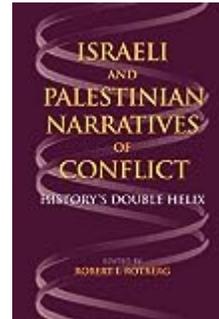




**Robert I. Rotberg, ed.** *Israeli And Palestinian Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. viii + 283 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34767-1; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21857-5.



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## **Building a Culture of Peace: Toward a Reconciliation of Israeli and Palestinian Historical Narratives**

*Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict* is a collection of essays that discuss how Israelis and Palestinians portray their histories in scholarly work, classroom textbooks, and media outlets. The volume derives from discussions held at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government in 2003 and brings together a number of American, Israeli, and Palestinian scholars representing a range of viewpoints.

The premise behind many of these articles is the idea that there are two competing and diametrically opposed narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—one Israeli, one Palestinian—which dominate alternative narratives in each society. According to editor Robert Rotberg, the two narratives “view similar events from different angles” (p. 2). Accordingly, the purpose of the book is to survey the two versions of Israeli-Palestinian history, identify possible points of convergence, and encourage each side to accept the validity of the other’s narrative. The eleven essays included in the book evaluate a number of related topics such as the founding principles and character of Zionism, the portrayal and definition of the

“other,” the allocation of blame and the debate about each side’s moral standing. Several essays discuss the important topic of collective psychology and the educational systems used by Israelis and Palestinians to instill patriotic values and national loyalty.

While a survey of Israeli and Palestinian conflict narratives is an important undertaking, there is already a voluminous literature addressing this in some detail. The book’s most original contribution, however, is that it tries to “narrow, not eliminate, the chasm that separates one strongly affirmed reality from another” by striving to foster dialogue and understanding (p. 3). For instance, in chapter 2, “Israeli-Jewish Narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” two Israeli experts on educational psychology, Daniel Bar-Tal and Gavriel Salomon, argue that protracted conflicts induce society members to create a collective “psychological repertoire,” of convictions and emotions, that allows them to deal with stress. Israelis manage the challenges of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by constructing a shared narrative of collective memory and an “ethos of conflict.” These adaptations are

seen as truthful representations of past events and current problems justifying the group's actions, while vilifying the opponents as immoral, violent, and unjust. Although Bar-Tal and Salomon focus on Israeli narratives and psychological responses, they argue that the realization of peace necessitates changing the conflict narrative and respective psychological viewpoint of each side. They also call for a more nuanced understanding of the origins of each side's ideological and political orientations.

Chapter 3 of the book attempts just that. An Israeli scholar of Jewish history, Dina Porat, complicates the idea that Zionist discourse projected itself in opposition to the local Arab population. Her essay on Zionist identity before 1948 argues that Zionists defined themselves in opposition to the Jewish diaspora, the experience of exile, and persecution. She cites a number of primary and secondary works to suggest that early Zionist thinkers and leaders did not consider the Arab presence in Palestine as a factor influencing Zionist identity. Porat explains that the reasons for the relative inattention to the local Arab population in early Zionist writings are "not to be found necessarily in an ill will that the Zionist movement harbored against the Arab local population but in the circumstances of Zionist creation" (p. 49).

The essay by Palestinian scholar Nadim Rouhana focuses on the features of Zionist thought and action that defined how Israeli society treats the Palestinians. His position diverges significantly from Porat's argument by contending that the encounter between Zionism and the Palestinians was the most important factor in determining Zionist (and later Israeli) views and actions toward the Palestinians. He views Zionism as a "culture of force," declaring that the "use of force against Palestinians is embedded in the idea of Zionism itself," and never "was it ever seriously considered to share the land with its people—the Palestinians" (pp. 116-118). Instead, Zionism employed and extolled violence against the Palestinian people.

Israeli peace activist, historian, and former soldier Mordechai Bar-On uses Rouhana's essay as an example of the difficulty of bridging the gap between Israeli and Palestinian narratives. While accepting his honesty Bar-On questions whether Rouhana's basic premise about the violence and illegitimacy of Zionism could ever be realistically accepted by Israelis. Bar-On doubts whether the Palestinians will ever abandon their view of the "original sin" of Zionism and how it caused a "Nakba" on their homeland in 1948. Instead he argues that histori-

ans "should equally recognize and legitimate the inherent plurality and variety of their trade" (p. 144), engage in self-criticism, focus on historical accuracy, and make efforts to "deconstruct perceptions and notions of the past that tend to encourage conflict and make reconciliation harder" (pp. 144, 153).

Saleh Abdel Jawad, a Palestinian scholar at Birzeit University, challenges a series of assumptions made in Israeli-Zionist writings and in some Western (mis)understandings of Palestinian scholarship as he outlines the foundational and legitimizing myths of both Israeli and Palestinian narratives. Israeli foundational myths include the emphasis on decline, the claim that the land had been empty, the claim that Palestinians fled in 1948, and the claim that Israel has always endeavored for peace while the Arabs have rejected their offers. Palestinian foundational myths include their emphasis on an ancient presence and de-emphasis on Jewish presence in biblical Palestine and the centrality of Jerusalem to Palestinian and Islamic history.

Mark Tessler argues that the myth of Arab rejectionism of Israel is the most serious obstacle to peace in the Middle East. Using public opinion poll data, Tessler contends that Arab citizens and states have not consistently and uniformly opposed Israel's existence or the concept of Arab-Israeli peace. Rather, he concludes that "developments in the years following the Oslo Accords strongly suggest that Arab attitudes are indeed contextual and that for the most part Arabs seek territorial compromise and not the liquidation of the Jewish state" (p. 184).

One of the more interesting themes of this book is addressed in the chapter "The Bridging Narrative Concept," by Illan Pappé. He defines this as "a conscious historiographical effort that is ... intrinsic to the more general reconciliation effort," where historians on both sides can work together to arrive at a mutually acceptable assessment of the conflict's history (13, 194-195). According to Pappé, narratives cannot be successfully bridged without the presence of a number of preconditions. These include a political atmosphere conducive to reconciliation and the use of relativist, empathetic, and cooperative historical methods, particularly by those on the stronger side; a shift in the power structure of the cultural field allowing for an initial legitimization of the narrative of the weaker side; and finally, a new emphasis on non-elites through the use of social and cultural history. Pappé outlines potential areas of research that would contribute to this effort, such as a focus on the pre-nationalist Ot-

toman period in Palestine where blame resides outside the familiar nationalist fault-lines.

A short-term alternative to the challenge of bridging narratives is presented by Israeli professor of psychology Dan Bar-On and Palestinian professor of education Sami Adwan. They contend that, though linked, Israeli and Palestinian narratives are distinct: “the Israeli and Palestinian narratives are intertwined like a double helix, but they are still separate and should be acknowledged as such” (p. 205). Arguing for the importance of textbooks as “one of the formal representations of the society’s ideology and ethos,” Bar-On and Adwan put together an experimental school booklet in Arabic and Hebrew about the history of the conflict that included both Israeli and Palestinian narratives about contested topics, themes, and events. A similar booklet was printed in February 2003 and used in classrooms in an experimental capacity. Based on a study of workshops, student responses, and teacher’s reactions, Bar-On and Adwan realized that the “move from a single-narrative to the two-narrative approach was a paradigmatic shift for which the teachers had to be thoroughly prepared” (p. 212). Nevertheless, the teachers were able to engage in a process of self-examination and revised the booklet, leading to the publication of a book entitled *Palestinians and Israelis Learn the Narrative of the “Other.”*

Two chapters discuss the Palestinian and Israeli educational systems, an important component to grassroots efforts to promote peace. Nathan Brown examines the conceptualization of national identity in the developing Palestinian educational system. “Palestinian schools do not teach hate through their books,” Brown writes, yet in affirming and conflating the nationalist, Arab, and Muslim identities of Palestinians, they do not offer a “cosmopolitan and complex sense of national identity” (p. 241). In the final chapter, Eyal Naveh examines core dynamics of identity in Israel, as constructed through the Israeli educational system, from the ethnocentrism of the 1950s to the more culturally pluralistic approach of the 1970s and 1980s. A new core curriculum was established

in 1995 for secular state schools in an attempt to resolve these identity crises, though Naveh concludes that “Israel’s historic narrative can no longer be taught as one story and one memory but only as a mosaic of intercommunicating stories and memories” (p. 268).

In conclusion, *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict* presents a number of useful and pertinent perspectives on Israeli and Palestinian remembrances of the past. Many of the arguments and issues addressed in the book are well known and some of its prescriptions for resolving the conflict are difficult to put into practice. Moreover, as a work about reconciling historical narratives, the book should have included more Palestinian writers (the ratio of Israeli to Palestinian authors is more than double). Some of the chapters also contain patronizing conclusions. For example, Mordechai Bar-On argues that “the lesson Palestinians should learn from Israel’s revisionist historiography is not how correct they are in their own narratives but rather how self-critical they, too, must become.” Bar-On’s view, also echoed by Rotberg and others in the book, that there is “no symmetry ... in the case of Israeli and Palestinian intellectuals” and that Palestinian counterparts to Israeli scholars lack “the self-confidence that will allow them to feel totally free to develop their work as historians” (p. 168) is contradicted by the self-critical and celebrated work of several generations of Palestinian historians, sociologists, and/or cultural critics such as Edward Said, Hisham Sharabi, Issa Khalaf, Rashid Khalidi, Salim Tamari, and Khalil Shikaki.

A final thought: while one sympathizes with Rotberg’s goal of trying to find a way to mitigate the Israeli-Palestinian problem, it is more difficult to accept the notion that historical truth or validity should be a composite of two narratives. Rather than argue for bridging historical narratives and arriving at a synthesis of both sides’ narratives, perhaps the better alternative is to focus on advancing a psychology of peace. This can be done by addressing the pain of the past and cementing conditions that allow both sides to live in peace in the future.

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