the Peel Commission to report on this difficult situation. In 1937 the Commission reported: there is an irrepressible conflict between two national communities within the narrow bounds of one small country...there is no common ground between them.: The report recommended partition. During World War 2 the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who was vehemently anti-Semitic, sided with the Nazis. The Jews formed a brigade. and fought with the Allies. This brigade was at first opposed by the British who were suspicious of their postwar goals.

After the war the UN organized a commission to study the situation and came to the same conclusion as the Peel Commission. A partition plan won UN approval. Ben Gurion then declared the State of Israel. The Arabs did not accept the plan, and war broke out. The war took place in two phases, firstly a civil war between Jews and Arabs in Israel. As civil wars are, it was fierce and cruel with many deaths. Then, in the second phase, the neighboring Arabs invade. The war ended in 1949 with an armistice.

In response to the situation, the UN passed the first of many resolutions--194, relating to the right of return of refugees. This constituted about 700,000 Arabs. For several reasons the Israeli state did not accept this resolution. Firstly, accepting so many people of a hostile population would constitute a fifth column. Secondly they pointed out that an equal number of Jews were expelled from Arab countries. Finally, after the end of World War 2, massive immigration of Jews was taking place. After expulsion from both Europe and North Africa, these immigrants were finding a home in Israel. They had no

other place to go.

After much discussion and pressure, the Israeli government offered to accept 100,000 Arab refugees. But the whole question became moot for an ironic reason. The Arabs rejected the offer of the return of 100,000 refugees, and all rejected Resolution 194, because they viewed it as a recognition of Israel's right to exist. From their point of view there was no sharing and no compromise--Jews had no place in Palestine. The refugees and many of their descendants have remained in camps all these years, leading a dislocated life, surviving on UN assistance, virtually ignored by the Arab governments.

In Israel there is much debate as to why and how these refugees were displaced. Benny Morris, the Israeli historian has studied these brutal times in great detail. Some fled from warfare, some were forcibly kicked out, some were urged by Arab armies to flee with the promise that they could return after victory. How many were kicked out is in contention by Israeli historians. One observation about the partition plan-- you have only to look at a map to see how impossible it was for any kind of coexistence. Each state was not a solid block of population.

Instead there were little mixed pockets of population. The map was drawn simply to follow the demography. It made no provision for ethnic or political considerations. Two peoples who had been locked in a bitter fight for decades, were thrown together.

Did the Arab governments help from a humanitarian point of view? Not particularly. The Palestinians have remained unpopular in large parts of the Arab world. When Egypt was in control of Gaza, from 1949 into 1967, Gaza Arabs were rarely allowed to travel into Egypt. After the first Gulf war in 1991, Kuwait expelled 250,000 Palestinians. Only Jordan allows Palestinians to become citizens. Elsewhere in the Arab world they are not permitted to become citizens. Even in Jordan, war broke out, suppressed by the Jordanian government. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has been a superbly effective scapegoat and distraction for the Arab masses, who rank very poorly in the UN's human development index in relation to the rest of the world.

The Six-Day War in 1967 created a fundamental change for Israel. Because Israel conquered the territories of the West Bank and Gaza, these lands with their millions of Palestinians came under Israeli occupation. Then followed the much discussed Resolution 242. The UN stipulated that Israel should withdraw essentially to the 1967 borders, as part of an overall agreement and a recognition of Israel's right to live in peace and security. The resolution acknowledges the Arab's rights to these lands, and Israel's right to peace and security. Israel expected to trade land for peace. In June 1967, Moshe Dayan said, "We are waiting for the Arabs' phone call. They know where to find us." The answer was given in Khartoum on September, 1967.

The major Arab states rejected the principles of Resolution 242, and announced their policy towards Israel--the three Nos: No recognition, no peace, no negotiations. Israel became the occupier of an angry and unhappy population. Living under occupation is terrible for the occupied. It is not a blessing for the occupier.

Arthur Herzberg, former Rabbi in Englewood, and former President of the American Jewish Congress tells a remarkable story in his book, "The Fate of Zionism." After Israel's victory, there was great jubilation. David Ben Gurion, former Prime Minister, had left politics and moved to a kibbutz in the Negev. He was invited to speak at a Labor Party meeting and arrived late, in traditional kibbutznik style, in shorts. He astounded everyone by saying that if Israel did not immediately return all the territory it had just captured, with the exception of East Jerusalem, it would be heading for a historic disaster.

Given the consequence all these years later, the loss of Israeli lives, the increasing demonization of Israel in the Arab press and in some parts of the world press, and to some degree in world opinion, in addition to the intifadas, the great suffering and humiliation of the Palestinians, the damage to the lives of both sides, it is becoming increasingly clear that Ben Gurion was right. He had the foresight to see that time passing only made it more difficult for Israel to protect its citizens and maintain control over a huge angry population. This is a cycle of violence and despair.

For Israel the situation is a trap. Israel cannot stay without creeping annexation that includes more Arabs into Israeli society--the demographic issue-- or leave, certainly not easily with all its many settlers. Also, what happens to the millions of Palestinians in the West Bank? Can they become citizens of Israel?

Now, in Israel there is much discussion of the demographic dilemma. Only about 50% of the people living between the

Jordan River and the Mediterranean are Jews. By the year 2020, the percentage of Jews will be 42%.

Currently, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has been heavily criticized for the conduct of the war with Hezbollah. To shore up his faltering government he turned sharply to the right and chose a hard liner, Avigdor Lieberman, for the cabinet. Lieberman is known for his extremely hawkish views. At one time he called for stripping Israeli Arabs of citizenship. This kind of talk makes an impossible situation even more impossible, if that is possible.

A two state solution seems like the way to go. The most detailed attempt was pursued by President Clinton, bringing together Israeli Prime Minister Barak, and Yasser Arafat. The first map outlining borders proposed by Israel has often been cited by the Palestinians as a ridiculous offer--a Bandustan plan of non-contiguous cantons, giving the Palestinians nothing that could be called a state. People have been left with the impression that this was the Israeli position. The final map reflecting Clinton's final proposal to which Barak agreed, was a contiguous area, encompassing most of the West Bank. It was the most reasonable deal to date, but it was rejected by Arafat. There were some weaknesses in the deal--for example--ambiguity over control of the air space over the projected Palestinian state.. The real weakness was that the Barak coalition had unravelled and he was now in a minority in the Knesset. However, even if the plan had not been approved by the Knesset, it could have become a signpost for a projected peace and a basis of hopes for the future, the signalling of a willingness to seriously negotiate the peace that both sides really need. Arafat rejected the plan and made no counter-offer. Sharon was elected, and the intifada broke out.

Clinton stated that the plan broke down essentially about the right of return of the refugees. Arafat told Clinton that if he accepted, Clinton could attend his funeral. Perhaps what is most important for the understanding of the conflict is that the plan clearly calls for a final resolution and an end to any further claims. This is the psychological sticking point for the Palestinians. They are interested in their concept of peace and justice--a vindication of their grievance. Unlike Israelis who are very tough negotiators, but also pragmatic and interested in solutions. Palestinians and Arab leaders take no responsibility for the disaster they have brought on their own people, both by the ineptness of their leadership and the autocracy and corruption of their governments.

Abba Eban was once quoted as saying, "Palestinian leadership never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity for peace."

The election of Hamas was in part a reproach to the corruption of the Palestinian National Authority and in part because of the political ineptness of the Abbas party who ran too many candidates against a well organized religious fundamentalist party with only a few candidates. Hamas, in spite of its charitable record, since they are responsible for much of the social services Palestinians get, still did not win a majority in the popular vote. However, both Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza. and Hezbollah in Lebanon are ideologically and religiously opposed to any kind of agreement on a political solution. They believe that Palestine, as stated in their charter, belongs entirely to Moslems. To relinquish any part of the land is forbidden. (Some orthodox Jews have a similar belief. God promised this land to the Jews and no one can give it up.)

Yet it has become clear that a military solution is impossible. Even worse--ongoing conflict is becoming ever more dangerous. If the nature of the conflict moves from the secular to the religious, we can only expect more bloodletting since it is against God's will to compromise.

At present given this history the worst aspect of the problem is that both Palestinians and the leadership of some of the Arab/Moslem states have refused to accept the legitimacy of Israel and realistic negotiations about the right of return of refugees to villages which no longer exist. Whatever the average Israeli and Palestinian thinks about a two-state solution, the constant violence supported and maintained by arms shipments allows extremists to sabotage any deal, even as it begins to take place

Given the long history of the Arab-Israeli conflict and failure of the many attempts at negotiations, I have come to the reluctant conclusion that both sides cannot come to an agreement by themselves. Arthur Herzberg, and Shlomo Ben-Ami, former Foreign Minister of Israel, and key participant in the Camp David talks have come to the same conclusion. There is no military solution. Neither side can impose its will on the other. All further hostilities will only inflict more cruelty on both peoples. Israel's safety has been thought to depend on deterrence, the idea that any attack can be handled by overwhelming force. The Lebanese conflict with Hezbollah's effectiveness in fighting Israel has put the deterrence doctrine in question, making the situation much more dangerous.

A political solution must be found, and can only happen with concerted international action. . The US, which at one time had the credibility to appear as an honest broker has lost this power since its entanglement in Iraq. The need for participation by the Arab League is absolutely necessary. Once, in 2002, they proposed a vague initiative. As the situation becomes more and more threatening and dangerous, because of the availability of sophisticated long distance weapons, they may become more willing to participate in negotiations. In fact ,they have recently shown renewed interest. Growing Shiite radicalism threatens the Sunni governments. Rage against Israel can rebound against these same governments. Unsettling wars in this area could create economic havoc. From the Israeli point of view, the acknowledgement of the limits of military power could influence Israel if there was a real chance of an agreement.

The outlines of a reasonable agreement are fairly clear from the implementation of Resolution 242 and the Clinton parameters of 2000. Is pressure likely to be more effective now? In the recent hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, the US was at first reluctant to demand an immediate ceasefire to give Israel time to control Hezbollah. When the situation looked as if it might spiral out of control, the major powers in the Security Council were able to act decisively and effectively to bring peacekeepers into the area. This demonstrates how the major powers in the Security Council can impose solutions if they choose. They may decide to do so in the Arab-Israeli conflict if they think the situation in the region is becoming too unstable and too dangerous. There is some good reason for this . The weapons involved are becoming more and more sophisticated, with potential to ignite a regional war and create chaos. One proposal is to put UN peacekeepers in the West Bank.

Finally, returning to the idea of narratives--Sami Adwan, a Palestinian educator, met with Dan Bar-On, an Israeli social psychologist. They have worked together since 2002 developing three booklets called "Learning The Other's Narrative." to be used in Palestinian and Israeli high schools. Each side is confronted with a contradictory version of history. Each page is divided into three: the Palestinian and Israeli narratives, and a third section left blank for the pupil to fill in. The purpose is not to legitimize or accept the other's narrative, but to recognize it. The booklets have been translated into English, Spanish, Italian, Catalan and Basque, and will soon appear in German. In France it has sold more than 23,000 copies. It has also been adapted for use for the Macedonian-Albanian narratives.

There have been great difficulties in introducing the booklets into Palestinian and Israeli high schools. However, more and more people in these communities are urging a change in the teaching of history,. Understanding the other's narrative is essential for progress, and as well, essential for humanist thinking and ethical action.