



The Imbalance of Empathy in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: Reflections from the (Simulated) Negotiating Table

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Every academic year ICSR is offering six young leaders from Israel and Palestine the opportunity to come to London for a period of two months in order to develop their ideas on how to further mutual understanding in their region through addressing both themselves and “the other”, as well as engaging in research, debate and constructive dialogue in a neutral academic environment. The end result is a short paper that will provide a deeper understanding and a new perspective on a specific topic or event that is personal to each Fellow.

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The Imbalance of Empathy in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: Reflections from the (Simulated) Negotiating Table

Introduction

Empathy is often regarded as a key feature of social life. To be able to walk in the other person's shoes means to see the other as an equal, and to be aware of their thoughts and feelings.¹ Recent academic debates have focused on the relevance of empathy not only in interpersonal relationships, but also on the international stage; just as individuals require empathy to settle their differences, so do groups of individuals to resolve conflicts between them.²

The need for empathy as a transformative tool in conflict resolution is especially critical in conflicts such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, where decades-old animosities have been institutionalized into a system of dehumanization and essentialization of the other, and where a lack of trust has effectively dismantled successive attempts at peacemaking.³ During my time as a fellow at the “Through the Looking Glass” program in the War Studies Department of King's College London, I have come to the realization that the balance of empathy between Israelis and Palestinians is unequal. The Israeli participants in the program seemed to be more capable of empathizing with certain elements of the Palestinian narrative, while the Palestinian participants seemed more resistant to the program's attempt to facilitate an understanding of the other side's narrative.

This paper seeks to understand whether this imbalance of empathy exists on the societal level as well, and, if so, identify the reasons for it. This paper argues that this imbalance of empathy does indeed exist, with Israelis being more capable of criticizing their historical narrative and empathizing with the Palestinians' narrative. This paper further argues that this imbalance is the result of military and diplomatic power asymmetries between Israelis and Palestinians. This imbalance of empathy has practical implications: if Palestinians are, at this point in time, incapable of empathizing with Israel's narrative, demanding that as a precondition to direct negotiations is futile.

If Israel's leadership is truly interested in bringing the Palestinians to the negotiating table, it should remove such requirements and show empathy for the Palestinians' plight without demanding the same. Lack of trust is the outcome of fear; gestures which would help overcome that fear could contribute to initial trust-building in the low-trust, low-empathy sociopolitical ecosystem of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

1 Head, Naomi. (2015). “A Politics of Empathy: Encounters with Empathy in Israel and Palestine.” *Review of International Studies* 42(1), pp. 95–113.

2 Crawford, Neta, C. (2014). “Institutionalizing Passion in World Politics: Fear and Empathy.” *International Theory* 6(3), pp. 535–577.

3 Head, Naomi. (2015). “A Politics of Empathy: Encounters with Empathy in Israel and Palestine.” *Review of International Studies* 42(1), pp. 95–113.

Enabling familiarization with a previously unknown “other” could be a step towards not only establishing borders between the two peoples, but building bridges between them for generations to come.

Empathy Starts with the Self

As stated by Naomi Head, one’s ability to empathize with the other must begin with the self; she mentions Clare Hemmings’ observation that subjects must have their own comfort challenged before being able to empathize with the other.⁴ For this reason, this paper tests its initial hypothesis by seeing to what extent Israelis and Palestinians are capable of self-doubt and critical readings of their own historical narrative; this would be the first step towards acknowledging and empathizing with previously competing elements in the other side’s historical account. As the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is comprised of many narratives surrounding different events throughout its history, this paper will focus on perhaps the most pivotal event in the conflict – the 1948 war which led to the creation of the State of Israel and the Palestinian refugee crisis.

In the early decades following the war, both Israeli and Palestinian historical accounts seemed to be mutually exclusive. Israel’s “old historians”, like Yehoshafat Harkabi, grew up before and during Israel’s formative years and their work subsequently supported Israel’s founding myth⁵ – that the Jewish settlement in Israel was attacked by the Arabs of Palestine, and later on by the armies of neighboring Arab states, upon the end of the British mandate over Palestine and the declaration of the State of Israel which followed. The founding Jewish state then acted in self-defense and heroically defeated the Arab armies, successfully securing the borders of the Jewish state as they were designed by the 1947 United Nations (UN) Partition Plan.

Arabs who resided within Israel fled at the behest of the Arab leadership, which promised a speedy return upon the victory of the Arab countries (which never came to pass); because their flight was not forced, but rather the unfortunate result of war, these Arabs should not be considered refugees, and Israeli forces cannot be blamed for intentionally expelling Arabs or committing atrocities towards them.⁶ The aggression of Arabs both within and outside Palestine is seen as doubly malicious in light of the Holocaust which befell the Jewish people, and the decades of persecution which European Jews suffered from. The need for a Jewish state was clear, and Israel was thus founded on the highest moral values and the backing of the international community.⁷

The Palestinian narrative offers an entirely contrary view to the Israeli one. The Palestinian population could not and would not accept the 1947 Partition Plan. From the outset, the goals of the Zionist movement in Palestine came at the expense of the land’s indigenous population. If a majority Jewish country was established between the river and the sea, where would the current Arab majority go?⁸ Once Palestinians began resisting the UN vote on partition, which was not accepted by the Arab world, Zionist forces hit back with full force.

4 Head, Naomi. (2015). “A Politics of Empathy: Encounters with Empathy in Israel and Palestine.” *Review of International Studies* 42(1), pp. 95–113.

5 Achcar, Albert. *The Arabs and the Holocaust*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010.

6 Smith, Charles, D. *Palestine and the Arab Israeli Conflict*. Bedford: St. Martin’s, 2004.

7 Harkabi, Yehoshafat. *Arab Attitudes Toward Israel*. New York: Hart Publishing Co., 1972.

8 Masalha, Nur. *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of “Transfer” in Zionist Political Thought, 1882–1948*. Washington D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992.

The Zionists were likewise not averse to using terror tactics and psychological warfare (notable examples include Deir Yassin) in order to drive the Palestinian population away, razing villages and committing atrocities to prevent their return as is outlined by the Haganah's infamous Plan Dalet.⁹ After the war, Israel pointedly refused to accept any repatriation attempts by Palestinian refugees, and thus began the Palestinian refugee crisis. These events, now known as the *Nakba*, are deeply ingrained in Palestinian collective memory; they are kept fresh by the continuing plight of Palestinian refugees throughout the Middle East today, and the ongoing struggle to liberate Palestinians from Zionist occupation.¹⁰

Starting from the 1980's, however, Israeli historians began questioning Israel's founding narrative. These "new historians", like Benny Morris and Tom Regev, used newly declassified documents from the Israeli Defense Forces' (IDF) archives and from various political parties to reveal new truths about the war.¹¹ While definitive proof of a systematic expulsion of Arabs was not discovered, not even in the lines of Plan Dalet, they concluded that Jewish forces used methods such as rape, mutilation and forced transfers in multiple Arab villages. They also concluded that Jewish troops used the case of Deir Yassin as a threat to Arab populations they wished to evacuate. Along with newly uncovered events, like the expulsion of the population of Lydda (which was signed by future Prime Minister Itzhak Rabin), these historians undermined mainstream Israeli narratives and opened the door to further doubt, criticism and self-reflection.¹²

In contrast to this process, Palestinian narratives have remained largely unchallenged by Palestinian historians. While many Palestinians acknowledge Jewish persecution and the Holocaust as historical facts, they say they do not understand why they must pay the price for them. Jews in the Middle East lived in relative peace with their Arab neighbors before they displayed national aspirations, and Zionists are the ones to blame for the escalation of hostile relations.¹³ Colonialist encroachment on Palestinian land and the threatening tones of Zionist leaders like David Ben-Gurion and Zeev Jabotinsky led to Palestinian armed resistance, which lasts to this day; this resistance is further justified by religious factions as *Jihad*, and so wide support for actions seen by Israelis as terrorist acts continues from various parts of Palestinian society.¹⁴ Even after the Israeli narrative was opened to internal criticism, Palestinian historians and scholars like Nur Masalha continued excavating facts which would fortify the foundations of the Palestinian narrative rather than undermine them.¹⁵

The Opening of the Israeli Mind...

There is a clear asymmetry of power between Israelis and Palestinians, and this appears to be the underlying cause for the imbalance of empathy between the two parties, as well as the cause of one side's aversion to reevaluating its national narrative.¹⁶ Paradoxically, the Israeli narrative weakened as Israeli strength grew. First of all, Israel's

9 Smith, Charles, D. *Palestine and the Arab Israeli Conflict*. Bedford: St. Martin's, 2004.

10 Achcar, Albert. *The Arabs and the Holocaust*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010.

11 Smith, Charles, D. *Palestine and the Arab Israeli Conflict*. Bedford: St. Martin's, 2004.

12 Morris, Benny. *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

13 Achcar, Albert. *The Arabs and the Holocaust*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010.

14 Ibid.

15 Masalha, Nur. *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of "Transfer" in Zionist Political Thought, 1882–1948*. Washington D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992.

16 Head, Naomi. (2015). "A Politics of Empathy: Encounters with Empathy in Israel and Palestine." *Review of International Studies* 42(1), pp. 95–113.

military strength (particularly since the 1967 war and the beginning of occupation) has transformed the way in which Israeli society views itself. The State of Israel was founded by a Jewish settlement which escaped persecution, discrimination and eventually even genocide in Europe; these Jews were joined, after Israel's establishment, by hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from Arab countries who were dispossessed and expelled from their homes.¹⁷

This persecuted minority mentality lingered in Israeli society during its formative years, and created an ethos of self-defense and purity of arms – Jews, as a persecuted minority, never initiate aggression but rather seek to protect the one Jewish state in the world. This Jewish state, the Israeli narrative holds, is established on liberal democratic principles and the highest moral philosophies of Jewish thought, and so any use of force is to be seen as proportionate and necessary.¹⁸ This self-perception, combined with the very real existential threat Arab states posed to Israel until 1967, allowed this narrative to be successfully reinforced for several decades.

However, as Israel rose in might as a regional military power, successfully defeating Arab armies in its many wars and courageously resisting the terrorist methods of various Palestinian groups, this narrative began to crack. Two main events can be seen as the turning points in Israel's narrative: the invasion to Lebanon (1982) and the breakout of the first Intifada (1987).¹⁹ The invasion to Lebanon, which was led by then IDF chief Ariel Sharon, was widely seen by the Israeli public as an unnecessary stretch of Israeli power into territories over which Israel had no clear claim; and the atrocities committed during this invasion, like the massacres in Sabra and Shatila, did little to boost the legitimacy of Israel's actions.

More important, however, was the effect the first Intifada had over Israeli public opinion. Israelis and the world at large were suddenly exposed to daily life in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), which had never been seen by the common Israeli. Images of Israeli tanks and soldiers facing Palestinian children and stone-throwers were popularized in the media and put in stark contrast with the way in which Palestinians were repressed by the IDF, especially as Prime Minister Rabin guided Israeli forces to crush the Palestinian uprising with all necessary force. These events forever tainted the clear consciousness of Israelis, who could not explain them away with invocations of the distant Holocaust or self-defense; this is evidenced by Israel's "new historians", who around this time displayed openness to elements in the Palestinian narrative that Israelis had until then fiercely denied.²⁰

The second element in the asymmetry of relations which allows Israelis to empathize more with the Palestinians is Israel's international legitimacy. Despite the Israeli government's protests at the biased treatment it receives from international organizations, these organizations in fact helped create the State of Israel from the outset. The 1917 Balfour Declaration gave a Jewish home in Palestine the initial international support it needed, and eventually led to the British mandate from the League of Nations (which ordered Britain to facilitate its implementation); the 1947 Partition Plan was successfully

17 Achcar, Albert. *The Arabs and the Holocaust*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010.

18 Smith, Charles, D. *Palestine and the Arab Israeli Conflict*. Bedford: St. Martin's, 2004.

19 Achcar, Albert. *The Arabs and the Holocaust*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010.

20 Ibid.

passed in the UN by the world's nations and sanctioned the creation of a Jewish state, which was promptly admitted to a variety of international organizations.²¹

Furthermore, Israel's narrative of persecution and victimhood was acknowledged by the world's leading powers, with nearly all the world's nations acknowledging the uniqueness and horror of the Holocaust and condemning acts of anti-Semitism within them to this day. These events anchored the legitimacy of Zionism's original goal in the international community, with the need for a Jewish state becoming clear after the events of World War II.²² The diplomatic acknowledgment of Israel's core narrative gives Israelis the luxury of empathizing with elements in the Palestinian narrative which run counter to its own; it is easy to let go of history when your view of it is, for the most part, undisputed. Seeing how even the scrutiny of the new historians could not undermine Israeli unity in the face of external threat, Israelis could feel even more secure in empathizing with elements of the Palestinian narrative. Israeli empathy can thus be interpreted as an extension of Israeli power, where Israelis are the active empathizers to the Palestinians, who are merely passive recipients.

... And the Closing of the Palestinian One

The Palestinians, as the weaker side in the conflict, do not enjoy the benefits of either military might or diplomatic prowess. Palestinians were never able to resolve their conflict with the Jewish settlement, and later with Israel, by force – not even when they had the military backing of the entire region. Their subsequent use of terror against Israel never amounted to a viable existential threat over the Jewish state, and it has likewise failed to pressure Israel to relinquish control over the oPt and put an end to occupation. In addition, Israel's robust security apparatus and the relative safety of its citizens makes it impossible for Palestinians to understand Israeli Jews' sense of persecution, which stems from events that took place decades ago and which the Palestinians took no part in. The Israeli narrative of past victimhood is therefore seen by Palestinians as nothing more than a legitimization of Palestinian suffering in the present.²³

When it comes to diplomatic efforts, the Palestinians' international legal warfare against Israeli occupation has yet to yield results on the ground. While Palestinians have increasingly applied for membership in various international institutions, like the International Criminal Court, and have promoted anti-Israel resolutions in UN organizations through their Arab allies, Israeli diplomatic efforts have effectively blocked the Palestinians from being able to inflict tangible harms on Israel's international standing (with the UN Security Council or the UN Human Rights Council capable of little more than voting on symbolic resolutions and condemnations). The Palestinians' inability to damage Israel's international standing is combined with their failure, as of yet, to secure their own; despite international public opinion increasingly swaying to the side of the Palestinians, realpolitik has so far stopped the UN from giving Palestinians the ultimate form of diplomatic legitimacy – unanimous international recognition of a sovereign Palestinian state.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Gill, Natasha. (June 19, 2013). "The Original 'No': Why the Arabs Rejected Zionism, and Why It Matters". *Middle East Policy Council*, retrieved on March 22, 2017 from: <http://www.mepc.org/articles-commentary/commentary/original-no-why-arabs-rejected-zionism-and-why-it-matters>.

²³ Achcar, Albert. *The Arabs and the Holocaust*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010.

These Palestinian weaknesses threaten the national aspirations and physical security of Palestinians, who are powerless to affect Israeli policies towards them; they likewise make it hard for Palestinians to empathize with the Israeli narrative, which seems at odds with the daily experiences of most Palestinians. Not having gone through the same cognitive dissonance as Israelis when it comes to their perception of their own narrative, and being engaged in a long-standing intractable conflict within which they are the weaker party, Palestinians have recruited their historical narrative to support a monolithic identity which is far more resistant to change.²⁴ Not only are Palestinians unable to empathize with some parts of the Israeli narrative, but attempts at dialogue, coexistence and reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis are generally rejected as attempts at “normalization” – which is defined as any joint Israeli–Palestinian activity whose purpose is anything other than exposing and putting an end to Israeli occupation.²⁵

Should Palestinians allow themselves to empathize with Israelis’ motives and reasoning, they would in effect be validating Israeli actions against them and allow for the continuation of the status quo indefinitely. For this reason, Palestinians engaged in dialogue programs like “Through the Looking Glass” often tend to shift the discussion to the political and collective features of the conflict, and find it difficult to perceive and understand narratives which deny their national traumas and delegitimize their individual experiences under occupation. This can be frustrating for the Jewish-Israeli participants (as it was for me initially), who feel more comfortable coming closer to the Palestinian point of view yet find their Palestinian counterparts unwilling (or, in fact, unable) to walk the same distance.

Empathizing with the Past to Establish a Future (i.e.: Policy Recommendations)

The imbalance of empathy is unlikely to shift so long as facts on the ground do not change. Multiple dialogue programs have been established since the Oslo Agreements on the grassroots level out of the understanding that trust and empathy are critical for the success of future peace talks; however, as is evident by the implosion of subsequent attempts at negotiations and continued animosity between Israeli society and Palestinian society, these programs have so far had limited results.²⁶ Such a move in mentality would likely take years to occur, as it requires an intrinsic shift in the Palestinian position from that of the weaker party to (at least to an extent) an equal. As this shift is unlikely to occur without both parties signing an agreement to end material and territorial claims, it appears that demanding empathy from the Palestinians would only result in a perpetual cycle which would prolong the conflict indefinitely.

Nicholas Wheeler explores Martin Wight’s claim that two adversaries may de-escalate and resolve a conflict by having one party take certain steps to create confidence on the other side. While Wight failed to specify which side that should be, it appears that in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict the answer is clear.²⁷ Wheeler emphasizes that trust between leaders is key to resolving conflict between their

24 Head, Naomi. (2015). “A Politics of Empathy: Encounters with Empathy in Israel and Palestine.” *Review of International Studies* 42(1), pp. 95–113.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Wheeler, Nicholas. (2013). “Investigating Diplomatic Transformations.” *International Affairs* 89(2), pp. 477–496.

respective communities; Israel, as the more powerful side, should take responsibility and attempt to create some level of trust on the leadership level to allow the Palestinian leadership to come to the negotiating table with the support of its people. This can be done in two ways: (1) by removing preconditions to negotiations which demand empathy from the Palestinian leadership to the Israeli narrative (for example, Benjamin Netanyahu's insistence that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state); or (2) by showing a level of empathy on the leadership level to some aspects of the Palestinian narrative, which the Israeli public would be able to digest and which would be appreciated by the Palestinian public as a sign of good faith. These two steps could do more than just bring about a deal between the peoples – they could be the first step on the path to reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians after a deal is signed, and create a foundation for true and sustainable peace.

Conclusion

The role of empathy in international relations is defined by the unique conditions surrounding different conflicts between groups and nations. In the case of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the ability of each side to empathize with the historical narrative of the other seems to be affected by the asymmetry of power between the two parties. Military power and diplomatic legitimacy have made Israelis more comfortable doubting and criticizing their account of history, as founding myths seemed to clash with new realities. Palestinians, on the other hand, have been the weaker side of the conflict since its inception, and their inability to change their conditions along with the harsh realities they face at the hands of Israelis have perpetuated their narrative of victimhood and weakness.

In practical terms, this means that for the imbalance of empathy to change, the asymmetry of power between the two parties needs to be addressed; this can only be done through a comprehensive agreement between the two parties that will put an end to violence and claims and would put the Palestinians on a more equal footing with the Israelis. As the collective psychology of Palestinian society prevents Palestinians from empathizing, or even from supporting empathy, towards Israelis so long as occupation continues, it would require a brave step on behalf of the Israeli leadership to acknowledge the imbalance of empathy and make the first move towards bringing the Palestinians closer to the negotiating table.

As a peaceful two-state solution seems to be fading away, it is now – more than ever – a time to bring about a resolution to this century-old conflict; the longer status quo remains in place, the more institutionalized the narratives of both sides become, and the more difficult it would be to change them.

Israel cannot claim the narrative of a persecuted victim if it continues to victimize others, and should reckon with the fact that with its newfound great power, comes great responsibility. While political realities have made it difficult for either leader to be too openly empathic to the other, what is needed now is a leader who seeks to promote not his personal interests, but the interests of the community he promised to represent. By making that difficult step, Benjamin Netanyahu could become the courageous leader his people need, and resolve the conflict through the transformative power of empathy.

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