



المركز الفلسطيني  
للبحوث  
السياسية والمسحية  
Palestinian Center for  
POLICY and  
SURVEY RESEARCH

# Looking at the Other's Viewpoint: Historical Narratives of Palestinians and Israelis

**Sustainable Peace Education**



**May 2021**

**Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR)**

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Lesson in Civics

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## Conflict of Narrative

Palestinians and Israelis use their different historical narratives to prove their rights or the basis of their presence in this country. Each party claims that it has proven the truth concerning its connection to this land, the land of historical Palestine. At the same time, this raises controversy and clashes between successive generations on both sides.

The historical narrative gives both Palestinians and Israelis the right to own this land. Each side also believes that its narrative is the opposite of that of the other side, and refutes the historical foundations narrated by the other. It places the blame on the other for not accepting coexistence, pointing to the other's use of the ugliest methods of uprooting, destruction and war.

### Components of the Palestinian Narrative

- 1) Palestine is for its people, including Muslims, Christians and Jews.
- 2) The Zionist movement is part of Western colonialism and the Balfour Declaration is invalid.
- 3) Britain and Israel are responsible for Palestine's tragedy.
- 4) Israel is responsible for forcing refugees to emigrate, and refugees have the right to return.
- 5) The Partition Plan was unjust to Palestinians as they were the majority and owned the vast majority of land.
- 6) Palestinians have the legitimate right to self-defense and to resort to all forms of resistance.

Palestinians and Israelis are unable to visualize the perceptions and claims of the other side. The conflict that has raged for more than 72 years has not allowed them to see the other's viewpoint, and has kept their perceptions of the other within the framework of serving the conflict, while each side sees itself as the victim in a context of colonial conflict and racial discrimination.

The **Palestinian narrative** is based on several components. First, that Palestine is the homeland of the Palestinian people in all their religious diversity, including Muslims, Christians and Jews. They have lived on this land for hundreds and thousands of years, during which they were subject

to invasion and occupation, but they held out and resisted. Palestine is not the homeland of any other peoples.

Second: The Zionist movement is part of European colonialism, which occupied Arab lands, including Palestine, and exploited them for its own benefit. The Balfour Declaration, in this context, is an essential part of this exploitation, despite the invalidity of this promise by colonial Britain. Britain had no right or authority to give that promise because the land did not belong to it to give it away, and because the people of Palestine formed, at that time, the great majority of the population of Palestine and owned the vast majority of its land. The Zionist movement is a European movement, alien to the land of Palestine and not part of its constituents. The Palestinian narrative, in this context, rejects any connection between the Holocaust of the Jews during World War II and the right of the Jews to a homeland of their own, since Palestine was not a party to the Holocaust and it is not permissible, in any way, to hold Palestine responsible for protecting Jews from new massacres, if that is to come at the expense of its own existence.

Third, the Palestinian narrative is based on the fact that responsibility for their tragedy rests with Israel, Britain, and the Arab countries that let them down, without neglecting their own responsibility given their divisions and weakness. The British occupation helped Jews to emigrate to Palestine in large numbers, and enabled them to obtain military and organizational capabilities to build their organizations and society, leading to the failure of Palestinians in their resistance to Jewish and British designs for Palestine.

Fourth, the Palestinians believe that Israel is responsible for their Nakba in 1948. The Nakba, or the “catastrophe,” meant the loss of one’s own homeland to the Zionists and the birth of Israel; the loss of most Palestinian families of their homes and properties, and the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem. Palestinians were forced to live as refugees in camps in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and in exile in neighboring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Egypt. Palestinians who remained in their villages and towns and who came under Israeli control were treated as second-class citizens. They were placed under military rule, and emergency regulations were applied to them. Their lands were confiscated and their movement restricted. Many of them became internal refugees, and were prohibited from returning to their villages and towns that they were forced to abandon during the war.

Fifth, the Palestinians believe that the Partition Plan issued by the United Nations inflicted a great historical injustice on them. It gave a large part of their country to foreigners who had no right to own the land, and who were far fewer in number than the native inhabitants and owned a fraction of the state’s land. Likewise, the Palestinians’ rejection of the Partition Plan did not justify the response of armed Jewish militias that started the 1948 war, when they carried out armed hostilities against unarmed Palestinian villages and towns that were not ready for war until the arrival of Arab armies on May 15, 1948.

In addition, the armed Jewish militias did not accept the Partition Plan. They were intent on expanding the borders of their state and “cleansing” the land that they wanted for their state of the largest possible number of Palestinians. The war plans, military operations and tactics, such as using artillery against civilians in villages and towns, massacres such as in Deir Yassin, and war propaganda and rumors about imminent Zionist attacks and the possible extermination of the population, were all aimed at forcing the indigenous peoples to flee their homes and lands.

Sixth, the Palestinians believe that their uprooting was deliberate and in violation of international law and UN resolutions, especially UN General Assembly Resolution 194, which states that Palestinian refugees and their descendants have the legitimate right to return to their original homes and properties, or to receive compensation if they choose. The Palestinians also believe in their legitimate right to resist the Israeli occupation by all means, including armed resistance, as long as it is in accordance with international norms and international law.

**Components of the Israeli Narrative**

- 1) The Holocaust or *Shoah* has validated the legitimacy of Zionist ideology, which states that Jews around the world need a state of their own, in their historical land, to form a safe haven from the oppression of anti-Semites.
- 2) Military victory in the 1948 war protected the Jews from another genocide at the hands of the Arabs and the Palestinians.
- 3) The emigration of Palestinians from their homes in the 1948 war was caused by the Palestinians' rejection of compromises.
- 4) The 1948 war was one of self-defense, as the Arabs and Palestinians rejected the Partition Plan and they were the ones who started the war.
- 5) Israel is not responsible for creating the problem of refugees who left their homes voluntarily, or with the encouragement of the Palestinian and Arab leadership.
- 6) Thousands of Jews lost their homes and properties in Arab countries as a result of the war, and therefore each party must find a solution to its refugee problem.

As for the **Israeli narrative**, it is also based on a number of components. First, the Holocaust or *Shoah*, which was the most extreme manifestation of anti-Semitism, had categorically justified Zionist ideology; for, without a state of their own, established in their historical homeland of 2,000 years ago, the Jews will be subject to multiple massacres, even if not on the massive scale and horror perpetrated by the Nazis. In this case, the absence of a sovereign state for the Jews that shapes its own emigration options, Jews fleeing such atrocities will be denied asylum once more, even in Western countries such as the United States and Britain. Jews who may be saved would be trapped, as they were in Europe between 1933, when the Nazis came to power, and 1942, when the Nazis began implementing the "Final Solution." The possibility of rescuing them would be remote, and they will be subjected to massacres again.

Second, the Israeli military victory in the 1948 war was the final testimony for justifying Jewish

national independence. Israel suffered from the numerical scarcity of its Jewish population, which made the war a struggle of "the few against the many". The motivation for going to that war was the complete conviction that the only alternative to victory was another Holocaust, either immediately - that is, at the hands of the attacking Arab forces - or in the long term, within the framework of the conflict between Palestinians and Jews. In the absence of the Jewish state, it would have been impossible to prevent a similar catastrophe.

Third, the 1948 war, which Israelis call the War of Independence, and which displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, was a direct result of the Palestinians' rejection of any compromise. They were offered a compromise between their needs and aspirations, and the aspirations of the Jewish people for self-determination. The most obvious manifestation of this rejection was the Arabs' rejection of two proposals for partition, offered to them by the Peel Commission in 1937 and United Nations Resolution No. 181 of 1947.

Fourth, since Palestinians and Arab countries rejected the UN's Partition Resolution No. 181 and waged war, instead, to prevent the establishment of a Jewish state, Israel's fight was one of self-defense from the standpoint of international law and international legitimacy. This means that lands that Israel acquired as a result of the war - that is, other than those allocated to the Jewish state under Resolution 181 - came in the framework of self-defense. Consequently, the Arab states and the Palestinians cannot demand that Israel withdraw to the borders of the Partition Plan, which they themselves rejected.

Fifth, Israel does not bear any responsibility for creating the Palestinian refugee problem, with the exception of a few cases, as they did not force Palestinians to leave their homes. Palestinians themselves chose to do so, either on their own accord, or after they were encouraged by Arab or local leaders in order to pave the way for the invading Arab armies, which were expected to quickly

wipe out the emerging Jewish entity. Thus, the source of the Palestinian refugee problem lies in the Arab rejection of any settlement that might have avoided war, and in Arab countries' decision to launch an "aggressive" war on the fledgling Jewish state. The problem was further rooted in Palestinian expectations that the Jewish community in Palestine would be eliminated quickly, and in their judgment that, in order to reduce their costs, they had to make room for the Arab fighting forces to do their work. The Israeli narrative also says that the number of Jewish refugees who came to Israel from Arab countries, because of their persecution or expulsion after the establishment of Israel, equals the number of Palestinian refugees. This means that each party must solve its own refugee problem, by resettling them in their territories.

Sixth, the Arab countries' conquest of Palestine made it impossible for Jews to continue to reside in these countries. Thus, the war declared by the members of the Arab League also led to a mass exodus of Jews. In the immediate aftermath of the war and in the early 1950s, hundreds of thousands of Jews had no choice but to flee from countries such as Iraq, Morocco, Yemen, Egypt and Tunisia. Hence, a balanced and fair view of the plight of the Palestinians must take into account that they are not the only ones displaced by the 1948 war.

## I Test Myself

### 1) Why does the Palestinian narrative reject the Balfour Declaration?

Because it was issued by a colonial state that had neither the right nor the authority to give away what it did not possess to a people other than the Palestinians, whose homeland no one else deserves to own.

### 2) Explain why the Palestinian narrative distinguishes between the Zionist movement and Jews living in Palestine?

The Palestinian narrative distinguishes between resident Palestinian Jews, who have lived there for hundreds of years alongside Muslims and Christians, and the Zionist movement that originated with European Jews who did not reside in Palestine. The reason behind this relates to the Palestinian narrative's belief that the right of Palestinian Jews to their homeland, Palestine, is an unquestionable right, because they are citizens with all the rights of citizenship. On the other hand, the Palestinian narrative emphasizes that the Zionist movement is part of British and Western colonialism that aims to dispossess them of their lands.

### 3) Explain the role of the Holocaust or *Shoa* in the Israeli narrative?

The Israeli narrative is based on the premise that the Holocaust experience underscores the basic need for Jews to have a homeland of their own, a homeland that defends them and provides them with a safe haven from anti-Semitism.

### 4) Why does the Israeli narrative refuse to recognize the right of return for Palestinian refugees?

Because it believes that Palestinian refugees willingly left their homes and were not forced to do so, and that Arab countries must absorb and resettle them, in exchange for Israel absorbing and resettling Jewish refugees who came to it from Arab countries as a result of their persecution and expulsion.



**EUROPEAN UNION**

This lesson is part of a joint research project on sources of mutual distrust between Palestinians and Israelis, funded by the European Union. The content do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.