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## History Matters

Why we must acknowledge the claims of the Palestinians *Joseph Levine*

I have often been involved in arguments about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that focus on its history. Usually, the defender of current Israeli behavior urges the importance of appreciating all that Israel has been through and why it exists in the first place. I respond by reviewing the dispossession of 1948, terror attacks on Arab villages in the '50s, Israeli provocations over the DMZ on the Golan Heights in the '50s and '60s, and on and on. Eventually and invariably, the defender of Israeli behavior insists that we not be so distracted by the history, that we need to focus on resolving the current conflict, not rehearsing the past. And thus we are struck by a larger question: is the history of Israeli-Palestinian relations important in our attempts to solve the present problem?

I would answer affirmatively. Understanding the history is crucial—not all the details, of course, but the fundamental themes. It is not hard to identify the major elements of the two conflicting narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In fact, sixty years after Israel's founding, the two points of view were crystallized in the competing responses to the event: celebrations of Israeli Independence Day on the one hand, and remembrances of the Catastrophe (*Nakba*) on the other.

In the mainstream Zionist narrative—which includes liberal supporters—the State of Israel is the realization of legitimate Jewish nationalism. That project, having been sanctioned by the international community through both the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine (awarded to Great Britain with the understanding that the British would carry out their commitment described in the famous Balfour Declaration) and the UN partition resolution, was rejected by the Arab world. Because of this violent rejection, Israel has been forced to maintain a strong military and fight many wars as well as remain vigilant against constant terrorist attacks from its enemies. The liberal version here will admit that the settlement enterprise in the West Bank and Gaza was a mistake, and that often the Israeli government acts unwisely and unjustly. But the basic parameters of the narrative remain.

On the Palestinian side (which includes many Jews who fall outside the mainstream Zionist camp), the fundamental theme is that Zionist settlement in Palestine was a colonial enterprise, which flourished behind the guns of a major world power that did not have the right to dispose of this land, and that in order to erect an exclusivist Jewish state, the Zionists, once they achieved sufficient power, threw out most of the indigenous population and treated those that remained as second-class citizens. By and large, the Zionist enterprise is seen as similar to the European colonization of North America and Australia.

These are obviously broad-stroke descriptions, but they will do for now. With regard to these conflicting historical narratives, I have two points to make: first, there is a fact of

the matter about their relative accuracy, and second, that it matters.

Liberal Zionists often grant some degree of legitimacy to the Palestinian narrative, but then put it alongside the Zionist one and bemoan the lack of understanding. The idea is that they each represent an extreme, and the truth has to be in the middle.

Of course the notion that the truth is always in the middle is nonsense, and those making this assumption would not for a minute apply the principle to, say, the Nazis or the Soviet Union. (What is supposed to be the Nazi side? “Well, yes, the German Jews were getting a little uppity”?) In fact, in this case, the truth is clearly not in the middle. Sober historical reflection shows that the Palestinian narrative is substantially correct. My purpose is not to make that case now, but rather to explore the consequences, assuming it is true.

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Suppose I am right that the Palestinian narrative is substantially correct, and the Zionist one is largely apologetic. Why does it matter now? Aside from a perfectly understandable concern for historical truth, how does taking a stand on the events of 40-60 years ago make any difference to the practical task of forging a durable peace between Israelis and Palestinians? Does a properly pragmatic attitude not demand that we leave these historical controversies aside in order to focus on the task at hand?

Quite the contrary, it is a mistake to assume that pragmatism requires inattention to history. Without a proper appreciation of how we got here, the task at hand—forging a durable peace—will be extremely difficult, perhaps impossible to achieve.

To be sure, the history and associated balance of blame is not *all* that matters: it is but one—albeit important—determinant that ought to govern what ultimately happens. Jewish claims resulting from one hundred years of settlement, new realities on the ground, and political and material constraints all enter into the mix. Still, the history of the conflict matters for two essential reasons. First, and most important, acknowledging the substantial truth of the Palestinian narrative will shift the dynamic of the peace process from concern for Israel’s security to commitment to redress for the Palestinians, a necessary new direction if talks are to succeed. The change in attitude would usher in a new framework for negotiation. Second, an appreciation of the history will provide a perspective from which to better understand how Israel’s current practices reflect a sixty-year history of obstructionist tactics. With the accurate historical context in mind we may gain a better sense of how Israel can reconcile with Palestinian interests and negotiate in good faith.

With regard to the first reason, we need to begin from the fact that what the Zionists did in the name of the Jewish people was a serious injustice against the Palestinians. In fact, I think it fair to say that it rises to the level of a crime against humanity. It is important to appreciate the seriousness of the grievance that Palestinians have. Under the umbrella of an imperial power, Jews from Europe came to their land with the clear purpose of erecting an exclusivist Jewish state. They neither sought nor secured the consent of the indigenous Palestinians for their project. The Palestinians made their

opposition to their own subjugation by this foreign people manifest in every way they could—including, of course, violence against innocent victims—to no avail. When they fought against the establishment of the Jewish state, the vast majority were forcibly evicted and the remainder put under a military regime for eighteen years. During the 1950s, thousands of Palestinians attempting to return to their homes and farms were shot on sight, which, not surprisingly, gave rise to terrorist attacks by Palestinians against Israeli targets. The brutality and illegality of the occupation and settlement program of the remainder of Palestine starting in 1967 is well known.

While both sides have committed unjustified acts of violence against each other, two facts render the situation morally asymmetrical: first, being by far the stronger party, the harm inflicted by Israel on the Palestinians is vastly greater than that inflicted by the Palestinians on Israelis; second, and this is much more significant, while both sides have done wrong to each other, the Palestinians maintain a core, unresolved grievance against the Israelis stemming from their forcible dispossession and continued occupation. The Israelis have no such corresponding complaint against the Palestinians.

I see no way to argue plausibly against this basic point. Once it is acknowledged, what can be said in reply? There is one response, and, interestingly, many supporters of Israel do retreat to this position. They hold that despite the great wrong done to the Palestinian people by the founding of Israel and their forcible dispossession, the great good that was accomplished by finally providing the Jews a homeland of their own, after centuries of horrible oppression, justifies it. Even if we accept that argument, which I do not, so long as we recognize that the Palestinians were indeed wronged in a fundamental way, and by virtue of that wrong carry a serious and justified grievance against the State of Israel and Israeli-Jewish society, it becomes clear that the framework of the current peace process must undergo a sea change.

For one thing, the obsession with Israeli security that provides the mold for all discussions concerning the peace process must be transformed into an equally strong concern for meeting the comparable Palestinian claims. Once one acknowledges the enormity of the Palestinian injury, it becomes clear that accommodating their needs is Israel's primary obligation. Again, even if one thinks that the Jewish need at the end of WWII justifies the founding of the State of Israel and the subsequent ethnic cleansing, one cannot deny the Palestinian claim to a significant degree of redress. Given the obvious validity of the Palestinian claim, one must realize that constant attempts to chip away from what remains to the Palestinians after 1949—exemplified by final-status discussions that assume a good deal of settlement annexation to Israel—lose any justification whatsoever.

The question of Israeli-Jewish security also looks totally different once the Palestinian grievance is recognized. The standard story is that Palestinians, and Arabs generally, just hate Jews, or Westerners, for no good reason, and therefore there must be special protection from and vigilance against them. Recognition of the history of injustice suffered by Palestinians undermines the credibility of this conventional view. When your people have been brutally dispossessed, it is not surprising that you react with a desire for vengeance: it would be surprising not to desire vengeance and arguably show a lack of a proper sense of dignity. But if current hatred is fueled by this history,

then a genuine attempt to redress the grievance, with public acknowledgment of the wrong committed, will go some distance toward effecting reconciliation, and thereby ensuring genuine security.

Though of course Palestinians, first and foremost, want land, compensation, and their rights restored, public Israeli acknowledgment of their grievance as a basis for negotiations is also a crucial element in what they seek. I remember well an event I attended during Israel's fiftieth anniversary, when four men who had been survivors of the Nakba told their stories at a demonstration in response to the pro-Israel celebration taking place nearby. As I listened to their stories, I started to think of the role that the Nakba played in their culture and compared it to the Jewish national trauma, the Holocaust. (I am not saying the Nakba counts as genocide, just that the trauma it represents plays a role in Palestinian society similar to that which the Holocaust plays in Jewish society.) Then I started to wonder what it would be like for Jews if Holocaust denial were not restricted to marginal figures, as it is now, but were widely accepted in the society in which they lived. This is what it is like for most Palestinians in Western countries, who live in a world dominated by Nakba-denial. I can only imagine what a difference it would make to Palestinian consciousness throughout the world were Israel to proclaim, "yes, we drove you out, and that was an egregious wrong, and we want to make it up to you."

The second reason the history matters to present-day concerns is that it puts what is happening now in proper perspective. An important dimension of the Zionist narrative is the complaint that the Palestinians, and the Arabs surrounding Israel, have spurned every opportunity for peace while Israel has vigorously pursued it. In fact there have been many attempts by Arab leaders to make peace with Israel, which Israel often rebuffed, and Israel has been guilty of consistently provocative behavior. In the 1950s, as the diary of former Prime Minister Moshe Sharett makes clear, Israeli attacks against Egyptian targets were aimed at provoking Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser into an aggressive posture. As recounted by the Swedish general Carl Von Horn, who monitored the demilitarized zone between Israel and Syria during the 1950s for the United Nations, most of the infamous Syrian shelling of Israel from the Golan Heights was provoked by Israeli incursions and attacks. In 1971 Anwar Sadat offered peace to Israel in return for withdrawal from the Sinai, but his offer was dismissed out of hand. Only after he proved his ability to mount a serious military challenge to Israel in the Yom Kippur War was he deemed a worthy negotiating partner (which leads many Arabs to say "all they understand is force"—sound familiar?). In 1988 the PLO formally recognized Israel within the Green Line, yet it took five years before Israel, as part of the Oslo agreement, recognized the PLO. With respect to Oslo, which was supposed to lead to a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, one can clearly see Israel's negotiating strategy—keep talking while creating facts on the ground—by noting that during the Oslo years the number of settlers in the occupied territories doubled. Finally, the following passage from historian Avi Shlaim, concerning the first and mostly forgotten Arab-Israeli peace conference held in 1949 in Lausanne, Switzerland, perfectly illustrates the major themes of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians, continuing to this day:

What [the Egyptian negotiator] Mostafa's lecture . . . showed . . . was that

in 1949 the Arabs did recognize Israel's right to exist, they were willing to meet face to face to negotiate peace, they had their conditions for making peace with Israel, and Israel rejected those conditions because they were incompatible not with her survival as an independent state but with her determination to keep all the territory she held and to resist the repatriation of the refugees.

Seeing Israeli behavior since 1967 in this light makes it clear that no fundamental change in Israeli strategy toward the Palestinians will come about without strong international force behind it. The settlement enterprise, establishing major Jewish-only roads, carving Palestinian areas up into bantustan-like cantons—all of this “creating facts on the ground” proceeds no matter who is in power, or what is being officially proclaimed to the international audience, or what negotiations are taking place.

Does this mean negotiations should be abandoned? Of course not. But it does mean that Israeli declarations (such as departing-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's repeated promises to reduce the number of checkpoints in the West Bank while actually increasing them) cannot be considered sufficient to show good faith. As the occupier and principal aggressor, Israel must demonstrate good faith by taking significant actions to meet Palestinian demands. If Israel does not enact such measures, then the world community, especially the United States and the United Nations—the external parties chiefly responsible for the terrible situation in the first place—must employ sanctions to ensure Israeli compliance.

Sometimes I get the feeling that supporters of Israel who, deep down, recognize the fundamentals of the situation, refuse to acknowledge the history because they fear that if they do, all will be lost. If we really did steal their land, then we just have to give up any claim we have, they seem to think. So the response is to deny or repress recognition of what has happened and continues to happen. This response is dangerous and wrong-headed: dangerous because it prevents good-faith negotiations; wrong-headed because, as I emphasized above, recognizing history and acknowledging the fundamental Palestinian grievance does not automatically mandate any particular outcome to a negotiated end to the conflict.

While I favor a non-ethnic democratic state in Israel/Palestine, I don't think this the obvious outcome of any negotiations, even if undertaken in full recognition of the history and in good faith. But whatever is now deemed the best solution will not come about if the history of the conflict is not recognized. Israelis and Jews around the world need to face this history openly and honestly. Only then can the serious debate about what is to be done finally commence.

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