# WPF REPORTS

# *Myth & Narrative*

## IN THE
## ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN
## CONFLICT

DEBORAH L. WEST

WORLD
PEACE
FOUNDATION
FOUNDED 1910

# THE WORLD PEACE FOUNDATION

The World Peace Foundation was created in 1910 by the imagination and fortune of Edwin Ginn, the Boston publisher, to encourage international peace and cooperation. The Foundation seeks to advance the cause of world peace through study, analysis, and the advocacy of wise action. As an operating, not a grant-giving foundation, it provides financial support only for projects which it has initiated itself.

Edwin Ginn shared the hope of many of his contemporaries that permanent peace could be achieved. That dream was denied by the outbreak of World War I, but the Foundation has continued ever since to attempt to overcome obstacles to international peace and cooperation, drawing for its funding on the endowment bequeathed by the founder. In its early years, the Foundation focused its attention on building the peacekeeping capacity of the League of Nations, and then on the development of world order through the United Nations. The Foundation established and nurtured the premier scholarly journal in its field, *International Organization*.

Since 1993, the Foundation has examined the causes and cures of intrastate conflict. The peace of the world in these decades has been disturbed primarily by outbreaks of vicious ethnic, religious, linguistic, and intercommunal antagonism within divided countries. The episodes of brutal ethnic cleansing that convulsed Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo are but the best known and most devastating of a rash of such attempts to oust rivals across the globe. Few places are immune from some variant of this internecine warfare, whether the immediate battles are over religion, language, appearance, or color differences. Thus, the Foundation is active in and studies the problems of Cyprus, Sri Lanka, and the Sudan, and has worked in and studied the prospects for democracy in Burma and Haiti. It has sponsored research on the role of non-governmental organizations in preventing conflict in ethnically divided societies. It has engaged in feasibility studies regarding the reduction of conflict in Africa by the creation of African crisis response forces. It has analyzed the use of preventive diplomacy in resolving ethnic and other intercommunal conflicts. Its work on truth commissions demonstrates how that method of post-conflict justice-seeking can help prevent future internal conflicts. The Foundation has examined how the United Nations should manage its peace building responsibilities.

Intercommunal conflict often becomes civil war and, in some cases, leads to failed states. The Foundation has actively researched the causes of state failure, and how best to reinvigorate and manage the resuscitation of wounded states.

Contributing to widespread killings in intercommunal conflicts, civil wars, and imploding states is the easy availability of small arms and other light weapons. For this reason, the Foundation engaged in a long-term examination of the small arms problem, and how its licit and illicit trade should be addressed. The Foundation has also analyzed the connection between conflict diamonds and civil war.

Part of the task of the Foundation is to resolve conflicts as well as to study them. The Foundation's work in Congo, Cyprus, Burma, Sri Lanka, Haiti, the Sudan, Zimbabwe, and all of Africa has resolution of conflict as its goal. It has sponsored a detailed study of negotiating the end of deadly conflict within and between states. It is also engaged in an analysis of the successes and failures of African leadership.

# MYTH AND NARRATIVE

# IN THE

# ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

DEBORAH L. WEST

# CONTENTS

***Deborah L. West** is Program Associate, World Peace Foundation and WPF Program on Intrastate Conflict at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.*

# REPORT OF DISCUSSIONS

**Myth and Narrative in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**
Conference: February 27–March 1, 2003
John F. Kennedy School of Government
Cambridge, MA

*The following is intended to provide a non-individually attributed report of the discussions at the "Myth and Narrative in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict" conference held February 27-March 1, 2003 at the John F. Kennedy School of Government. Debate was spirited throughout the conference, and participants often disagreed strongly regarding the many controversial issues. Items included in this summary do not necessarily reflect the author's opinion or that of all conference participants. Instead, this report seeks faithfully to capture the sense of debate and the character of the important questions raised during three days of intense discussion. Participants had the opportunity to review the report and submit their comments but were not asked to sign it or to agree or disagree with its contents.*

To what extent is the contemporary framing of the narratives of causality and responsibility for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reflective of myths and narratives which capture a complete portrait of founding assertions? To what extent does each side's core narrative assist conflict resolution? To the extent that there are narratives which delegitimize the other party to the conflict, can they be confronted? These were the underlying questions which framed the discussion of Myth and Narrative in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The title of the project reflected certain presumptions, including the definitions of the terms "myth" and "narrative." Although in some contexts the words are used interchangeably, throughout the conference the term "myth" was generally considered to indicate a story, often about the origins of a group, which was not historically true. (It should be noted that not all falsehoods are myths.) The term "narrative" was used to indicate a person or group's story of what they perceived to have happened. Narratives may or may not be historically "true;" a single event can contain multiple, potentially overlapping and competing narratives because of the experiences and perceptions of the participants in an event. Myth generally holds a negative connotation, narrative a positive one.

It has been argued that national narratives (or myths) are essential in providing the continuity that people need for collective action. Even if a particular myth or narrative is conceived as a rationalization or an untruth, it can still serve as an organizing principle. For example, the British used founding myths of British military success and the traditional "stiff upper lip" to strengthen citizens' resolve during World War II.

The power of such myths and narratives can echo through time. As Orwell said, "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past."[1] Myths are most effective and most dangerous when they remain unrecognized for what they are. If one believes in objective reality, it is distressing to realize that facts are not always the driving force in human behavior. Most conference participants agreed that conflict arises when one set of myths is seen as degrading to the other. However, it is very difficult to "bust myths" if a population is not ready. Timing and context play an important role. (When, for example, were European nations prepared to confront their complicity in the Holocaust? Israelis are able to bust their own myths because of their maturity as a nation, whereas Palestinians lack a nation from which to reevaluate and rephrase their narratives.)

There clearly is a connection between myths and narratives and what political options are entertained (or not). Myths do motivate collective action/inaction.

Despite being constructs, myths do not solely have a negative effect. For twenty years after World War II, countries in Western Europe homogenized their previously highly divergent national narratives. Even accounting for other factors such as economics and a police presence, Stephen Van Evera asserts that the homogenization of myth has helped to strengthen European peace for over fifty years.[2]

During the conference, two strong caveats arose with regard to viewing history through the lens of myth and narrative. The first was a warning to heed inequality at every historical juncture. Equal weight cannot be given to Nazi myths vs. Jewish myths regarding the Holocaust, Afrikaner mythology and British mythology regarding the Anglo-Boer War, or Palestinian myth vs. Israeli myth. Another warning concerned how easily even seemingly positive myths can be turned into destructive propaganda and ideology. This problem can best be avoided through a scrupulous search for truth and justice. The participants in the conference largely agreed that intellectuals hold a particular responsibility for revising the historical record and reinforcing those who try to tell the truth.

Several participants noted that there was no contradiction between paying attention to myths and being concerned with truth. Those who study myth and narrative must pay careful attention to the persons who propagate which myths and which narratives, and why. Such a study can be a part of a process of finding the truth.

---

[1] George Orwell, *1984* (New York, 1948, 1992, rev. ed.), 32.
[2] Steven Van Evera, "Primed for Peace: Europe after the Cold War," *International Security*, XV (1990/91), 7–57.

# The Function of Narratives: Coexisting or Bridging?

The function of narratives was discussed at great length. It was suggested that in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, each side's narrative is rooted in fear and insecurity, albeit for different reasons. Each side fears destruction, and, in another sense, each side fears peace. If peace comes, each side will have to reorganize itself. This process is difficult because it is psychologically easier to organize against a clearly defined opposing force than without one. In order to move beyond the traditional opposition, each side must recognize and legitimize the other side's fears as well as its own.

During the conference, there were two main streams of thought about how to deal with fears and compromises. One solution called for two narratives. Those narratives do not have to be equal or unproblematic. However, as soon as one side feels secure in its own narrative, it becomes more willing to look at the other's narrative. Ideally, both narratives would have points of agreement, and points of disagreement, but mutual respect for each. This solution was seen as more practical in the short- and medium-term.

The other option, considered by some participants as academically preferable and practically impossible at this point, was to create a bridging narrative—a single narrative which could encompass the narratives of both sides to the conflict.

In a two narrative solution, there is also space in the middle which should not be lost. Each side can focus on that space in the middle and how each might fit into such a space. It is possible to delve deeper into parts of history that have been ignored and thereby to recapture a richer history. In the past fifty years, an "unpicking" of the diverse experience has occurred, suggested one participant. It is not necessary to weave all of the narrative strands into one history, but to compel people to respect the diversity of narratives. Is pity the bridging mechanism? Or is compassion?

Some participants felt that the dual narrative option was more conducive to a two-state solution. Others urged a bridging narrative regardless of whether the solution were one-state or two-state in character. A bridging narrative could focus on human concerns rather than national ones. Whether Zionism was colonialist or nationalist, Palestinians were uprooted from their land. A bridging narrative can talk about Zionism being very positive for Jews and disastrous for Palestinians at the same time. Both stories can be true; one need not be false. Collective identity of the one does not have to be built on the negation of the other.

A bridging narrative should not be seen as reductionist; it is intercultural rather than multicultural, suggested some participants. A good bridging narrative can include discreet narratives with many contact points. Other participants noted that within narratives certain terms such as "ethnic cleansing" can be very provocative. Some noted that it is important not to idealize the victim, which often is an ethnic group which under different circumstances would have acted in the same way as the victimizers. For example, it is important to recognize that not all events or general trends occurred uniformly. It is clear that in 1948 Israel oc-

cupied Palestinian villages, that Arab forces attacked Israel, that there was Palestinian and Arab resistance, that many Palestinians fled for their lives, and that villages were destroyed.

However, some participants noted that the motives of the Israelis were somewhat less clear. What was the Israelis' intent? In 1948, why were Muslim villages emptied but not Christian Arab villages? Some commanders decided on their own to leave certain Palestinian villages intact, or to allow expelled villagers to return—how do these facts affect overall policy? The level of Palestinian/Arab resistance is also contested. Most localities decided not to resist by force.[3]

Difficult questions about the use of truth and myth were raised. Can emphasizing truth lead to greater conflict? Can an untruth that encourages peace be beneficial? The group largely agreed that in the long run the truth would come out, and not addressing it earlier would only lead to greater conflict. Only so much can be expected from truth, however. The example of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Committee was given. Few South Africans believe that the TRC's work led to real reconciliation, but many do believe that some truth and some restorative justice were achieved.

The point was made that both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict tend to cling to "combat narratives," which are useful for mobilizing support, but not helpful for achieving reconciliation. One participant suggested that a bridging narrative could place most of the blame for the origins of the conflict on the Christian West, and earlier anti-semitism.

On the Palestinian side, it was suggested that there is a feeling that if the Christian West were held responsible, that fact would legitimate Zionism. Also, some Palestinian voices lump together the Christian West and Zionism as both being European and colonialist. In addition, it was noted that Zionism also sprang from an urge to avoid assimilation, although that avoidance became a more pressing goal after World War II. Nonetheless, taking the Christian West into account could narrow the narrative gap; some suggested that it could serve as a "hate soaker." There was disagreement as to whether this approach would be useful or simply diversionary.

Some members of the group said that the way in which the Zionist project was fulfilled was in many fundamental ways wrong, and that many wrongs continue today, which in some sense continue and elaborate past policy. The group could not agree on how (or if) the Zionist project could have been prosecuted without forcefully displacing Palestinians.

The nature of the Arab-Israeli encounter must be examined and the truth agreed upon. This must be the basis of a new narrative in either case, suggested the participants.

---

[3] Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1948* (Cambridge, 1987).

# Suffering and Justification

Suffering is a real and indisputable personal emotion. Some participants observed that in the Middle East it has often been downplayed and/or exploited for political purposes. Because of the nature of suffering and each individual's experience, it should never be used as a source of comparison. From a humanistic perspective, there is no way to justify suffering.

The Palestinian experience of suffering has involved not just death and personal injury, but humiliation and denial of personal freedom and opportunity, observed some participants. These are different kinds of pain that are real and experienced daily.

The images of Palestinian suffering that appear in the Arab media almost exclusively concentrate on suicide attacks on Israelis. Several participants who disagreed about other aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict concurred that this focus has several negative consequences. Palestinians are not offered help by Arab nations because they are seen as heroic fighters not in need of assistance. The Arabic media shows only the "heroic" bombers; it does not show the main issues, such as what happens on the ground on a daily level, or what drove the suicide bombers to their missions. Arab nations use Palestinian suffering to deflect their citizens from examining the numerous problems in their own countries. As well, the depiction of Palestinians as largely helpless against a powerful Israel reinforces the perception of Arabs as victims and discourages them from taking action against their own problematic regimes. Participants felt that if the Arab press and television gave more coverage to their own problems—and worked to resolve them—they would have more energy and credibility to aid the Palestinians.

Another issue that arose was the problem of being a victim vs. being the victimizer, and the different types of suffering that accompany each. Groups often struggle over the question of who has suffered more. When a group is defined as a victim, it is not inclined to take responsibility for other actions or individual identity. One participant cited his work with the children of Nazi perpetrators and Holocaust survivors' children in the U.S., Israel, and Germany. This group comprised people from current conflicts, and sought to discover whether the way the group worked (through storytelling and narrative) would prove helpful in resolving the current conflict. The Jewish people in the group felt more comfortable with the Germans than with the Palestinians. Some of them already knew the Germans and had a relationship of trust, and most felt culturally closer to the Germans than to the Arab Palestinians. Finally, they felt more comfortable being the recognized victims than to exercise responsibility for being partial victimizers of Palestinians.

Being entrenched in the role of victim is a major divide between Israeli Jews and Palestinians, and both groups usually struggle over the question of which one suffered more. Jews cite their parents' and grandparents' experiences during the Holocaust, and Palestinians cite their parents' and grandparents' experience in

1947–1948, as well as their painful current experiences. Both narratives are real, but there is a function beyond reality that creates a "secondary game" of perception and competition. Most participants agreed that it was very important to understand that suffering should not be ranked. However, different moral meanings can be attached to suffering. There is a suffering from being an oppressor and a suffering from being oppressed, but they cannot be equated.

It was also observed that there is a lack of parity between Jewish Israeli and Palestinian narratives. The Jewish narratives tend to be more coherent and constructed, whereas the Palestinian narratives tend to be more broken. This phenomenon is not unlike the stories of Holocaust survivors, the majority of whose narratives were also broken after World War II, when and if they could talk at all. The overall Holocaust narrative grew in cohesion over the next few decades, which not all participants saw as a positive development.

Regarding the idea of the other, it was noted that Israeli Jews are still outsiders in the Middle East. Most are much more European or Western in orientation. Few speak Arabic. This issue has not been dealt with and would have to be addressed with the advent of peace. One element common to both narratives is the idea that both Palestinians and the post–World War II Zionists were/are refugees. It was suggested that this commonality could lead to greater mutual understanding (as in the case of American Jews supporting the U.S. Civil Rights movement) but often it does not. One participant noted that a major difference lies in the conditions after the suffering were experienced. If those who suffered feel secure about themselves in the aftermath, it is easier to allow their natural empathy to be expressed. If they are not, however, their fears will remain.

It was clear to most participants that each side of the conflict needs to recognize the suffering on the other side in order to move forward. Jewish Israelis have limited exposure to the daily suffering of Palestinians in addition to a very different view of the displacement which happened in 1948. Recognition of Palestinian suffering was urged, as was the Israeli government's removal of its chokehold on Palestinian society. Palestinians, as well, were considered to be largely unempathetic with the Jewish Israeli position. Some participants noted that given the plight of Palestinians today, it is difficult to have empathy with Israel's pain regarding the Holocaust and fear of suicide bombings and other acts of terror aimed to evict its state from the region. Nonetheless, other participants declared that such a recognition of Israeli fears is absolutely necessary.

The first steps toward reconciliation on both sides must include recognition and apology. Some participants argued that these steps could take place even before difficult practical issues such as the right of return and the end of terror attacks are addressed, while others felt that concrete solutions should of necessity come first. Although the participants generally agreed that recognition and apology were important, there was a feeling that the sentiment on both the Palestinian and Israeli street would be against reconciliation. Another next step would be to increase bi-communal experiences.

# Compromise and Compassion

A core element of the Israeli Jewish narrative, cited one participant, is the return of the Jewish people to its national home. A major component of this core belief is that there is a Jewish people. It is a construction, as are most nations. Some participants felt that the dispossession of another people was not an inherent part of the original Zionist project; others disagreed. For example, there were some Zionists, albeit a minority, who believed in a Zionist binational state.

Even though it is clear why Palestinians have difficulty accepting the idea of the Jewish people returning to its homeland, which negates their own narrative, it is also very difficult for Israelis to reject this part of their narrative. Neither negation should be required for conflict resolution and reconciliation.

Some participants suggested that it is important for Palestinians to acknowledge the narrative of Israeli Jews and to respect it; it is not necessary to agree with it. There must be a parallel acknowledgement by Jewish Israelis of the Palestinian identity. The process of reconciliation involves adopting a joint narrative without abandoning the core element of each narrative.

There was some discussion of the development of a right of Israeli Jews to self determination because they are in the Middle East and have been there for over a hundred years as an immigrant movement and over half a century as a nation. That kind of statement, balanced by statements from the Israeli side, could compose a bridging narrative on which both sides could agree and could be a basis for conflict resolution and the beginning of a reconciliation process which would take place over time. Older narratives could become less important. Yet, Palestinians cannot be expected to accept the legitimacy of the Zionist project, nor can Israelis necessarily accept its illegitimacy. The inherent contradiction between both sides' view of the conflict must be acknowledged and put aside; this contradiction inherently supports the argument for two narratives rather than for one bridging narrative.

New settlements and terrorist acts must stop immediately, the participants recommended, and settling concrete issues of where Palestinian refugees could return must be resolved. They will not be resolved for every refugee given that some land cannot easily be returned, but finding acceptable land to which Palestinians would go would be a positive breakthrough. Walid Khalidi has said that the number who should return should neither offend the Palestinians nor frighten the Israelis.[4] Several said that before a home for refugees is found, Israel must acknowledge and apologize for the expulsion in 1948. Others added that the Palestinians must acknowledge and apologize for the violence that they have perpetrated.

---

[4] Walid Khalidi, in private conversation with Ilan Pappe and Linda Butler, 2002.

# The Dynamics of Conflict/Nationalism

During the period leading up to and immediately following the war of 1948, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appeared to be intractable and irreconcilable; it was protracted, violent, and involved numerous refugees and extensive property damage. This situation posed major psychological challenges to those involved. Basic, universal psychological needs for security were (and are) not being met. In contrast, over time there has been a strong need on each side to develop the psychological strengths necessary to deal with a rival.

The ethos of a conflict is a configuration of central beliefs shared by society members which give society direction, said one participant. The ethos of a conflict is constructed out of a set of themes of belief; myths and narratives are incorporated into this ethos and maintain it. The themes involved in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict include: (1) beliefs about the justness of each side's goals (which simultaneously negates and delegitimizes the other side's goals); (2) security needs; (3) a set of conditions for a secure life; (4) valuing those who provide security; (5) patriotism and attachment to the land; (6) unity; (7) the positive collective self view of the group; and (8) victimhood.

These themes are disseminated throughout a society through schools, public discourse, leaders, etc. In order to move into the track of conflict resolution, the conflict's ethos must be changed. In the 1980s and 1990s, some change toward a more conciliatory ethos took place on the Israeli side, but much of this change in attitude has regressed to the mean of earlier insecurities and corresponding myths as a result of the latest intifada.

According to Palestinians, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is between a national group or a group of people living in their homeland and a group of people who came from outside Palestine and developed an ideology as to why Palestine should be their homeland. Whether this project is considered justified is already an ideological statement, not a matter of fact. It was naïve to think that it was possible to establish a Jewish state in the Palestinian homeland without the use of force. That Arabs only understand force is a point of view that is commonly accepted in Israeli society, and untrue, according to some of the participants.

The Israeli-Palestinian relationship has been shaped throughout by fear. This fear must be considered and managed. Palestinians fail to appreciate the fear of Israelis. In turn, Israelis often fail to confront their fears, and a fearful nation with massive weapons is a dangerous nation.

It should be kept in mind that fear is not unique to Israel. It has been a common theme in settler societies, e.g. Americans on the frontier, whites in South Africa. Fear, in these cases, stems from a knowledge that the other party will not accept a claim to territory. Israeli participants again argued that the important antecedent of fear was the collective memory of the Holocaust.

Facing fear means facing history and responsibility. For obvious reasons, doing so is not easy. Discrimination and inequality became part of Israeli society, according to some participants, who noted the perception that Zionist policy never hid its sense of superiority over the Palestinians. Even in the framework of the state of Israel, the same process continued in land distribution, immigration, and economic laws. It was suggested that in Israel, it is morally acceptable to prefer Jews over Arabs because the state is "Jewish."

Different perceptions of the Camp David meeting in 2000 are critical to the ongoing debate. Palestinians perceive that the options on the table at Camp David were nowhere near enough, and that Israel had no right to offer land while still continuing to build settlements. In contrast, the Israeli perception/myth is that Prime Minister Ehud Barak generously offered "everything" and that the Palestinians would not even come to the table to negotiate. Because the second intifada erupted immediately after the failure of the Camp David meeting, Israeli fears have fueled a shift to the right in Israeli politics toward self-protection, and away from finding accommodation with Palestinians.

Part of the response of both sides to the failure to forge an agreement at Camp David was a resort to nationalism. One way to reconcile the two sides is to deal with the aggregate experience, not with national character, said several participants. Another is to view the fear of the expeller and the fear of the expelled differently. In general, it is also important to look at all of the other agendas that have been sidelined by the centrality of the conflict.

One participant said that most Palestinians he knew accepted that Israeli society was dynamic, living, and would simply not go away. He added that the critical issue was that instead of addressing and re-addressing the past, the Israeli government continues a policy of settlement which only serves to reinforce the most harmful aspects of past Israeli policy.

## Zionism: Origins and Controversies

There is an ongoing controversy among historians regarding the beginning of nations and how nations express their founding narratives. National narratives can be said to express national identity and can reveal the conflicts and tensions inherent in a nation which may be difficult to detect from the outside. National narratives are complex, and subject to change as the nation itself evolves.

The conferees did not review the historical beginnings of Zionism in the nineteenth century. But it was suggested that there were four main tension points in Zionist identity that have changed as the idea of Israel and its reality evolved.

- There is tension between the historically fragile Jewish identity and the Zionist claim of political, religious, and physical strength. The myth of strength was created because of the weakness (and fear of weakness) lurking beneath Jewish identity.

- Further tension surrounds whether the Jewish identity really was weak, or whether that idea was reinforced by Zionism in order to strengthen support for a Jewish state. (Jewish strength and creativity can be seen in the diaspora.)

- A related issue questions whether the Zionist movement, in tying its people to the land, deprived them of traditional Jewish intellectualism and debate.

- The anti-semitic depiction of Jews has traditionally been polarized: oppressed and weak on one side versus devious and scheming on the other. Jewish self-estimation also wavers between extremes of strength and weakness. Zionism has neither solved nor reduced anti-semitism.

Reconsideration of Jewish identity and narrative was deemed both possible and necessary. One participant suggested that the Jewish experience of having to move and adapt could help Israelis better to understand Palestinian motives, as the Palestinians are engaged in a struggle for land that they consider theirs.

## Reconsidering Identity

Some questions facing Israel include: If Zionism were sometimes flawed in its execution, does that fact invalidate the lives of those who fought for the Zionist cause? Does it invalidate the lives of the generations who were born in Israel who do not see themselves as colonials, but Israelis? How should Israel act in order to rectify past wrongs, without giving up on a national identity based on the idea of a Jewish state? Is this historically possible? Was Israel behaving as a colonial power? If so, was the colonization of Israel different from other colonies because there was a feeling of returning to an ancestral homeland, and because of the post-Holocaust feeling that Israel was the last refuge? Is Israel colonialist since the settlements continue? In the future, will Israelis want to accept one state without worrying who comprises the majority?

Reconsideration of Palestinian identity was urged as well, though there was intense debate as to whether Palestinians, coming from the weakness of being an occupied people and refugees rather than the strength of a nation, were equipped to develop their own narrative, which is in fact still under construction. At what point in time are people no longer refugees?

The issue of Palestinian textbooks provides an interesting and concrete example of the difficulties in forming a Palestinian narrative. A participant described how, in 1994, the Palestinian National Authority was first allowed to issue textbooks. Their efforts began with textbooks for grades 1-6. The texts give the impression that Palestine is a normal country with a long and peaceful history. The books were striking in avoiding the types of language and stories that anyone could criticize (e.g. referring to right of return.)

In 1995–1996, a committee was appointed to draw up a Palestinian curriculum, and in less than a year the committee produced a 600-page document, conceived to boost democracy and to integrate the curriculum across subjects. The document was creative on issues of history; the committee wanted to create a national, an Israeli, and an international narrative, without those narratives conflicting with each other. Sensitive issues surrounding the conflict were avoided in the texts, which were published in 2000 and are in use in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

These textbooks attempt to depict a continuity of Palestinian identity. Maps drawn of the region, even in the Middle Ages, show Palestinian national borders, and these are reflected in the books. One participant said that he saw the narrative in these textbooks as one in which everything is contested. The books do not know what to teach to the children because the adults have not figured out the issues yet. They did what textbook publishers all over the world do—call on the authoritative documents. However, Palestinians have a very small set of authoritative documents. It is not clear if the spasm of textbook writing reflected a stage in nation building or an attempt to compose a national narrative under occupation.

Some participants cautioned against presenting a parity of narratives between Israelis and Palestinians because of this asymmetric relationship. There are major differences in the power and knowledge of each side. The popping of Israeli myths has "made a big bang" while Palestinian origin myths are still being developed in order to prove that their nation exists and that Palestinians are entitled to the same rights as any other people. The revision of Israeli history has caused some Israelis to develop more sympathy for the Palestinian struggle, but there is still a long way to go to educate Israelis about Palestine.

Palestinian nationalism and Zionism may disagree on past heroes and the victims, but they treat these issues fundamentally the same. Both subordinate the past to legitimize their current national struggle. The Palestinians have experienced the transformation of the territory as colonial and racist and their struggle for self-determination must be seen in that light.

## The Search for Peace and the Drive Toward War

It was suggested that there was only a short historic moment when the broadest part of the Palestinian and Israeli populations were likely to accept a solution. That time period ended with the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Since then, hope for peace has been a victim of the Oslo process, the renewed intifada, and continued settlement. Each side of the conflict is afraid of the other's maximalist vision.

On the one hand are the Islamist movements spearheading the terrorist campaign and suicide bombings who want to remove Israelis in their entirety. About 30 percent of Palestinians agree with this policy, whereas about 40 percent of

Palestinians are not confident about any solution. Another maximalist solution calls for a binational state in which Palestinians would be the majority by default.[5] Although many participants liked the idea of an ultimate binational state, some strongly disagreed, and few thought that it was practical in the near-term.

Some participants noted that to Israelis, a binational solution sounds like *reconquista* in a different guise, given the population disparity. Nevertheless, the Israeli government policy (and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's policy in particular) of continuing settlements has persuaded many Palestinians that Israel wants to gain as much land as possible.

The conflict in Israel-Palestine has been filled with charged language and emotional reactions. The ethno-religious ideology of Zionism is out of keeping with the norms of the twenty-first century, noted some participants, and every age is judged by the laws and norms of its time. It was suggested that Zionism could theoretically be defined as a movement to achieve a state, and post-Zionism as the period after 1948.

There are two distinct trends within Zionism. One is the pure Jewish state, and the other is the territorially maximal state. The Labor Party wants the institutions of the Jewish state without dealing with the issue of second class citizens. They would be willing to give land for peace in order to lessen the demographic imbalance, said some participants.

Public opinion of Muslims and public opinion among Muslims are fairly different things, described some participants. There is a Western (particularly American) view of Islam as aggressive and undemocratic. Factually, however, there appears to be no correlation between the strength of Islam and the weakness of democracy. And while anti-Israeli feelings run strong in the Arab world, one participant cited studies denying a primordial hostility against Jews. "We all more or less agree that it's not about some militant impulse, it's coming from economic and political grievances. It should not be seen as religious determinism." Some participants asked: How serious a problem are the stereotypes about Islam and what can be done to dispel them? Would it make a difference if we succeeded in dispelling them?

When support for Arafat was falling (after 1994) it did not translate into support for either the Palestinian left or for Hamas. It translated into support for none of the above, noted one participant.

There were large areas of agreement about how deplorable the situation is in the Occupied Territories and how dangerous is the Israeli chokehold. There was also a lot of agreement on the 1948 war—that Israel was created at the expense of the Palestine, that after 1948 Israel did not accept responsibility for rectifying the situation, and that the hostility of Arab nations surrounding Israel exacerbated

---

5 Eugene Rogan, "Manifest Destiny: Maximalist Visions of Palestinian and Israeli Nationalisms" (Paper presented at WPF Program Conference on Myth and Narrative in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 2003).

the conflict. However, it was thought that people on both sides have not yet found a way to agree on how to frame those issues.

## Questions, Probability, and Practicality

Do the above areas of disagreement have to be resolved in order to make progress? Is there a bridging narrative to avoid such an existential question? Can one agree to disagree or agree about what each side thinks is understandable given their experiences (which are different)? Can one focus on occupation since 1967? Do the deeper issues have to be addressed first? What should be done about this area of disagreement? Is there a way to address these myths that will make a difference? Can dispelling myths change how people look at each other? Can it do so enough to make a difference?

Because of the balance of power, some participants noted the acute danger that the gap between the discourse of two states and the reality of building two states will always be dictated by the Israelis. Some participants felt that academics should consider solutions that create peace in the long run, but that there is nothing wrong with talking about the two-state solution as a contemporary stage, not the end of the conflict.

It must also be remembered that a two-state solution is not 50 percent to each, noted some participants. Israeli Jews already have 80 percent of the territory and would have to return less than 20 percent in any agreement to return to the suggested 1967 borders.

The three million refugees cannot be excluded from the solution; doing so would not only be ethically wrong, but functionally impractical. They have not been consulted hitherto in the process, which is a fundamental mistake. What kind of state do Palestinians want?

Has the left been completely marginalized in Israel? Some participants noted that, psychologically speaking, most Israeli doves became confused and lost faith in the peace process after Camp David and the renewed intifada. This psychological change has had a major influence on policy and politics in Israel after 2001. Most Israelis have given up hope. The remaining doves are still doves because they approach the conflict from a morally empathetic point of view. Israel must decide what kind of society and/or state it wants. Many want a humanist state, but with a Jewish majority. Palestinian mythology could become irrelevant in the absence of power.

Can there ever be a concept of human rights and self determination outside the framework of a sovereign state? Some in the group agreed that a state for all citizens is more preferable, yet argued for a two-state solution now because it is the only practical one. Others felt that a two-state solution was the only solution. Participants observed that it is difficult for those immersed in conflict to conceive it more broadly, and globally, through the lens of human rights.

# History and Interpretation

Throughout the conference there was a disconnect between those who wanted to talk about what really happened, historically, and those who wanted to talk about the perception of reality. Both views are important in resolving the conflict. Discussing myth and narrative generally proved to be more fruitful than talking about the minutiae of what occurred.

Conference participants largely felt that both Palestinians and Israelis could agree on much of the factual history of the founding of Israel and even on the broad events which have happened since. Participants largely agreed that Jews weren't expelled from Arab world, Barak's "generous offer" wasn't generous, and Islam is not inherently uncompromising and militant.

However, major differences lay in the interpretation of events and are crucial. Interpretational issues include:

- Israelis seeking refuge in their ancestral homeland because after World War II there was nowhere else to go.

- Palestinians losing a homeland due to a European-inspired colonization.

- Heroic fighting of the Israelis against a Palestinian/Arab resistance.

- Amount of resistance on the part of the Palestinians.

- Palestinians want the entire state (as proved by suicide bombings).

- Israelis want the entire state (as proved by 1967 war, continuing settlements).

- The right of Jews to have their own nation-state and what inspired the nationalist movement. How did outside forces and the Palestinians affect the dynamics of the movement?

- The right of Palestinians to have their own nation-state and what inspired the nationalist movement. How did outside forces and Zionists affect the dynamics of the movement?

- Arabs have continually rejected partition while the Israelis have accepted it.

- How many Palestinian refugees were displaced in Israel?

- How many Jewish refugees were displaced in the Middle East?

- Is there any parity?

Because of the very disparate experiences of 1948, it will be difficult to find a bridge between symbolic gestures, practical arrangements, and reconciliation. Israel must deal with the refugee problem for which it bears much responsibility. Yet, Israel cannot accept full return of refugees within its own borders. Compensation, resettlement, and limited return would offer a practical response.

Population transfer was a popular approach in the first half of the twentieth century, noted some participants. Most other transfers were accepted. There was

a bloody Turkish-Greek population exchange. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) approved it, the League of Nations supervised it, and the transfer came to be seen as a positive precedent for settling ethnic conflict. The Soviets expelled Kurds, Chechens, and Tatars. After World War II, twelve to fourteen million ethnic Germans were expelled from the Soviet Union, and two million were killed.

Some participants explained that many Israeli survivors of 1948 still cannot admit that battle shock and trauma occurred. No medical units addressed it at the time; officially it did not exist. This sort of internal Israeli mythology is very difficult to bust. Kibbutzniks who were captured and went into captivity in Egypt were excised from the official history after they returned and stigmatized because they did not fight. The term Masada was forbidden to be used during the war of independence, also the image of the Warsaw Ghetto—no "dying to the last man" because it was feared that it could happen in Israel. There was a strong perception of danger, and whether that perception was accurate or not, it is what was acted upon. How great was the real danger vs. the perceived danger? If the situation was not David vs. Goliath, what was it?

Some participants suggested that what can be learned from the failure of Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts until now is that peace cannot be dictated by Israel. The 1967 war results are important, but the root of the continuing, contemporary conflict lies in 1948.

Some participants cited the Israeli government's call for an *aliyah* of 1 million Jews, which indicates that there is room in the country for a larger population—but only for non-Arabs. Others said that given the decline in Jewish population worldwide and that almost everyone who is likely to immigrate already has, a massive aliyah is impossible. Some participants added that Israel is also an illiberal society. Israel lacks a bill of rights, and possesses a politically important and powerful fundamentalist plurality.

There was a general feeling among some participants that Israelis needed to understand that there are people on the Palestinian side who want peace. Even Palestinians who believe that suicide bombings are an acceptable means to an end to the occupation tend to believe that the bombing at Hebrew University in 2002 went too far. Several Palestinian participants reported on a "sea change" of opinion after the Mt. Scopus bombing; others reported that they and their colleagues had publicly condemned the attack.

## Busting the Myths (or Making Myths Less Relevant)

Myth busting is similar to affidavits from expert witnesses, described one participant. Historians can use archives to uncover evidence of what really happened. This process can be important to the political present, particularly in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Political space only allows for a simple story. There is a tension between a historian's academic duty to discuss broader and more complex stories, and being politically more effective with simpler tales. A complex,

nuanced history could be seen as complementing myth busting by depicting people's lives with complexity.

Books by the new Israeli historians were used at the negotiations in 2000 at Taba and in the 1993 negotiations to convince the Palestinian delegation that there had been a change of attitude in Israel. Palestinians used the same books in 2000 to argue for their ancestral rights to land. Histories debunking the Israeli Zionist narrative have been used by both sides.

In the end, many of the differences over narrative were not that great, but it was very difficult to conceive of a joint narrative in the context of the conflict. It may be possible to create a common narrative about goals and ideals, if not on history. Agreeing on how to reach the common goals and ideals also appeared to be a roadblock. Are there other answers? Is thinking along the lines of the Cyprus three-state proposed settlement useful?

The group largely agreed that the best solution at this point is a two-state solution, following the 1967 boundaries. The two-state solution (divorce) is a short-term goal—an interim vision of a united country with divided sovereignties. The two states could not coexist without a tremendous amount of interaction.

There is a limit to what academics and intellectuals can do. Busting myths is not enough to make a difference on the ground. Nonetheless, challenging the national construction of the past and uncovering the truth can be a first step. Constructing dual narratives or bridging narratives is a further step. The final step might be to think outside of the box of national consciousness. If one perceives the concept of rights and self-determination as applying to people rather than to nation-states, then some of the questions of the conference are moot.

## PARTICIPANTS

- **Prof. Dan Bar-On**, Ben Gurion University
- **Dr. Mordechai Bar-On**, Ben Zvi Institute
- **Prof. Daniel Bar-Tal**, Tel Aviv University
- **Prof. Nathan Brown**, George Washington University
- **Prof. Neil Caplan**, Vanier College
- **Prof. Beshara Doumani**, University of California, Berkeley
- **Prof. Norman Finkelstein**, DePaul University
- **Prof. Herbert Kelman**, Harvard University
- **Dean Philip Khoury**, Trustee, World Peace Foundation; Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- **Prof. Daoud Kuttab**, Al-Quds University
- **Prof. Roger Owen**, Harvard University
- **Prof. Kenneth Oye**, Trustee, World Peace Foundation; Center for International Studies, MIT
- **Dr. Ilan Pappe**, Haifa University
- **Prof. Laila Parsons**, Harvard University
- **Prof. Dina Porat**, Tel Aviv University
- **Dr. Jeremy Pressman**, Kennedy School of Government
- **Prof. Eugene Rogan**, St. Antony's College, Oxford University
- **Prof. Robert Rotberg**, World Peace Foundation; Kennedy School of Government
- **Prof. Nadim Rouhana**, Tel Aviv University
- **Mr. David Shipler**, author
- **Prof. Mark Tessler**, University of Michigan
- **Prof. Stephen Van Evera**, MIT
- **Prof. Mary Wilson**, University of Massachusetts

# Books of the World Peace Foundation (since 1980) *

*State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*. Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), (Washington, D.C., The Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

*Ending Autocracy, Enabling Democracy: The Tribulations of Southern Africa 1960–2000*. Robert I. Rotberg (Washington, D.C., The Brookings Institution Press, 2002).

*Peacekeeping and Peace Enforcement in Africa: Methods of Conflict Prevention*. Robert I. Rotberg, Ericka Albaugh, Happyton Bonyongwe, Christopher Clapham, Jeffrey Herbst, Steven Metz (Washington, D.C., The Brookings Institution Press, 2000).

*Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions*. Robert I. Rotberg and Dennis Thompson (eds.), (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000).

*Creating Peace in Sri Lanka: Civil War and Reconciliation*. Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), (Washington, D.C., The Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

*Burma: Prospects for a Democratic Future*. Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), (Washington D.C., The Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

*War and Peace in Southern Africa: Crime, Drugs, Armies, and Trade*. Robert I. Rotberg and Greg Mills (eds.), (Washington D.C., The Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

*Cascade of Arms: Managing Conventional Arms Proliferation*. Andrew Pierre (ed.), (Washington D.C., The Brookings Institution Press, 1997).

*The United States and Europe After the Cold War: A New Alliance*. John W. Holmes (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1997).

*Haiti Renewed: Political and Economic Futures*. Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), (Washington D.C., The Brookings Institution Press, 1997).

*Democratic Transitions in Central America*. Jorge I. Domínguez (ed.), (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1997).

*Vigilance and Vengeance: NGOs Preventing Ethnic Conflict in Divided Societies*. Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), (Washington D.C., The Brookings Institution Press, 1996).

*From Massacres to Genocide: The Media, Public Policy, and Humanitarian Crises*. Robert I. Rotberg and Thomas G. Weiss (eds.), (Washington D.C., The Brookings Institution Press, 1996).

*Maelstrom: The United States, Southern Europe, and the Challenges of the Mediterranean*. John W. Holmes (ed.), (Washington D.C., The Brookings Institution Press, 1995).

*Os Estados Unidos da America e a Europa do Sud*. John W. Holmes (ed.), (Lisboa, Fundaquo-Luso-Americana, 1995).

---

\* For a list of all World Peace Foundation publications, see WPF Report 25: *Foundation Report 1999–2000* (Cambridge, MA, World Peace Foundation, 2000), 31–40.

*Transiciones Democráticas en Centro América*. Jorge I. Domínguez and Marc Lindenberg (eds.), (San José, Costa Rica, CINDE, 1994).

*Democracy in the Caribbean: Political, Economic, and Social Perspectives*. Jorge I. Domínguez, Robert A. Pastor, and R. DeLisle Worrel (eds.), (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

*Collective Security in a Changing World*. Thomas G. Weiss (ed.), (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993).

*Third World Security in the Post-Cold War Era*. Thomas G. Weiss (ed.), (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993).

*Alternative to Intervention: A New US-Latin American Security Relationship*. Richard J. Bloomfield and Gregory F. Treverton (eds.), (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990).

*Regional Conflict and U.S. Policy: Angola and Mozambique*. Richard J. Bloomfield (ed.), (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990).

*Africa in the 1990s and Beyond: U.S. Policy Opportunities and Choices*. Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), (Algonac, MI, Reference Publications, 1988).

*Guests Come to Stay: The Effects of European Labor Migration on Sending and Receiving Countries*. Rosemarie J. Rogers (ed.), (Boulder, Westview Press, 1985).

*Puerto Rico: The Search for a National Policy*. Richard J. Bloomfield (ed.), (Boulder, Westview Press, 1985).

*Portugal, Os Estados Africanos de Lingua Oficial Portuguesa E Os Estados Unidos Da America*. Joaquim Aguiar (Lisbon, Fundaçao Calouste Gulbenkian and Boston, WPF, 1985).

*South Africa and its Neighbors*. Robert I. Rotberg, Henry Bienen, Robert Legvold, and Gavin Maasdorp (Lexington, Lexington Books, 1985).

*Namibia: Political and Economic Prospects*. Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), (Lexington, Lexington Books, 1983).

*The American People and South Africa*. Alfred O. Hero and John Barratt (eds.), (Lexington, Lexington Books, 1981).

*Conflict and Compromise in South Africa*. Robert I. Rotberg and John Barratt (eds.), (Lexington, Lexington Books, 1980).

# Reports of the World Peace Foundation

34. *Myth and Narrative in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Deborah L. West (2003)

33. *Africa's Discontent: Coping with Human and Natural Disasters*, Robert I. Rotberg (2003)

32. *Haiti's Turmoil: Politics and Policy Under Aristide and Clinton*, Robert I. Rotberg (2003)

31. *To Rid the Scourge of War: UN Peacekeeping Operations and Today's Crises*, Rachel M. Gisselquist (2002)

30. *Diamonds In Peace and War: Severing the Conflict-Diamond Connection*, Ingrid J. Tamm (2002)

29. *The Foundation Report 2000–2001,* Robert I. Rotberg (2002)

28. *Zimbabwe Before and After the Elections: a Concerned Assessment*, Moeletsi Mbeki, Greg Mills, and Fred Phaswana (Johannesburg, 2001)

27. *The Challenge of Puerto Rico: Resolving Status Issues*, Rachel M. Gisselquist (2000)

    *Sudan: Policy Options Amid Civil War: Postscript*, Deborah L. Weinberg West (2000)

26. *Sudan: Policy Options Amid Civil War*, Rachel M. Gisselquist (2000)

25. *The Foundation Report 1999–2000*, Robert I. Rotberg (2000)

24. *Preventing Conflict in Africa: Possibilities of Peace Enforcement*, Robert I. Rotberg and Ericka A. Albaugh (1999)

23. *The Scourge of Small Arms*, Michael Klare and Robert I. Rotberg (1999)

22. *The Foundation Report 1997–1998*, Robert I. Rotberg (1999)

21. *Peacekeeping or Peace Enforcement? Conflict Intervention in Africa*, Dana Francis (1998)

20. *Cyprus 2000: Divided or Federal?,* Robert I. Rotberg and Ericka A. Albaugh (1998)

19. *Mediating Deadly Conflict: Lessons from Afghanistan, Burundi, Cyprus, Ethiopia, Haiti, Israel/Palestine, Liberia, Sierra Leone, & Sri Lanka*, Dana Francis (ed.), (1998)

18. *Sri Lanka's Civil War and Prospects for Post-Conflict Resolution*, Lisa M. Kois, Dana Francis, and Robert I. Rotberg (1998)

17. *Securing Peace in Africa: An Analysis of Peacekeeping and Peace Enforcement Potential*, Jeffrey Herbst (1998)

16.  *Truth Commissions: A Comparative Assessment*, Henry J. Steiner (ed.), (1997)

15.  *Burma: Prospects for Political and Economic Reconstruction*, David I. Steinberg (1997)

14.  *The Foundation Report, 1995–1996*, Robert I. Rotberg (1997)

13.  *War and Peace in Southern Africa: Crime, Drugs, Armies, and Trade*, Greg Mills (1996)

12.  *The UN Tangle: Policy Formation, Reform, and Reorganization*, Leon Gordenker (1996)

11.  *Haïti: Perspectives d'une Reprise Politique et Économique*, Jennifer L. McCoy (trans. Carrol F. Coates), (1995)

10.  *Haiti: Prospects for Political and Economic Reconstruction*, Jennifer L. McCoy (1995)

9.  *Non-Governmental Organizations, Early Warning, and Preventive Diplomacy*, Emily MacFarquhar, Robert I. Rotberg, and Martha A. Chen (1995)

8.  *The Foundation Report 1993–1994*, Robert I. Rotberg (1995)

7.  *The Media, Humanitarian Crises, and Policy-Making*, Robert I. Rotberg and Thomas G. Weiss (1995)

6.  *Democratic Transitions in Central America and Panama*, Marc Lindenberg (1993)

5.  *Collective Security in a Changing World*, Thomas G. Weiss and Laura S.H. Holgate (1992)

4.  *The Caribbean Prepares for the Twenty-First Century*, Jorge I. Domínguez, Richard Fletcher, and Robert Pastor (1991).

3.  *The United States and Latin American Democracy: Lessons from History*, Abraham Lowenthal (1991)

2.  *Third World Security in the Post-Cold War Era*, Thomas G. Weiss and Meryl A. Kessler (1991)

1.  *Combating Cocaine in Supplying Countries: Challenges and Strategies*, Gregory F. Treverton (1989)