



Israeli Memory of the Palestinian Refugee Problem

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Conflicts are a common human phenomenon, which typically do extensive damage to the involved parties. Their courses are significantly influenced by the memory of the rivals in question. This realization, and the centrality of conflicts worldwide, is the major reason for the recent growth in memory studies. Following this theme, this essay addresses a major case study: the Israeli memory of the main historical event of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict—the 1948 Palestinian exodus, which led to the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem. For decades, this conflict has jeopardized the stability of the Middle East, and is currently in an important phase: an intermittent peace process, in which the Palestinian refugee problem is a major issue. The essay describes the major dynamics of the Israeli memory of the Palestinian exodus from 1948 to nowadays, the causes of these dynamics, and their implications.

Theoretically, collective memory is generally defined as representations of the past that are collectively adopted and assembled into narratives. Collective memory is a general category, one that includes various types of memories. Relating to two of the main types, the first is popular memory, defined as representations of the past held by the society's members and best manifested directly by public opinion surveys. Popular memory significantly influences the psychological reactions (emotions, attitudes, and motivations, for example) and the behavioral reactions of the people holding it, and is therefore accorded great importance. The second kind is the official memory: the representations of the past adopted by the state institutions. This memory is manifested, for instance, in publications by state ministries and the army. The biggest significance of the official memory is that it influences the popular memory, the importance of which was explained above. Official memory, however, has its own separate importance: it represents countries in the international arena, and thereby influences their interactions with other countries.

Focusing on collective memory of conflicts, it consists of the narratives that describe the eruption of a conflict and its course, held by a party in a

conflict. A typical conflict narrative is significantly selective, biased and distorted, characterized by a simplistic black–white view in favor of the in-group. It plays a major role in the course of a conflict, by shaping the psychological and behavioral reactions of each party positively toward itself and negatively toward its rival. Such a typical memory of a conflict is functional during its climax, since it provides each party with the socio–psychological basis needed to meet the enormous challenges that intractable conflict demands. Eventually, however, such memory also inhibits de-escalation of the conflict and its peaceful resolution, as well as reconciliation between the parties. Thus, the more significantly a party’s memory can be positively transformed to being less distorted—when there is factual basis for such a transformation, and usually there is—the more the party’s psychological reactions will accommodate the rival and view it in a more legitimized and humanized manner. This will increase the likelihood of achieving peace and reconciliation.

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is a largely intractable conflict that has lasted for about a century, causing significant material, physical, and psychological damage to the involved parties. It started mainly due to the conflicting wishes of two national movements to establish their homelands in the same territory, and later was also influenced by cultural and religious concerns. Roughly, since the 1948 War, the conflict has come to dominate the existence, ideology, and identity of the Israeli-Jews. Since the foundation of the State of Israel, its institutions have almost exclusively disseminated the *Zionist* narrative of the conflict as a whole (“inclusive” narrative) among the Israeli-Jews. Generally, this inclusive narrative portrayed the Arabs/Palestinians and the Jews/Israelis as narratives of conflicts typically do. It was significantly selective, biased and distorted, presenting a simplistic description of events in a black–white way. The Arabs/Palestinians were blamed for the outbreak of the conflict and its continuation, delegitimizing them, while the Jews/Israelis were portrayed positively as peace-loving and moral, sole victims of the conflict.

The central historical event in this inclusive narrative is the Palestinian exodus during the 1948 War. During that war, some 650,000 Palestinians left the area in which the State of Israel was established, and the Palestinian refugee problem was created. This event is considered by the Palestinians to be their *Nakba* (“Catastrophe” in Arabic), and is a cornerstone of their identity. Since 1948, the refugee problem has become a major matter in Israeli–Arab/Palestinian relations, because the Arabs/Palestinians conducted a wide diplomatic campaign demanding the return of the refugees. Since the Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations in the 1990s, it has been a major issue in need of resolution. As for the Israeli-Jews, most of them consider the refugees’ return into Israel to be a major threat to their security, and therefore reject it. In sum, the exodus and the refugee problem have great political, psychological, and social importance for both parties. The responsibility for the exodus influences the political solution to the refugee problem (such as

a return of the refugees, offering apology, or paying reparations) and both parties' self-images.

The Palestinians and the Israeli-Jews have different narratives regarding the causes of the exodus. The Palestinians largely argue that the exodus was caused by expulsion. By contrast, the Zionist narrative of the exodus took no responsibility for it, and solely accused the Arabs/Palestinians. The Palestinians, it argued, left willingly because of blanket appeals from the Palestinian leadership and that of the Arab states, as well as fear of the Jews. Acts of expulsion by Jewish/Israeli fighting forces were not noted and were even denied.

In the first decades after the 1948 War, the Zionist inclusive narrative of the conflict was widely disseminated among Israeli-Jews in various ways. This was done, for example, regarding the 1948 exodus, via booklets of the national Information Center that were distributed among the citizens, history and civics textbooks that were approved by the Ministry of Education (or used in the education system with no such approval), and publications by the Education Corps in the Israeli army (Israel Defense Forces [IDF]) that were distributed among its soldiers. This dissemination project was conducted not only by state institutions, described above, but also by societal ones such as studies of Israeli-Jewish scholars, memoirs of the 1948 War written by its Jewish veterans, and essays in the daily newspapers. All of these state and societal institutions presented, by and large, the Zionist narrative of the exodus in their publications throughout that period, until the 1970s. This was a manifestation of the hegemony of this narrative in Israel, while it also strengthened its grasp in Israel.

In the 1970s, Israeli-Jewish societal institutions first challenged in a significant manner the dominant and inclusive Zionist narrative of the conflict. The scholar Yeoshua Porat, for example, published a book in which he argues that the 1936–39 Palestinian uprising was directed mainly against the British and not against the Jews (as the inclusive Zionist narrative claimed). As for the 1948 exodus, many scholarly studies, daily newspaper essays, and some 1948 Jewish war veterans' memoirs have begun presenting a *Critical* narrative (at times called a "post-Zionist"). According to this narrative, some Palestinians left willingly (in response to calls from their leadership to partially leave, or as a result of fear or societal collapse), while others were expelled by the Jewish/Israeli fighting forces. The expulsion cause was in sharp contrast to the Zionist narrative.

This societal change intensified in the late 1980s with the commencement of an historical revisionist period commonly called the "New Historians" era. New additional historical studies criticized additional aspects of the Zionist inclusive narrative of the conflict, or supported criticism raised earlier. They suggested, for example, that in an agreement with Abdalla, King of Jordan,

Jews divided the territory in 1948, and that the military balance between the Jews and the Arabs/Palestinians in the 1948 War favored the Jews in some phases of the war. As for the exodus, the historian Benny Morris supported its Critical narrative in many documents; such support, although less wide in scope, was also provided by other studies. Thus, since the late 1980s and at least until the mid-2000s, the Critical narrative was, for the most part, the exclusive one among Israeli-Jewish studies. Moreover, since the late 1980s, the publication of Critical newspaper essays also increased (vast majority), along with Critical 1948 war veterans' memoirs (about a third). At the same time, Israeli nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) began more significantly to present the Critical and the Palestinian narratives more significantly in their publications. Onward, beginning in the 1990s, some history textbooks used (without approval) in the educational system began to present the Critical narrative. The documents provided by the scholarly studies, and the testimonies given by Jewish 1948 war veterans, presented a solid basis to conclude that the Critical narrative regarding the exodus is more accurate than the Zionist one. Since the late 1990s, various Israeli and Palestinian NGOs and academic institutions have also begun negotiating the parties' historical narratives of the conflict.

As for the approach to the exodus of the Israeli state institutions, at least until 2004, the IDF and the Information Center continued to present, for the most part, the Zionist narrative. The situation in the Ministry of Education, though, was somewhat different. Until 1999, its approved history and civics textbooks presented, by and large, the Zionist narrative. Since 2000, however, they have presented the Critical one (at least until 2004). Similarly, in 2005, the Israeli National Archive published a book containing a selection of documents pertaining to the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The book cited Benny Morris' version of the expulsion of Palestinians from the Palestinian cities of Lydda and Ramla in 1948, and also revealed a telegram sent by Rabin, ordering local Israeli commanders to expel the residents of these two cities.

As an intermediate summary, we can see that the Israeli approach toward the exodus began to drastically transform in the 1970s from exclusively Zionist to, gradually, becoming significantly Critical, initially among the societal institutions and onward among the state ones. This transformation had various political implications. First, as described above, the Israeli *official* memory regarding the exodus began to transform, in 2000, to becoming partially Critical (regarding the Ministry of Education and the National Archive). Second, the Zionist narrative of the exodus reduced its grasp on the Israeli-Jewish *popular* memory. A 2008 public opinion survey conducted among a representative of sample of Israeli-Jews found that only 41 percent of them held that narrative, while 39 percent held the Critical narrative, and eight percent the Palestinian one (twelve percent did not reply). That is, 47 percent of the members of

this sector believed that some or all of the Palestinians were expelled in 1948 (more than those holding the Zionist narrative claiming no expulsion). This state of affairs represented a major shift in Israeli-Jewish popular memory of the exodus, which was much more Zionist-oriented in the first decades after 1948. Consequently, popular memory influences the politics regarding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The same research also found, for example, that people who held an inclusive Critical narrative of the conflict (of 24 major events of it) were more inclined to choose dovish parties in Knesset-parliament elections. They were also less inclined to hold negative feeling towards Palestinians (hatred, fear, rage, and de-legitimization), and were more supportive of signing peace agreements with them (all this, compared to people holding an inclusive Zionist narrative of the conflict).

The third implication relates to the Israeli–Palestinian peace process. For decades after the 1948 War, Israel refused to acknowledge the tragedy of the Palestinians in 1948 and any political responsibility for the exodus. In contrast, the 2000 Camp David and the 2001 Taba Israeli–Palestinian peace summits witnessed a change. At that time, the Critical narrative of the exodus was so prevalent in Israel that it was hard for Israeli negotiators to ignore it as they used to. Therefore, in the summits, they expressed a basic willingness to publically acknowledge Palestine’s 1948 tragedy and, indirectly and implicitly, Israel’s partial responsibility for it. This promoted the prospects for peace between the parties.

How can we explain the transformation of the way the exodus was presented in Israel over the years? It was an outcome of various social, economic, and political developments. Largely, until the 1970s, various occurrences in Israel significantly supported the Zionist narrative and inhibited the Critical one. Israel was involved in the conflict, and despite gaining victories, its Israeli-Jewish citizens generally felt insecure in the State’s existence. This promoted collectivism and conformism among them. In addition, the security threat, combined with initial major economic difficulties, highlighted the need to mobilize the citizens to cope with these challenges, to be patriotic, and to contribute their share to the struggle. At the same time, the Palestinians were not central in the Israeli-Jewish public sphere until the late 1960s–early 1970s, resulting in limited research about the 1948 exodus. In addition, describing the Critical narrative was prohibited, since it was perceived as providing the Arabs/Palestinians with ammunition in their international diplomatic struggle with Israel, demanding the return of the Palestinian refugees.

Furthermore, the Israeli-Jewish society had a few major relevant characteristics. First, it was oriented toward collectivism and conformism due to the social background of its Ashkenazi elite (those coming from Europe), the threat of the conflict described above, and the traditional nature of the majority of the massive immigration to Israel after its foundation. All this

significantly prevented Critical thinking and activity. Second, the Israeli-Jewish media was largely controlled by the state or by political parties—the radio and the television (from the late 1960s) completely, and the main newspapers largely. This prevented dissemination of Critical ideas and information. Third, the Mapai political party, and its successor, Ma'arach, were in power from 1948 to 1977. They were highly in line with, and supported by, the Israeli social elite (scholars, journalists, and authors). This prevented the elite from being too critical of the Zionist narrative and ideology supported by these parties.

In contrast, from the 1970s until now, the Critical narrative has gradually become more acceptable in Israel, due to many changes. Israel has become more secure in its existence, due to its economic and military strengthening, the 1979 peace agreement with Egypt, and the 1990s peace talks (including the 1994 peace agreement with Jordan). Consequently, there was less need to mobilize the citizens. In addition, the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the 1982 Lebanon War raised wide criticism against the political and military elites, promoting general societal criticism. Furthermore, the centrality of the Palestinians increased, reaching its peak with the eruption of the 1987 uprising (Intifada), characterized by their physical prevalence in the public sphere as well as their views of the 1948 exodus. Simultaneously, the extent of taboo surrounding the Critical narrative decreased, due to the decrease of the Arab/Palestinian diplomatic campaign against Israel.

Moreover, various processes transformed the Israeli-Jewish society. Primarily, it became less collectivist and conformist, and more individualistic and Critically oriented. This was due to: a generational turnover, in which the 1948 generation—the more conservative and Zionist oriented generation—gradually gave more control in Israel to the younger, more open generation; a decrease in the threat of the conflict; and the less traditional second generation among the Jewish immigrants. In addition, Americanization (and later globalization) processes occurred, promoting individualism, human rights, pluralism, critical thinking, and less attachment to Israel, while various social rifts (based on religion, economic status, or origin) emerged or were enhanced, leading to the fragmentation of the society. Moreover, beginning in the mid-1970s, the main newspapers became more privately owned and commercially oriented to the extent that in the mid-1990s, they became exclusively so. In addition, the mid-1990s experienced a wide deregulation of the electronic media, which led to the opening of dozens of new radio and television channels. All this led to a wider dissemination of Critical ideas and information. Moreover, in 1977, a political turnover took place in which the Ma'arach party was replaced by the Likud party. This led to a rift between the state institutions and the social elite, and the latter felt freer to be Critical. Finally, with regard to the research community in Israel, three processes took

place: a generational turnover among scholars; Critical theories (such as post-modernism or multi-culturalism developed in the Western academia) gained more impact; and in the early 1980s Israeli archival documents regarding the 1948 War began to be declassified, allowing for the publication of studies based on documents that described expulsions. All these integrated changes led to the wide dissemination and acceptance of the Critical narrative in Israel.

In conclusion, until the late 1970s, the Zionist narrative regarding the 1948 exodus was the hegemonic one in Israel. Since then, due to social, economic, and political developments, it has lost its hegemony and the Critical narrative has taken a significant place. Consequently, the Israeli official and popular memories have also transformed to become significantly Critical, and the Israeli–Palestinian peace talks have been somewhat influenced, in turn.

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