# The Relationship Between History and Nationalism in the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Chloé Bernadaux

*Abstract:* **Adopting an "historical sociological" approach, this piece investigates the role of historical narratives in the formation of identities in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. As a "linguistic device", traditional narratives are framed within a specific paradigm, according to which the "nation" is seen as the only valid expression of senses of belonging. Why and how historical narratives have played a major role in the formation of collective identities in both national movements is the core question of this study. This piece investigates both the "positive" historical narratives as well as the negative identity elements at the core of the building of the national Self. This research shows that the formation of a hegemonic narrative by the conventional Israeli historiography has prevented the reconciliation of both nationalist processes and any future prospects for the resolution of the conflict.**

*Key words:* **Arab-Israeli conflict, nationalism, historical sociology, New Historians.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

"The problem of history" paradigm has shaped the debate on the role of history for understanding social reality. Researchers such as Nick Vaughan-Williams have argued that a shift shall be operated towards a deconstructive approach posing the "radical indeterminacy of historical meaning as object of analysis"[1].

Analysing history through the concept of narratives is often disregarded, since it implies that the specific meaning of each historical facts does not derive from the general, as advocated by the constructivist conception of history[2]. However, a new conception of history developed under the name "historical sociology" refutes the possibility of objective assessments of historical events and acknowledges the role of interpretation in our processing of historical facts. This conception reconciling the radical, traditional and constructionist visions of history acknowledges the centrality of narrative as unavoidable process carrying a potential emancipatory function. Recognizing that historical facts are knowable but subjected to diverse interpretative frameworks, leads us to identify the opportunity an extensive study of historical narratives bears: the opportunity to challenge political discourses.

In "*What is History in International Relations?*", Hobden demonstrates the necessity of studying the historical context of a conflict to reveal its roots[3]. Beyond an extensive demonstration of the importance of historical contextualization in the study of the Arab-Israeli conflict, this study focuses on the function historical narratives exercise in the formation of identities. By emphasising on and selecting facts as well as applying specific frameworks for their interpretation, narratives are inherently constructed. In the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, most historical accounts are formed by Israeli historians and political elites and constitute hegemonic narratives. In this context, Palestinian and grassroots voices are often being marginalized. Acknowledging this should help us to consider the analysis of historical narratives as an opportunity to challenge the status quo. An analysis of the historiography of the Arab-Israeli conflict reveals that dominant narratives can be object of contestation; not only from the Palestinian side but also by a new generation of Israeli historians called "The New historians". As a "linguistic device"[4] narratives analyse the Arab-Israeli conflict through a particular paradigm, according to which the "nation" is seen as the only valid expression of senses of belonging. As a matter of fact, both Palestinian and Israeli narratives of the Arab-Israeli conflict revolve around the nationalist paradigm, representative of the international system since the peace of Westphalia. Both narratives validate the hegemonic and Eurocentric vision of the international order. As Ozkirimli puts it: Nationalism is not only viewed as "the natural framework for all political interaction, but it also structures our daily lives and the way we perceive and interpret the reality that surrounds us."[5]

One of the most significant and controversial debate around nationalism was the one between primordialists, who argue that nationalism demonstrates a pre-existed feeling of national belonging (mostly based on ethnicity)[6] and modernists, who assert that historical developments and cultural traditions attached to nationhood are constructed[7]. One can reconcile

[1] Vaughan-Williams N. (2005). International Relations and the 'Problem of History'.*Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, *34*(1), 115. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/03058298050340011301

[2] Hobson J. and Lawson G. (2008). What is History in International Relations?.*Millennium: Journal of International Studies. 37*(2), 422-23. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0305829808097648

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both views by acknowledging that historical facts and their interpretations are revised to suit the present claims of political elites.

The question at stake here is: Why and how historical narratives have played a great role in the formation of collective identities in both national movements? This research argues that historical narratives constitute the pillar for the formation of both Israeli and Palestinian identities, both in their positivity and negativity.

On the one hand, historical narratives from both camps legitimize the existence and actions of their own national peoples (I). On the other hand, the building of the national Self was achieved through a process of othering including negative identity elements (II). On a normative level, this study shows that the formation of a hegemonic narrative by the conventional Israeli historiography has prevented the reconciliation of both nationalist processes and any future prospects for the resolution of the conflict (III).

## II. CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONALISM BY PALESTINIAN AND ZIONIST NARRATIVES RESPECTIVELY

European historical narratives have described the creation of the modern European nations via heroic war and revolution. Both Zionist and Palestinian historical narratives mirror these themes in their justification of their existence as a nation.

Concerning the role of the Zionist historiography in framing the Israeli identity, Uri Ram asserts that "historical consciousness is not simply an aspect of nationalism, but rather its gist"[8], while highlighting its role in the preservation of an existential meaning. The word "Zionism" coined by the Austrian Jew Nathan Birnbaum refers to a territory, Zion being the Hebrew reference to Jerusalem, suggesting that there exists a pre-existing Jewish national identity arising from the religious Hebrew past (primordialist view of nationalism). Similarly, the concept of *"Aliyah"*, corresponds to Moses' return to Jerusalem and the emancipation of Jews, and is also referred by the Zionists to describe the migration of the diaspora to Israel, their "homeland". In this Zionist narrative, settlement is viewed as a realization and the acquisition of new territories as redemption[9]. It is therefore deductible that the Zionist conception of the Jewish identity, encompassing both territorial and historical attachments, relied to a great extent on the modern paradigm of nationalism. Additionally, she also points out the obstructions in Zionist narratives of any non-nationalist alternatives (ex: assimilation, autonomy, etc.) to the Zionist movement existing prior to the establishment of Israel as if Zionist nationalism was the only "natural" destiny of the Jewish people.

The Zionist nationalist discourse is also embedded within a process of gendering of the nation. As Joane Nagel argues, the nation is often represented through feminized symbolics (The Marianne as symbol of the French nation for instance) in order to convey a masculine ideal of nationalism and is protected by patriotic (men) heroes and where demilitarized people and non-nationals are viewed as effeminate[10]. As reactionary process to the feminization of the Jew in the Nazi narratives, the Zionists rapidly sought to promote a masculinized vision of the Jews, protector the Israeli nation, through socialism in the context of the kibbutzim, agriculture and settler colonialism. According to Rachel Byrne, "Zionism sought to replace the effeminacy attributed to Jewish men with a masculinity defined by European gentiles, thus avoiding assimilation into their diasporic countries"[11]. These efforts aimed towards he assimilation of the Zionist national movement into the world order and enabled it to gain legitimacy from other Western nation-states.

Another aim of Zionist historiography was the creation of a unified Zionist community, which, due to its diasporic aspect, lacked a common culture and language. As Alan Taylor puts it: "It seems evident that the Zionist revolution was not the natural and inevitable outcome of Jewish history, but a break from the past. Its success was the result of favourable circumstances enhanced by astute manipulation"[12]. This "manipulation", based on Zionist narratives of a common Hebrew past of the Jewish nation, aimed at stimulating a sense of activism and acceptance of the Zionist project among Jews.

Both Palestinian and Israeli narratives also put emphasis on the question of whether a Palestinian identity existed prior to the British mandate. The Palestinian narrative as well as the Israeli "New Historians" refer to the existence of the cohesion of a Palestinian community and the existence local networks within Palestine"[13]. According to this narrative, British mandate would have been created based on those organic boundaries. Furthermore, while Doumani mentions the three attempts by the Ottoman Empire to implement administrative borders in Palestine (1830, 1840 and 1872)[14], the New Historians Kimmerling and Migdal refer to three important revolts shaping Palestinian history, the first revolt occurring in 1834 as resistance against the Egyptian rule and as both symptom and factor of the birth of Palestinian nationalism[15].

[8] Ram U. (1995). Zionist Historiography and the Invention of Modern Jewish Nationhood: The Case of Ben Zion Dinur. *Indiana University Press: History and Memory*, *7* (1), 115. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25618681
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[14] Doumani B, 9.
[15] Kimmerling B and Migdal J.S., (2003). The Palestinian people: a history. *Harvard university press*, 6.

On the other hand, conventional Israeli historians tend to negate the existence of a Palestinian nationalism existing prior to the British mandate and hence the dynamics that emerged before the 1880s[16].

## III. THE BUILDING OF THE SELF THROUGH A PROCESS OF OTHERING INCLUDING NEGATIVE IDENTITY ELEMENTS

Why did the conventional Zionist historiography intend to contest the existence of a well-rooted Palestinian nationalism? Kelman argues that the "Other" Palestinian is traditionally perceived in Zionist narratives as a "source of some of its own negative identity elements". In other words, the conflict between two national movements who claim the same land creates a set of ideological claims that implies an "exclusive relationship to the land"[17]. As such, the exclusiveness promoted by both historical narratives constitutes the very essence of each people's identity.

As a matter of fact, it is not surprising that Palestinian and Arab historiography tend to describe Zionism as a mere "form of settler colonialism" implying that there is no historical links between Jews and Palestine; while Israeli historiography is conventionally unwilling to recognize the Palestinians as a separate nation within the Arab world. As Golda Meir stated: "The are no such things as Palestinians"[18]. Neither is it surprising that Zionist enterprise is depicted as "racist" by Palestinian historical narratives and the Palestinian resistance as "terrorist" by the Zionist narratives, both narratives stigmatising the Other as violent and unjust[19]. In fact, a link between the Arabs and Nazis has been established in the 60s in order to delegitimize the suffering and existence of the Other, depicted as a radical.

In this framework, the traumas experienced both by the Jews with the Holocaust and by the Palestinians with the Nakba become "woven in political discourse, collective memory and practise"[20] in so far as they vehiculate the idea of destruction as "ultimate intention" of the other[21].

In this context, a watershed moment for the formation of the two identities was the 1948 war. In the first place, its

denomination implies the construction of opposing identities, the Palestinian side referring to the "Nakba", their catastrophe", while the Zionist narrative evokes a glorious "war of independence"[22]. As advocated by Mordecai Bar-On, the two diverging narratives of conflict constitute, by themselves, sources of conflict. In fact, the Palestinian historian Saleh Abdel Jawal observes that the conventional Israeli historians often put the emphasis on Arab's responsibility for starting the war and obstruct the pre-partition atmosphere characterised by Israeli oppression during the battles conducted by the Haganah and the Jewish agency in early December, showing at the same time that Arab hostility was "far from their collective mind"[23].

An important aftermath of the 1948 war was the societal fragmentation of the Palestinian community, impeding the formation of a real collective memory and unified history[24]. Furthermore, the destruction of Palestinian archives during the 1948 war explains why the Palestinian historiography has not been as developed the Israeli one and therefore hindered a real challenge of the hegemonic Israeli narrative[25].

## IV. THE FORMATION OF A HEGEMONIC NARRATIVE BY CONVENTIONAL ISRAELI HISTORIOGRAPHY

Both Palestinian and Israeli educations on the Holocaust and Nakba reveal a process of production of the Self through the negation of the Other's identity. However, one witnesses a strong domination of the literature on the conflict by the conventional Israeli historiography. The hegemonic character of the Zionist narrative highlights well-rooted hierarchies of power. While this narrative sets up an exclusive framework through which historical facts can be analysed, Palestinian narratives were merely seen as "sheer propaganda"[26].

Not only the historiography on the 1948 events but also the one on Ottoman Palestine reinforces specific categories of knowledge. The depiction of Palestine as "passive victim of Ottoman decline whose modern beginnings were a result of extern events"[27] did not only imply a denial of the validity of Palestinian nationalism but also greatly influenced Palestinian historiography, which on the model of Israeli approach, never sought an extensive analysis on events occurring during the middle period of Ottoman rule and ignored the memories of grassroots Palestinians in their historical accounts.

More striking is the hegemonic character the Israeli conventional narrative of history has taken within the Israeli educational system. Blinded by the trauma of the Holocaust,

[16] Laqueur W. and Rubin B.M. (2008). *The Israel-Arab reader: a documentary history of the Middle East conflict*. London, New York: Penguin Books (7).

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[20] Fierke K.M. (2008). Memory and Violence in Israel/ Palestine. Human Rights and Human Welfare. *Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver*, 37. https://www.du.edu/korbel/hrhw/volumes/2008/fierke-2008.pdf

[21] Kelman, H, 589.

[22] Rotberg R.I. (2006). Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix. *Indiana University Press,* 9.

[23] Rotberg, 7

[24] Fierke, 36.

[25] Rotberg, 9

[26] Pappé, I. (2006). *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511992728.003

[27] Doumani, 18.

the Israeli educational system leans towards refusing to acknowledge the Other's own sufferings[28].

The study of the new Israeli history textbooks reveals that the "binational" aspect of the conflict as well as the complex factors behind the Palestinian refugee issue[29] were more emphasized than in the past. However, conventional Zionist narratives still dominate the teaching of history and still convey the ideas of the heroic fight led by Jewish soldiers during the 1948 war and the "triumph of quality over quantity"[30]. Furthermore, the Palestinian society is viewed as backward, existing without proper institutions and under tribal leadership (orientalist view). Most important of all is that the existence of Arab citizens as significant national minority of Israel is ignored in all textbooks. The Palestinian counter-narrative has hence no place for recognition in Israeli textbooks and the Israeli educational system proves to be an effective way to perpetuate the dominant ideology in Israel. In fact, the author argues that the use of the teaching of history to shape the national ethos cannot lead to the multicultural education necessary for an efficient peacebuilding process. This way of teaching history does not allow any confrontation of narratives and myths, while only assigning a passive role to students[31].

In her movie entitled *This is my Land,* Tamara Erde, a french-Israeli Jew, recalls: "When I was in school, I didn't know anything about Palestinian history or about the occupation. I was patriotic, I wanted to serve in the army." Furthermore, during one of her interviews, an Israeli student affirms: "We are surrounded by Arabs who know this is a Jewish place, where everyone is Jewish. They want to hurt us because they want our land". These testimonies unveil the hegemonic role of Zionist historical narrative in building identities through the monopolization of discourse in education. In this context, historical narratives act as framework and story through which a society understands its own identity, which, when lacking the consideration of the Other's narrative, creates a climate "where actors are unaware of red lines and domestic constraints"[32], deepening the conflict even further.

## V. CONCLUSION

Both conventional Israeli and Palestinian historiographies tend to be destiny oriented as a counterpart of a nationalist notion of Israeli and Palestinian identity. Not only did they aim at legitimizing the existence and identification of both peoples as a nation, but also constructed a narrative where the other's identity is seen as a threat to one's own identity. This narrative, fuelled by the recent historical traumas experienced by both Peoples, goes hand in hand with the rise of the nation-states order in the 19th Century and the process of Othering nationalism implies. The Zionist historical narrative, however, developed as a hegemonic tool through which an interpretative framework is constituted for the analysis of both Jewish and Palestinian history.

The Israeli movement of the *New Historians* only gained legitimacy in the 1990s with increasing democratization of Israeli society and access to Palestinian sources[33]. This new historiography could potentially create a post-Zionist identity based on "communitarian citizenship rather than on nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism"[34].

More than a fight between historians, a "counter-education" of history in schools, aiming at challenging the hegemonic Zionist narrative and ideology in Israeli schools and at recognizing Jewish trauma in Palestinian schools, should be implemented as essential step towards mutual dialogue where otherness, more than acknowledged, is viewed as necessary condition for self-reflection and reflexivity.

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