NATION, NARRATION AND CONFLATION
A mutual blind spot in historical narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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CONTENTS

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ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Oslo peace process in 2000, many academics and

educators began to focus on antithetical Israeli and Palestinian historical narratives as an

important obstacle to a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A decade later,

initial optimism at the prospect of a "bridging narrative" that would foster mutual

comprehension by integrating Israeli and Palestinian versions of history has waned, with many

early enthusiasts abandoning the idea as unrealistic. This paper compares Zionist and

Palestinian historical narratives about the conflict as a whole, to the work of historians

specializing in land issues in Palestine in the period 1881-1939. The comparison reveals

important mutual lacunae in both sets of conventional narratives, which if integrated into an

overall history suggest a potentially productive integrated "bridging" narrative.

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Après l'échec du processus de paix d'Oslo en l'an 2000, plusieurs universitaires et éducateurs

ont commencé à considérer les récits historiques antithétiques israéliens et palestiniens comme

étant un obstacle à la résolution pacifique du conflit Israélo-Palestinien. Une décennie plus tard,

l'optimisme initial d'une perspective de récit commun, susceptible de favoriser une

compréhension mutuelle, s'est dissipé. Plusieurs des premiers fervents de cette idée l'ont

abandonnée car ils la considèrent irréaliste.   Ce document compare les récits historiques

Sionistes et Palestiniens, du conflit dans son ensemble, à l'œuvre des historiens qui se

spécialisent dans le domaine des questions foncières et territoriales en Palestine entre 1881 et

1939. La comparaison révèle des lacunes importantes dans les deux récits historiques et suggère

qu'un récit commun potentiellement fructueux pourrait voir le jour si l'on tenait compte des

travaux des historiens, mentionnés ci-dessus,   en les intégrant à l'histoire globale.

INTRODUCTION

The spectacular failure of the Oslo peace process in 2000 and the outbreak of the 2nd intifada

garnered a variety of reactions from various parties involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,

ranging from extreme disappointment to a chorus of "I told you so"s.

Even before negotiations had completely fallen apart, two mirror-image narratives began to

emerge in journalistic and popular discourse which still predominate today: while the protagonist

nation (either Israel or the Palestinian Authority depending on the version) had bent over

backwards to accommodate the other side's demands, the Oslo process failed because the

antagonist side had not been negotiating in good faith. Instead, the antagonist nation had been

using the peace talks as a way of buying time in order to crush the protagonists by other means;

unrelenting settlement construction on Palestinian land in the pro-Palestinian version (Elgindy

2010, Shlaim 2013), or the accumulation of weapons to resume violent attacks on Israel in the

pro-Israeli version (Karsh 2004, Fishman 2003). Much like in a *Choose Your Own Adventure*

novel, these stories have alternative endings. In the Palestinian version, Israel, which had never

offered any meaningful proposals to begin with, effectively ended the peace process by electing

hardliner Ariel Sharon. Alternatively, in the pro-Israeli version, Israel had offered almost

everything the. Palestinians wanted, but it was Arafat who ended the peace process by rejecting

these generous offers, without putting forth any significant counterproposals (Clinton 2004, Ross

2002), and then deliberately starting the 2nd intifada in order to achieve Palestinian statehood by

violence (Enderlin 2003, Karsh 2004).

As the shouting match of competing stories reverberated in media, in the streets and on university campuses, a few voices pointed out something striking: the peace process failed and collapsed into mistrust, indignation and violence despite the fact that *bulk of the populations on both sides basically agreed on what an acceptable final settlement should look like* - a situation which is still the case today (PIPA 2002, Ha'aretz 2005, Associated Press 2009, Kalman 2013, Abu Toameh 2013). Polls even show that majorities are ready to compromise on what are usually portrayed as intractable sticking points of a compromise, such as the "right of return" for palestinian refugees (Angus-Reid 2003, NYT 2013). At the same time these same polls also show that each side is extremely pessimistic and mistrustful of the other's intentions and willingness to follow through (PSR 2013, Kalman 2013, Abu Toameh 2013). A more striking exemplar of the toxicity of competing historical narratives is hard to imagine.

As any Jewish-Palestinian dialogue group organizer can attest, political discussions between Israelis and Palestinians usually borders on the impossible. Zionist and Palestinian versions of history create a factual, moral and linguistic Tower of Babel scenario where the same words and events have entirely different meanings ascribed to them depending on the listener. What one person thinks of as banal and uncontroversial ideas such as "Zionism", "Palestinians", "right of return," "right to exist" are seen as malicious provocations and propaganda terms by the other. As a result, political discussion between Israelis and Palestinians tend to be extremely short, quickly escalating into frustration and disgust.

The 2006 film *Encounter Point* documents The Bereaved Families Forum, a dialogue group for Israelis and Palestinians who have lost family members to the conflict. The film demonstrates

the power that direct interaction has in humanizing the other and diffusing hatred between

groups.   Even the parents of a victim of suicide bombing and the the parents of the bomber form

close bonds across the chasm of grief, anger ethnicity and politicals as they share their personal

experiences and feelings. Tellingly, political and historical discussions between bereaved family

members are absent from the film. At a 2006 presentation of Encounter Point at McGill

university, I asked Ali Abu Awad and Robi Damelin, (the dialogue group organizers featured in

the film) what happens when discussions turn to politics or history. Damelin's response was "we

fight." In effect, people who can bond with, and becomes personal friends with the parents of

the suicide-murderer of their child have a much harder time engaging in civil political discourse

with them.

In recognition of this poisonous dynamic, the post-Olso period saw a flurry of academic works

and experimental history textbooks focused on the role of historical narratives in the Israeli

Palestinian conflict. Educators published textbooks with simultaneous side by side dual

narratives in order to render the political positions of each side morally intelligible to the other

(Adwan and Bar-On 2003, 2006, Cohn-Sherbok and el-Alami 2001). Meanwhile, historians,

sociologists and anthropologists explored the idea of going a step further by creating an

integrated "bridging narrative" which would integrate Israeli and Palestinian narratives. In

contrast to many peace narratives which emerge after peace has been achieved, this narrative

would be a pre-requisite to peace, reducing tensions and making dialogue possible (Rotberg

2006, Pappé 2003)

Over the following decade, as conflict escalated and negotiations stalled, the initial optimism about "bridging" narratives waned. Some concluded in the course of their work with dialogue groups or experimental history classes, that these sorts of efforts cannot be productive while the conflict rages as tensions are too high for people to lower their psychological defenses (Bar-On 2006, Bar-On and Adwan 2006). Others came to believe that joint narrative would require a abandonment of national identities in favour of a unified identity, a goal more difficult to achieve than peace, and perhaps only possible after peace has been concluded (Hammack 2010). Even historian Ilan Pappé, who coined the term bridging narrative and who is perhaps the most optimistic of those pursuing one has recently abandoned the idea of an integrated meta-narrative in favour of the more modest goal of a "dialectical bridging narrative" which highlights areas of agreement and disagreement between narratives (Pappé and Hilal 2010).

But is this pessimism actually warranted? Although the challenges to dialogue are very real, the failure of these efforts to produce an integrated narrative is somewhat predictable given the fundamentally incompatible nature of the conventional narratives that these historians and educators are working from. As the next chapter will outline in more detail, both conventional sets of narratives are stories of dueling nationalisms racing to establish a state on the same territory. This competition culminates in an inevitable clash which ends up being the war of 1948, resulting in the creation of the state of Israel and the displacement of 700,000-760,000 Palestinians (Morris 2004a), which is seen as the origin point of today's difficulties.

Whereas historians on both sides now tend to agree on the most important facts of this story, where they differ substantially is in the interpretation of the motives of the various actors. These

interpretations result in opposite designations of the roles of aggressor and victim/defender and thus determine which facts are emphasized and de-emphasized by the author in the construction of his or her narrative.

While the different versions leave lacunae that can be complimentary, the main events have completely different interpretations ascribed to them, which can't be merged without taking an existing position, or coming up with a new interpretation.   Did Oslo fail because it was a "Palestinian Versailles" with Israel offering the Palestinians sovereignty in name only (Said 1993, Macaskill 2001, Hanieh 2013), or because the Palestinians refused to compromise or negotiate meaningfully even though Israel was offering them almost everything they wanted (Barak/Morris 2002, Ross 2002b, 2004)? The truth is one, the other or neither. It can't be both.

In Zionist histories, the main blame for the conflict is generally placed on a combination of religious intolerance of Palestinians in combination with the political machinations of the leaders of Arab leaders. Palestinian nationalism is often described as having no organic roots, and Palestinian identity having been largely invented in order to combat Zionism and later, Israel (see Sherman 2011, 2012, Pipes 1989). Zionist and Israeli violence (such as expulsions of civilians during the 1948 war, or the continuing occupation of Gaza and the West Bank) are described as defensive or pre-emptive reactions to Palestinian aggression (Morris 2008, 2011). Although it is now a minority view among historians, some still insist that Palestinians were not expelled in the 1948, but that they left voluntarily at the urging of Arab leaders for strategic military reasons (Karsh 2002, 2003).

Pro-Palestinian historians on the other hand see Zionism as an essentially racist 19th century colonialist movement which inherently required (and still requires) the displacement or disenfranchisement of the native Arab population in order to achieve its aims of statehood (Masalha 1992, R. Khalidi 2006). These writers see the Palestinian people as having been forced to pay off the moral debts incurred by Europe towards the Jews for the holocaust (Abdallah 2002, Said 1986, R. Khalidi 2006) while they tend to describe Palestinian and Arab violence as a or pre-emptive reaction to Zionism's inherent aggression (W. Khalidi 1976, 1985). Meanwhile, another genre of Zionist history shies away from overt blame, and describes the conflict as the tragic but inevitable result of the conflicting interests of two legitimate nationalisms (Laqueur 1972, Morris 1999).

What almost all of these narratives ignore or else gloss over, is a decades-long series of violent clashes and tensions between Arab peasants and Zionist settlers which began right at the outset of the Zionist/Palestinian encounter in the 1880's, and which shaped the attitudes of those peoples towards each other in ways that are crucial to understanding the dynamics of the conflict in our own time.

These clashes are critically important to any attempt at an integrated narrative, because as we shall see in the next chapter, these clashes put current moral justifications for the Zionist and Palestinian positions to the test. Were peasants attacking Jewish immigrants out of religious/ethnic intolerance and a desire to maintain dominance, or was it because they were being pushed off their lands? These neglected events are important for the very reasons that lead to their neglect by both sides: they challenge the moral foundations of key aspects of both Zionist

and Palestinian versions of history. As such they are crucial to the work of anyone hoping to

craft a cohesive integrated narrative on which acknowledges the experiences of either side and

on which a just peace should be based.

ETHICAL PILLARS

Zionist and pro-Palestinian political positions are generally based on sets of historical

assumptions which morally legitimize the cause of one side while delegitimizing that of the

other. Interestingly, historical and polemical texts about the conflict as a whole tend to pay little

attention to the implications which early violent encounters between Palestinian Arabs and

Zionists have on these historical assumptions.   In general, these narratives tend to either

completely ignore the existence of these encounters (see Sachar 1976, Pappé 2004), or to

minimize their historical significance when they are discussed (see Morris 2001, R. Khalidi

2006).

This essay will argue that the 'ethical pillars' of both Zionist and Palestinian historical narratives

can be put to the test by exploring the issues surrounding these violent clashes and that these

episodes are neglected precisely because the details surrounding them pose a fundamental

challenge to the moral legitimacy of both sets of Israeli and Palestinian nationalist narratives.

One of the main ethical pillars of Israeli historical narratives of the conflict is the belief that Arab

violence against Israel and the pre-Israeli Zionist community has historically been the result of

religious intolerance combined with a concomitant preference to engage in violence than to

accept the existence of a Jewish state. Viewed through this lens, violent and controversial

actions on the part of Israel and the pre-state *yishuv* (Palestinian Jewish community) can largely

be interpreted as defensive or pre-emptive, if sometimes excessive or ill conceived (see

Dershowitz 2003:7).

Conversely, Palestinian narratives are generally predicated on the idea that the Zionist movement had always planned, or at least necessitated the dispossession and expulsion of large numbers of Arabs from their own land (Masalha 1992, R Khalidi 2006:4-5). From this point of view, Arab violence against Israel and the pre-state *yishuv* can be interpreted as a mostly defensive or pre-emptive reaction, if sometimes excessive or ill-conceived, to dispossession at the hands of Zionists, and later by the State of Israel (W Khalidi 1976:lxxvii).

Given the centrality of these ideas to the moral case for pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian political positions, it is curious that popular and academic writings about the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict tend to pay so little attention to the violent clashes between Arab peasants and Zionist settlers that occurred throughout the formative period of the Arab-Zionist encounter, beginning in the first years of Zionist settlement in the 1880's and culminating in the Arab Revolt of 1936-39. In many respects, these clashes can be thought of as a series of "test cases" as to whether or not the moral assumptions of the Zionist and Palestinian narratives hold water: The bulk of these clashes involved Arab attacks on the Zionist settlements. What were the motivations of the attackers? Were they reacting to fears of dispossession in congruence with Palestinian narratives of the conflict, or were they motivated by nationalism, xenophobia, religious intolerance and jealousy as per Zionist interpretations?

Surprisingly, these crucial questions, and the events that beg them do not often hold an important place in texts that discuss the conflict as a whole. These works tend to be temporally oriented around the war of 1948 (which resulted in the creation of hundreds of thousands of Arab

refugees and in the creation of the state of Israel), and thematically focused on dueling

nationalisms and the machinations of elites. The violent clashes between Arab *fellahin* and rural

Jewish settlers that peppered the first six decades of the Arab-Zionist encounter are usually

described in passing if at all, as accents or asides to narratives of a 'race' towards 1948, focused

on institution building, international promises, colonial power strategies, white papers and elite

political figures (see Sachar 2007, Laqueur 2003, Morris 2001, Milton-Edwards 2008, Tessler

2009, Hadawi 1998, Schulze 1999, Scheer 2010, Kattan 2009). Ignoring seven decades of

clashes, some writers treat the events of 1948 as if they were the main cause of the present

conflict (i.e. Pappé 1992, Fraser 2008). Very rarely are the events of 1948 portrayed as a

consequence of attitudes shaped by these clashes or by the material issues that surrounded them

(for exceptions see Bonds et al 1977, Shafir 1996).

While in-depth discussions of these formative encounters between Zionists and Palestinian Arabs

do exist, they tend to be relegated to more specialized studies of land issues, peasant narratives

and Palestinian identity, rather than figuring prominently in narratives of the conflict as a whole

(i.e. Stein 1984, Swedenburg 2003, R Khalidi 2010, Adler 1988, Yazbak 2000, Dowty 2001)

The focus on competing nationalisms and the orientation towards 1948 continues in recent years

even as scholars, activists, diplomats and educators begin to appreciate the role that historical

narratives play in the perpetuation of the conflict (see Agha and Malley 2009, Rotberg 2006,

Pappé and Hilal 2010, Caplan 2010, Bar-On and Adwan 2006). When texts about the role of

narrative stray from theoretical discussions of identity and legitimacy, they tend to be focused on

the conflicting narratives of 1948, and whether or not these narratives can be integrated – a

question which after a few years of optimism, is now usually answered in the negative (see Bar-On 2006, Bar-On and Adwan 2006, Partner 2008, Pappé 2003, 2006). Even an important joint Israeli-Palestinian educational project, intended to generate mutual understanding by exposing students on both sides to the historical beliefs of the other (Adwan et al 2003), focuses on competing nationalisms, and begins with the Balfour Declaration of 1917. The violent clashes between rural Arabs and Zionists which occurred several decades prior and after that date are completely ignored. Works about narrative in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which focus on the formative period of the conflict or that explicitly examine the ethical bases of pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian political positions are practically non-existent [*i.e. the author has not been able to find any*].

NATION AND CONFLATION

Almost as much ink has been spilled in academia about nationalism as human blood has been spilled in the name of various nationalisms. The definitions, conceptions, paradigms and theories of and about nationalism, its origins, its functions, its manifestations, its psychology, its political effects, are myriad and on the surface, contradictory. Currently invoked theories of nationalism describe the phenomenon as everything from a "discursive formation" with various forms of nationalism having only the name in common (Calhoun 1997) to a "malady" of the process of development from feudalism to modernity (Nairn 1977/2003) to a modern expression of deep "primordial" instincts be they entirely cultural (Geertz 1973) or else innate, having evolved in order to allow individual humans to cohere into groups in order to compete with one another and pass on their genes (van der Bergh 1978). For all their apparent contradictions,

what all theories of nationalism hold in common is that they all seek to explain the internal (be it emotional, symbolic, ideological, psychological) relationship of human beings to the modern state. What are the ideological and material motivations that drive us to form into states? How and why do individuals come to identify with collectivities of people they have never met? Who is included or excluded and on what basis? Why are some nationalisms based on ethnicity, and others multicultural? Why do people make sacrifices based on these identities? What interests, material and psychological do these collective identities serve? How do these interests vary according to internal divisions within the collectivity, imagined or real?

Geertz (1963) sees nationalism and national identity as a way that people have of participating in, or else feeling like they are participants in the formation of a state to be, or else in the functioning of an existing state. Anderson (1983) argues that national identity is in part an organic consequence of print capitalism, which allowed people to learn about, and thus identify with strangers, with political, material and psychological consequences ensuing. Gellner (1983) sees national identity as a fictitious imposition from above, a product of industrialization, which required some way of unifying and homogenizing the people of various backgrounds and identities who were converging in urban centres. Along similar lines, Hobsbawm (1990) argues that nationalism was primarily an invention of national elites, in order to legitimize their rule, conflating their interests with that of the general public as a counter to emerging class-consciousness. As Hobsbawm sees it, this elite invention eventually took on other meanings and functions to the lower classes. As is the case with most theories about collective phenomena, seemingly contradictory paradigms and approaches to nationalism are often in fact complimentary tools. The utility of so-called ethno-symbolic, constructivist, perennial,

12

primordial, modernist, darwinian, instrumentalist and other approaches (see Smith 1998, Leoussi 2001, Özkirimli 2010 for overview) as well as any combination thereof, varies according to which aspect of nationalism or which particular situation of nationalism one is trying to understand.

As concerns the subject of this paper, we are interested in the conventional view among historians of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that conflicting nationalisms (in combination with other factors) were the primary and original cause of Arab-Zionist hostility, and by extension of the conflict itself. To this end it is only important to understand that national identity loosely binds people into large "imagined" communities with other self-identified members of that group, most of whom they have never met, whom they may or may not have much in common with, outside of certain ethnic, linguistic or cultural factors. Membership in this group may prompt individuals to action in support of various nationally identified political goals in the hopes of attaining material, or psychological benefits (including a sense of fulfillment of moral obligations in the form of self sacrifice). When it comes to self-identified members of national groups who are not members of a nation-state, adherence to "nationalism" usually implies the desire to either form such a state, or to achieve certain nationally defined rights or autonomy within another political entity. In historical narratives about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before 1948, most references to nationalism imply a desire to establish a nation-state. The conflict inherent in the fact that two self identified groups sought to establish a state on the same territory is the central focus of conventional narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

What is missing from the conception of nationalism found in these narratives, is that like any collective identity, national identity highlights certain within group similarities while obfuscating important differences. These differences include not only things such as gender, class and other status or material differences, but also important differences in terms of social or political vision associated with national identity and sentiment. Where two people might identify as Zionists (i.e. Jewish nationalists) and share a certain cultural, historical and symbolic lexicon, the same two people may also differ enormously in what their social and political goals and priorities are as Zionists. For the "political" Zionists who formed the leadership of most of the important Zionist organizations in the first few decades of Zionist settlement, the goal of statehood was paramount. This branch of Zionism, founded by Theodor Herzl conceived a vision of the Jewish state that was essentially European nation in the middle east, with no particular emphasis on Jewish culture or religion (see Herzl 1896). As such it has been described and criticized by contemporaries as a middle-class European reaction to the limited social-mobility of anti-Semetic Europe (Ginzburg 1897). In contrast, members of the "cultural" Zionist movement, whose most notable exponent was Ahad Ha'am ("one of the people" pen name of Asher Ginsburg), saw the main objective of Zionism as a worldwide Jewish cultural revival, centered in the historical Jewish homeland. For these Zionists, a political state was at best a secondary concern, being of interest only insofar as it was practical and furthered the movement's cultural aims (see Ginzburg 1897). Other Zionists prioritized Jewish liberation in the context of international socialism. Many were mainly concerned with escaping persecution or gaining economic opportunities, or various combinations of all of the above. For example the Labor Zionist movement which dominated since the 1920's, combined the state-centered focus of political Zionism with a nationalist form of Jewish socialism (Shafir 1996). These goals were

14

often in conflict. Thus you have the phenomenon of Zionist labourers trying to organize joint labour unions together with their Arab colleagues, but being thwarted in their efforts by Zionist labour leaders, in the name of Zionism (Lockman 1996).

Meanwhile Arab society was deeply divided and stratified, between the traditional elite notable class, a very small urban professional middle class, and a large rural majority. These groups, in particular the wealthy notables and *fellahin* (rural agriculturalists) were often highly antagonistic towards eachother (Stein 1987, R Khalidi 1997, Swedenburg 1998, 2003).   For many in the small urban middle class, Arab nationalism held the promise of social mobility as it offered the possibility of hitherto unavailable access to civil and political administration, just as Jewish nationalism did for the middle class Zionists. For the traditional elite class, once the Ottoman system which they had prospered under began to crumble, nationalism was often a means of retaining and expanding their dominance, as well as a means to deflect away mounting hostility from the rural classes away from them and towards their competitors.   In contrast to urban Arabs, for most of the rural people who made up the large majority of the population, nationalism and national identity were of little interest, except and until these became associated with struggles involving resistance to being evicted from their lands, mostly in the late 1930's. When nationalism did take hold in the countryside, it's symbols and object were had little in common with the elite version that historians tend to focus on (Stein 1984, Adler 1985, Swedenburg 2003, Yazbak 2000).

Where there has been a trend in the past several decades among historians of other subjects to revisit conventional narratives based on elite ideas by integrating narratives from below (for

example see Parente 2004 on the fall of the Roman Republic) this has not been the case for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While a "history from below" has been applied in terms of aspects of the conflict, such examining the daily lives of non-elite figures (Ben Ze'ev 2011), and re-examining narratives concerning specific groups (Shohat 1988, Cohen 2009), it has not yet been applied in terms of re-examining conventional narratives of the conflict as a whole.

It should be noted that sincere sentiment and idealism by no means preclude the existence of self-interested instrumentalism. The Leninist policymaker may sincerely believe that he is advancing the cause of the international proletariat as he dismantles autonomous workers' councils and replaces them with collectivized bureaucratic didctatorship. The free market ideologue and business mogul may see himself as a true champion of liberty as he squeezes his employees into a state of further and further dependence. Nor is ideological instrumentalism an exclusive purview of the elite. Research is psychology shows that ordinary people routinely rationalize their own interests as for the benefit if others, not only to others, but to themselves. This is true both in politics as in daily life (see Haidt 2012, 2007).

In the case of historiography of the Zionist-Arab conflict, the conventional focus on dueling nationalisms results in narratives which emphasize the actions and ideas of elite Zionist, Arab and British figures while ignoring the social divisions within Arab and Zionist societies. As we shall see, these divisions play a huge role in a series of events which challenge the ethical pillars of both sets of narratives, and which shed a different light on the conflict as a whole.

In his book *Silencing the Past; Power and the Production of History* (1995), Michel-Rolph

Trouillot discusses the role of rebel leader Jean-Baptiste Sans Souci in the emancipation of Haïti

from French rule. Although Sans Souci's story reveals very important aspects of the Haitian

revolution, Trouillot argues that because his story is embarrassing to the elite who took control of

Haiti after its emancipation, it has been "silenced" from history.

In particular, Sans Souci's story highlights the fact the "heroes" of the Haitian revolution, the

creole officers who eventually overthrew French rule, had opportunistically switched sides and

joined the French forces *against* the rebellion for an extended period during the rebellion. This

treachery reversed itself only because the officers' lives became endangered because the French

began wrongly suspecting them of collaboration with the revolutionary forces, led by Sans

Souci. Further tarnishing the image of the great nation builders is the fact that after they finally

defected from the French side, these officers turned around and murdered any Haitian rebels,

including Sans Souci and his forces, who insisted on fighting independently, rather than under

their command (Trouillot:31-69).

By "silenced," Trouillot does not mean that Sans Souci's story had been completely excised from

history, but rather something akin to 'neutralized'. Sans Souci is in fact commonly mentioned as

a rebel commander in histories of the emancipation of Haiti, and all the relevant facts

surrounding his rebellion have been available and in use since the 18th century. However, the

most important aspects of his story - the opportunism of the creole officers, their fratricidal

murder of the independent rebels, and the ethnic dynamics of the rebel forces which pitted

Congo born rebels against creole rebels are absent from most texts. When they are mentioned,

they are presented in a diluted fashion which negates the officers' shameful role, and erases the

class and ethnic dimensions of the revolution. (Trouillot:54, 66)

As we shall see, the analagous 'silenced' story of pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian historical

narratives lies hidden in the empty spaces of grand historical narratives of the conflict, and

exposed in plain sight in the obscurity of specialized studies of land related issues.

THE QUESTION OF THE HIDDEN QUESTION

The Case for Israel (2003) a popular polemic written by the famous American civil libertarian

jurist Alan Dershowitz, is exceptional in that the entire book specifically focuses on issues of

morality in terms of the origins of the conflict. Wittingly or not, this text exemplifies the sort of

"silence" described above. In a chapter entitled "Did European Jews Displace Palestinians?"

Dershowitz presents an account of Jewish land purchases in Palestine which bolsters his

assertion that Arab hostility towards Zionism was based on intolerance and political aspirations

rather than in reaction to unethical conduct on the part of Zionists. His argument supporting the

morality of Zionist land acquisition is neatly summed up in the introduction of the book:

> The Jews of the First Aliyah [*first wave of Zionist immigration*] did not displace
>
> local residents by conquest or fear as the Americans and Australians did. They
>
> lawfully and openly bought land - much of it thought to be non arable - from
>
> absentee landlords. No one who accepts the legitimacy of Australia being an
>
> English-speaking Christian nation, or of Western America being part of the
>
> United States, can question the legitimacy of the Jewish presence in what is now
>
> Israel from the 1880s to the present. (Dershowitz:6)

In the slightly more detailed treatment of the issue found in his chapter on land acquisition,

Dershowitz notes that a "professional analysis of land purchases between 1880 and 1948

established that three-quarters of the plots purchased by Jews were from mega-landowners rather

than those who worked the soil." As land sales imply voluntary transactions, there seems to be

nothing morally objectionable about any of the sales, be they by "mega-landowners" or by "those who worked the soil." When Dershowitz further down cites Benny Morris to the effect that "only 'several thousand' families were displaced following land sales to Jews between the 1880s and the late 1930s," the reader is left to wonder how anyone can be displaced by the sorts of voluntary land sales described. Given the information presented in the book, one might assume that the "displaced" families were voluntarily displaced – i.e. the 25% of sellers who were farmer-owners who chose to voluntarily sell their land to Zionist Jews. The picture painted here is that Zionists bought empty plots of land from absentee landlords, as well as land from individual farmers, and thus, Zionist land acquisition was a morally unobjectionable enterprise (Dershowitz 2003:25).

Given his contention that the land was acquired in an unobjectionable manner, it is surprising that Dershowitz does not mention anywhere in his book that several of the Jewish settlements established on land acquired from "mega-landowners" suffered from chronic attacks by Arab peasants. One might expect him to highlight these attacks in order to bolster his case that opposition to Zionism was based on the religious intolerance inherent in Islam. A look at the details surrounding these land purchases suggests why Dershowitz, like other writers, Zionist and pro-Palestinian alike, tend to gloss over this part of the story.

According to Kenneth Stein, a Zionist scholar who has written more extensively on Jewish land purchases than anyone in the English language, the land purchases from the "mega-landlords" that Dershowitz likes to highlight often involved the eviction of entire villages from lands which they had worked for generations and which provided their sole means of livelihood (see Stein

1980, 1984, 1991a, 1991b).   As will be discussed further on, the fathers and grandfathers of

these landlords essentially acquired their holdings by deceit from peasants who still believed

themselves to be the usufruct "owners" of the land, as had been the case for hundreds of years

(Stein 1984).

Zionist leaders were well aware of the effects of their purchases. The contracts between Zionist

buyers and Arab vendors normally specified that the Arab vendors were responsible for

obtaining eviction orders, which were then executed by Ottoman, and later British, forces (Stein

1984, 1991a, 1991b). In response, evicted peasants frequently carried out attacks against the

settlements erected on land where their homes once stood (Stein 1984, Adler 1988, R Khalidi

1988).   By the 1930's, wealthy Arab landowners also became major targets of peasant attacks.

These forgotten clashes – the result of a harmony of interests between Zionist and Arab elites,

were the first battles of the Arab-Zionist conflict.

It is not clear whether or not Jewish immigrants were aware of the land purchase methods, or the

nature of Arab attacks on their settlements. One would assume that the Zionist leadership would

not be eager to publicize this information, and that eastern European Jews immigrating to

Palestine in part to escape the intense discrimination and violent of the 19th century would

interpret these attacks from their own experience of ethnically motivated violence. Scholarship

on this issue appears to be non-existent, except as concerns one individual, Yitzhak Epstein a

Russian born Zionist settler and a teacher who had immigrated to Palestine in 1886. In 1905,

after 19 years of life in Palestine, Epstein presented an impassioned speech to the 7th Zionist

Congress in Basel Switzerland in which he excoriated the methods of Zionist land acquisition,

describing them as immoral and contrary to Zionist and Jewish ideals. He described in detail the

harrowing scenes of peasant evictions which he witnessed at the Jewish settlement of Rosh Pina

where he himself lived, as well as the calamitous situation of perpetual conflict and extortion

created by the eviction of an entire Druze village at nearby Metullah in 1878. He warned that

unless Zionists respected the *fellahin*'s rights to their land and integrated themselves into the

local culture, Jews would soon find themselves to be the bitter enemies of the Arabs of the

region.

> The lament of Arab women on the day that their families left Ja'uni—Rosh
>
> Pina—to go and settle on the Horan east of the Jordan still rings in my ears
>
> today. The men rode on donkeys and the women followed them weeping bitterly,
>
> and the valley was filled with their lamentation. As they went they stopped to
>
> kiss the stones and the earth...

> Will those evicted really hold their peace and calmly accept what was done to
>
> them? Will they not in the end rise up to take back with their fists what was
>
> taken from them by the power of gold? Will they not press their case against the
>
> foreigners who drove them from their land? And who knows, if they will not
>
> then be both the prosecutors and the judges . . . And they are brave, all armed,
>
> wonderful marksmen, excellent horsemen, devoted to their nation and in
>
> particular to their religion (Epstein 1905:43).

Epstein went on to outline a plan for the building of the Jewish National Home in Palestine which would not involve the dispossession of the local inhabitants. Epstein further argued for economic and also cultural integration with the local population as well as for participation in the "national revival" of the Arab people. Among other things, his plan involved reaching out to the peasant and middle classes (as opposed to the elite classes whom he considered to be venal parasites) by sharing western technological and agricultural improvements with them (Epstein 1905:47-48).

In a pre-emptive response to would-be critics of his plan, he noted that it would cost less to buy land according to his methods than was currently required to shoulder the costs of legal expenses, bribery, compensation, "protection" payments and self-organized paramilitary defense forces necessitated by the physical and legal battles which resulted from the likes of the Metullah purchase (Epstein 1905:49).

In 1907 following the publication of his speech in *HaShiloah*, the most important Zionist journal of the day, his proposals were debated and then unanimously rejected by the Zionist leadership. While these leaders continued to speak among themselves about how their settlements would win over the Arab population via all of the material benefits which would accrue to them, they continued pursuing a land acquisition policy which increasingly dispossessed more and more fellahin right through to the war of 1948 (Stein 1984).

Dershowitz does not ignore Epstein's story entirely. He does mention Epstein's speech in his book, in order to *bolster* his case for Israel. In his chapter entitled "Was the Zionist Movement a

Plot to Colonize all of Palestine?" he cites Epstein as an example of Jews who "sought to establish good relations with their Arab neighbours," explaining that "[o]ne of the earliest publications by a Zionist living in Israel was a small book by Yitzhak Epstein entitled *The Hidden Question*, which proposed giving local Arabs access to Jewish hospitals, schools, and libraries." No mention is made of Epstein's scorching account of the effects of Zionist land acquisition policies which comprises the bulk of his article (Dershowitz 2003:30).

Despite its distortions, Dershowitz' book is exceptional in that it actually takes on the issue of Zionist land acquisition policies at all. Other works like Howard Sachar's classic and voluminous *A History of Israel* (1976/2007) barely even touch on the subject. Epstein's story is rarely cited, and when it is, it is usually discussed in the context of Epstein's reference to Arab nationalism rather than his critique of land acquisition policies (Laqueur 1972/2003, Morris 2001). Despite it's significance in terms of the 'ethical pillars' of the Zionist narrative, Epstein's *A Hidden Question* was not translated into English until 2001. Significantly, the extensive introduction by the translator focuses on the fact of Epstein's early recognition of Arab nationalism (which most Zionist leaders were dismissive of until the 1930's) rather than on the pertinence of the land issue to the conflict as a whole (Dowty 2001).

THE ZIONIST HISTORIOGRAPHER'S NEED FOR ARAB NATIONALISM

Whereas Dershowitz' polemic is popular among a general readership, Benny Morris' *Righteous Victims: a History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict 1882-2001,* has been highly influential in academic circles.

A self-described positivist and Zionist, Morris is famous for being the most prominent of the Israeli 'New Historians' who successfully based on the Israeli declassification of documents from the 1940's, overturned many assertions held by Zionist historiography about the events of 1948. In particular Morris is known for overturning the idea that *Yishuv* forces did not deliberately expel Arab civilians from inside the future borders of Israel during the war (Morris 1988, 2001, 2004a). Previously, the popular belief had been that Arab military forces had requested that civilians to leave for strategic reasons. Morris' research had the effect of bringing mainstream academic Zionist narratives about the war of 1948 closer in line with the Palestinian version of events, which had always asserted that the Arabs had been forcibly expelled, by deliberate and pre-meditated plan (see Masalha 1992). For an example of the shift in the Israeli mainstream, in 1994, a text published and financed by the Israeli military, and authored by an Israeli colonel, describes atrocities committed by Zionist forces in 1948 - something which would have been completely unthinkable only a few years earlier (Morris 2007:2).   Although there are still some academic historians, most notably Ephraïm Karsh, who continue to assert that the depopulation of Arab villages in what became Israel was voluntary, and carried out at the behest of Arab military leaders (Karsh 2002a, 2011), this former ethical pillar of popular and academic Zionist history has become the minority view. Like most "left" Zionist historians,

most of Morris work portrays the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the inevitable result of two legitimate, but incompatible nationalisms competing for the same territory; thus the title of his book *Righteous Victims.*

Morris' writing is characterized by an openness to recording and discussing Zionist misdeeds which is entirely atypical of earlier Israeli scholarship. This has earned his work scathing critiques by the likes of staunch pro-Israel scholars such as Ephraïm Karsh, who accuses Morris of consciously distorting the facts in order to tarnish the *Yishuv* and Israel for the sake of encouraging compromises with the Palestinians during the Oslo years (Karsh 2000, 2005). Morris' writing is also characterized by a tension between a historian's sense of duty in discussing darker aspects of Zionist history, and a Zionist's need to partially excuse them. The same Benny Morris who has done the most to make Israelis aware of the *yishuv's* atrocities and expulsions of civilians during the war of 1948 (Morris 1988), and who has been accused of falsifying history in order to favour the Palestinian narrative, has since the collapse of the Oslo peace process, come forth to say that the civilian expulsions were not only inherent in Zionism's *raison d'être,* and more deliberate than he'd originally reported (Morris 2004) but that they were morally justified, and that they in fact did not go far enough (see interview of Morris 2004, Kimmerling 2004).

This seemingly paradoxical turn, makes perfect sense when we take into consideration the aforementioned "ethical pillars" of Zionism that legitimate Zionist versions of history, in combination with the pro-Israeli narrative about why Oslo failed. Thus Morris' change of heart reflects the change in attitudes of the formerly popular Israeli "peace camp," which has largely

evaporated after the Oslo collapse in 2000. Since that time, the country's political landscape has moved sharply and steadily to the 'right' which in Israel refers to a hardline approach to relations with Palestinians. To Morris, as to much of the general Jewish population of Israel, the collapse of Oslo proved that the Palestinians could not be negotiated with, that they were not interested in a two state solution to the conflict because "they want it all," meaning the destruction of Israel and it's replacement with a Palestinian state (Morris interview 2004). These ideas follow from the belief that Oslo failed because the Palestinians rejected everything that they had supposedly wanted. Therefore, according to post-Oslo Morris, hindsight shows that the expulsions of Arab citizens carried out by Jewish forces in 1948 were a wise pre-emptive measure against a future anti-Jewish genocide. Further, the *yishuv* should have expelled *all* of the Arab population from the borders of the future Jewish state in order to avoid the 60 subsequent years of as yet unresolved conflict (Morris interview 2004).

Morris' treatment of Zionist land acquisition evinces this tension between accuracy and apology in the way that he narrates the resultant dispossession. His depiction of the issue is fascinating in that he manages to cover the main facts surrounding peasant dispossession and early Zionist clashes, while simultaneously diluting and negating their impact in terms of creating anti-Zionist hostility among the Palestinian public. While he occasionally hints at, and even states outright that peasant dispossession was an important factor in Arab-Zionist relations, he invariably softens these statements by downplaying their significance and then pointing to Arab nationalism as the true source of Arab hostility towards Jews and Zionism.

Morris begins his chapter "The Beginning of the Conflict: Jews and Arabs in Palestine 1881-1914" with a discussion of a 1899 letter by Yusuf Diya al-Khalidi, a Jerusalem Muslim dignitary, to Zadok Kahn, the Chief Rabbi of France. In his letter to the chief Rabbi, the Muslim dignitary acknowledges that the Zionist cause is "completely natural, fine and just." However, he then proceeds to plead with the Zionist leadership to halt their endeavor and to choose a different site for their national home. Explaining the dignitary's logic, Morris writes:

> Khalidi had before his eyes the creeping dispossession that began when the First Jewish colonists, with their backers abroad, bought tract after tract of land. In some areas the land was uninhabited and untilled; in others purchase led to the immediate eviction of Arab tenant farmers, many of whose families had themselves once been the proprietors. The fear of territorial displacement and dispossession was to be the chief motor of Arab antagonism to Zionism down to 1948 (and indeed after 1967 as weIl). (Morris 2001:37)

While this seems like a clear articulation of the importance of peasant dispossession in creating animosity vs. the Zionist settlers, the rest of the chapter, like the rest of the book subtly negates this statement, giving the impression that dispossession was neither very significant in scope, nor in terms of its effect on Arab-Zionist relations.

For example, in a section entitled "Relations Between Olim [Jewish immigrants] and Arabs and the Causes of Arab-Jewish Antagonism" Morris details interesting anecdotes of conflicts between Zionist settlers and their Arab neighbours caused by misunderstandings, accidents,

cultural miscommunications and racism (Morris 2001:46-48). Meanwhile, at no point in the

broader chapter does Morris delve into any stories of *fellahin* evictions or the antagonism and

violence that resulted from them. The lack of attention to this aspect of Arab-Jewish antagonism

severs the events he describes from their context and thus their significance as generators of

Arab-Jewish antagonism. The starkest example from this section is Morris description of an

incident where the accidental shooting of an Arab worker by a Jewish guard at the Rosh Pina

settlement resulted in a vandalism attack by over two hundred Arabs (Morris 2001:47). Morris

neglects to mention the crucial context of this episode: Rosh Pina had been established via a land

purchase which resulted in the eviction of the entire population of what previously had been the

Arab village of Ja'uni. The lasting resentments of the dispossessed peasants regularly flared up

at such as the shooting incident described by Morris (Epstein 1908:41-43). Thus in Morris'

narrative, violence which had actually erupted in a tense environment fueled by resentment from

dispossession, becomes a trivialized, individual mishap, an unruly mob's premature vigilante

reaction to an unfortunate accident.

His most in-depth coverage of a particular episode of dispossession resulting in conflict is a short

paragraph on how the evicted Druze peasants of the aforementioned Metullah purchase attacked

that settlement for years afterwards (Morris 2001:55). Otherwise these events are mentioned in

passing, as part of a different discussion, focused on aspects of Arab nationalism.

Throughout Morris' book, Arab nationalism is posited as the real reason for hostility towards

Zionism, while antagonism due to dispossession is downplayed or simply not mentioned. This is

a recurring theme in many works by both Zionist and Palestinian writers. Morris does discuss

Yitzhak Epstein, mentioning that he was "deeply troubled by the eviction of the Druze tenant farmers at Metullah in 1896," but this is mentioned in passing, giving the impression that it was somewhat of an isolated event. Epstein's story is recounted not in the context of a discussion of the effects of dispossession on Arab-Jewish relations, but in order to highlight the early existence of Arab nationalism. Morris quotes the part of *A Hidden Question* which warns that the Arabs were in fact a nation who would eventually develop a national consciousness and political aspirations, noting that Epstein's speech was the first Zionist analysis about "the Arab question." His story is used to highlight the fact that mainstream Zionism at the time ignored the importance of Arab nationalism, exemplified by the Zionist leadership's rejection of Epstein's analysis on the grounds that Arab nationalism was insignificant. Epstein is also invoked as a springboard from which to launch a short overview of other Zionists who sought consent and integration with the local Arabs (Morris 2001:57-58). As with Dershowitz, Morris glosses over or ignores the main point of Epstein's story in order to highlight less relevant aspects of it which support his nationalism centered narrative.

Further on when Morris quotes historian Yehoshuah Porath on how "[o]ne cannot overestimate the devastating effects of these land purchases," he is not talking about the effects of the purchases on the lives of *fellahin*, nor their effects on Zionist-Arab relations, but rather about their effect on the Arab nationalist movement, was internally fragmented by the sales, which tarnished the reputation of the landowning class, with consequences that we shall examine later. Morris does devote two paragraphs to the mounting dispossession of Arab tenants from the 1880's to the late 1930's but he describes Zionist land purchases as only a small part of a phenomenon resulting from "debts, a multiplicity of heirs, or other causes unconnected to Jewish

30

land purchases." By the time Morris finally acknowledges that these land sales "stuck in the Palestinian collective consciousness," negatively affecting Arab attitudes towards Jews, and contributing to the spread of Arab nationalism among the peasant class, the hostility of Arabs towards Zionism seems opportunistic, like a collective projection of blame for a largely internal crisis (Morris 2001:123).

In his section on the Jewish response to the massive Arab Revolt of 1936-39, which studies by Zionist and Palestinian scholars have connected to a crisis of landlessness among dispossessed *fellahin* (see Stein 1991a, Yazbak 2000, Swedenburg 2003), Morris notes that "[s]ome Jews professed surprise. They had come to Palestine in peace; why were the Arabs reacting this way?" To Morris, this surprise was not due to Jewish immigrants' ignorance of the land acquisition policies of their leaders, but rather the result of a state of "denial" on the part of Jewish leaders regarding the fact that "what they faced was a rival national movement, rather than Arabic-speaking Cossacks and street ruffians" (Morris 2001:136).

Morris' attitude as regards the land issue seems to be encapsulated by a quote he takes from David Ben-Gurion, the Zionist leader who eventually became Israel's first prime minister.

> The Arabs, he said, felt that they were "fighting dispossession ... The fear not of
> losing land, but of losing the homeland of the Arab people, which others want to
> turn into the homeland of the Jewish people." (Morris 2001:136)

In other words, dispossession was not significant in its immediate effects on evicted peasants, but because it threatened the Arab nationalist state building project. Ben-Gurion, Morris, and many Zionist (and as we shall see pro-Palestinian) writers seem to be unable to fathom that the physical dispossession which was filling the slums of Palestinian cities with landless peasants in the 1920's and 1930's might have been a more powerful source of anti-Zionist and anti-Jewish sentiment, than abstract political nationalism. This would be particularly so given that this population was comprised of 70% rural farmers who viewed the state mostly as a parasitical and coercive entity, and who as we shall see were becoming increasingly hostile towards the wealthy Arab landowning class (from which most Arab nationalist leaders emerged), whose usurious lending practices and land sales to Zionists was directly causing much of their dispossession (see Yazbak 2000, Schleifer 1993, Stein 1984, 1991a, Weinstock 1973).

It should be noted that Morris' dismissive argument (cited by Dershowitz above, 2003:25) that in total, only "several thousand families" were displaced by Zionist land acquisition policies, negates his own position that these were not a driving force of antagonism versus Zionism. Several thousand families could mean anything from 1-10% or even more of the entire Arab population depending on the size of the families (which were likely large) and on the number of "thousands". At the very least, this was certainly enough to frighten and antagonize the rest of the population, including the urban working and middle classes who read about these evictions in newspapers (see excerpts of news articles in Stein 1991, 1991a, R Khalidi 2010), including *fellahin* from different parts of Palestine who although usually illiterate were exposed to journalism via public readings of the news (Swedenburg 1988:485)

Just as Zionists in the 1920's and 1930's needed to believe that Arab hostility was the result of professional instigators in order to avoid confronting the implications of the fact that much of the population was against them (Morris 2001:136, Laqueur 2003:234), Zionist historiographers seem to need to believe that the Arab *fellahin's* hostility was motivated primarily by abstract nationalism rather than by very real fears of expropriation and destitution in order to preserve the legitimacy of their political position.

By ascribing hostility to Zionism as primarily rooted in political nationalism, while ignoring the elements of physical self-preservation central to the perspective of rural Arabs, Zionist writers to some degree let the Zionist movement 'off the hook' from responsibility for their role in starting the conflict. According to this paradigm, Zionist aims and aspirations were legitimate, as were those of the Arabs. The true misfortune of the Ottoman and British mandate periods was that the Zionists didn't realize that the Arabs had national aspirations until it was too late, combined with the Arabs' refusal to acknowledge the justice of the Zionists aspirations thus preventing any meaningful discussion or compromise (Dershowitz 2003, Laqueur 2003, Morris 2001). The idea that Arab peasants were human beings who got angry when dispossessed of their land and livelihoods barely enters into the picture.

The "inevitable clash of legitimate nationalisms" is practically a genre of Zionist historiography, particularly left-Zionist. Walter Laqueur's excellent classic *A History of Zionism* (1972/2003) goes further than Morris's book in its honest portrayals and criticism of the uglier episodes of Zionist history. Unlike Morris, Laqueur does use Epstein's story to introduce a discussion of

fellahin dispossession. However, like Morris (and Ben-Gurion), he concludes his discussion by dismissing dispossession as a major factor in anti-Zionist hostility:

> The conflict was, of course, basically political in character, a clash between two national movements. The Arabs objected to Jewish immigration not so much because they feared proletarianization, as because they anticipated that the Jews intended one day to become masters of the country and that as a result they would be reduced to the status of a minority. (Laqueur 2003:227)

A few pages later, after offering a serious critique of Zionist methods and policies, along the lines of Epstein's critique (Laqueur 2003:232-233), Laqueur essentially lets the Zionist movement off the hook via an often-invoked 'inevitability' argument:

> It was more than a little naïve to put the blame for Arab anti-Zionism on professional inciters, frustrated Arab notables, and the notorious urban riff-raff, for there was a basic clash between two national movements... it is impossible even with the benefit of hindsight to point with any degree of conviction to an alternative Zionist policy... which might have prevented conflict (Laqueur 2003:234).

Again, the role of dispossession is not offered as a serious source of incitement, nor as a cause for the spread of Arab nationalism among the majority rural population (see Adler 1988). Nor is

it suggested that the naïveté of many Zionists may have been rooted in ignorance of that

dispossession.

To an extent, the dueling nationalisms paradigm, and the de-emphasis of the role of the land

issue allows Zionist writers to empathize with Palestinians in the abstract while seeing

themselves as the true victims of the conflict in the concrete sense. Morris starts off the

concluding chapter of *Righteous Victims* entitled "Origins" to this effect:

> In 1938, against the backdrop of the Arab rebellion against the Mandate, David
>
> Ben-Gurion told the Political Committee of Mapai: "When we say that the Arabs
>
> are the aggressors and we defend ourselves that is only half the truth. As regards
>
> our security and life we defend ourselves ... But the fighting is only one aspect of
>
> the conflict, which is in its essence a political one. And politically we are the
>
> aggressors and they defend themselves." (Morris 2001:676)

The subtle message hidden within this apparent acknowledgement of responsibility, is that while

the Zionists defend themselves against real physical attacks and defend their lives, the Arabs are

also victims, but mostly of abstract "political" aggression, which may rob them of majoritarian

status and the positions of state power that their elites crave, but not of anything substantial

enough to legitimate violence. Therefore at the end of the day, the Jews who have no state in the

world, and who accomplish their goals "by purchasing - not conquering land" (Morris 2001:676)

are in the morally superior position in the battle of "right with right" (Dershowitz:6), versus the

Arabs who after all, will have a plethora of states of their own after the expected decolonization.

Such at least was a prevailing pre-Oslo narrative. The post-Oslo view of the morality of Israel's position is reflected in the words of the post-Olso Benny Morris:

> We are the greater victims in the course of history and we are also the greater potential victim. Even though we are oppressing the Palestinians, we are the weaker side here. We are a small minority in a large sea of hostile Arabs who want to eliminate us. So it's possible than when their desire is realized, everyone ... will understand we are the true victims. But by then it will be too late (Morris interview 2004).

Given that the realities of Zionist land acquisition are rather damning to one of the main ethical

pillars of the Zionist narrative, one would expect every pro-Palestinian-inclined history of the

conflict to trumpet these stories at full blast, and at every given opportunity. Yet, such instances

are extremely rare. For example, Sami Hadawi's popular *Bitter Harvest* (1967/1998), which is

now in its fourth revised edition, makes no mention whatsoever of early Arab-Zionist clashes.

This despite the fact that had previously written an entire book on land ownership (Hadawi

1957). His entire discussion of the pre-mandate period is contained on page 9, where he claims

that Arab-Zionist relations in Palestine were unproblematic until 1920 "when Zionist designs on

the Holy Land became apparent." His only mention of land issues in the entire book is a section

where he argues that Palestinian landlords and tenants had always been "on the best of terms"

until British laws protecting cultivators against eviction gave the *fellahin* the impression that "he

no longer needed to pay his rentals," motivating the farmers to extort and exploit their landlords!

(Hadawi:46-47).

Other more serious works also gloss over land issues without such blatant distortions. For

example, A 1999 book by professor Abdelaziz Ayyad of Birzeit University titled *Arab*

Nationalism and the Palestinians (1850-1939) mentions "enraged villagers" attacking a team of

engineers tasked with assessing a large tract of land sold to Jews by the Sursuk family of Beirut.

No mention is made of evictions, leading the reader to imagine that the peasants must have been

motivated by nationalistic disdain for sale of the homeland, or perhaps simply by racism

(Ayyad:37). A mention is made of fear of loss of livelihood, but only in relation to urban

shopkeepers who were afraid of competition from their Jewish counterparts (Ayyad:36)

Walid Khalidi's *From Haven to Conquest* (1976/1987), a massive anthology of historical texts

relating to the conflict, manages to include a detailed discussion by Khalidi of Zionist land

acquisition, without making a single reference to peasant dispossession or clashes between

fellahin and Jewish settlers. Khalidi's focus is instead on Jewish immigration and the unfairness

of the amount of land allocated by various world powers to the proposed Jewish state vs. the

small percentage of territory actually owned by Jews (7% of mandatory Palestine by 1948). The

relative population counts of jews vs. Arabs also does not enter into the equation. (W

Khalidi:xxxvii-xlv, *passim*).

By ignoring land issues, these books lend support to the contention of Zionist writers that

opposition to Zionism was simply based on political aspirations combined with general anti-

immigration sentiments (see W Khalidi's explanation for why the Arabs needed to fight Zionism

by force 1976:lxxvii).

This lack of focus on land issues is not surprising when we take into consideration the

embarrassing role that the Palestinian national and nationalist elites played in the dispossession

of their own *fellahin*. As described in many sources, (Granott 1952, Stein 1984, Khalidi 2010)

prior to the Ottoman Land Code of 1858, Palestinian peasants had the rights to the lands they

worked according to a system of usufruct - ownership according to use. The land code, which

was part of a series of *Tanzimat* modernization reforms undertaken by the Ottoman Empire,

decreed that all land must be registered with the government in order to be legally recognized as belonging to its owners. *Fellahin* who were not familiar with the principles of capitalist property rights, saw registration primarily as a way for the parasitical state to keep tabs on them in order to force them to pay taxes and to conscript them into the military. Thus they were generally averse to registration. Taking advantage of this, educated elites such as tax collectors, village sheikhs and members of the urban notable class would persuade *fellahin* (who were often happy to oblige) into letting them register their land under their own names. By this method of 'legal theft' entire villages or even clusters of villages would fall into the hands of a single person or family. *Fellahin* would generally not understand that they had lost proprietorship of their land until one or two generations later, when they were told that it had been sold - either to European Jews, or sometimes to Palestinian agricultural plantations - and that they would have to leave with a short delay or else face forcible eviction by the Ottoman or later British military forces (Stein 1991b:61-62, Ruedy:123-124, Ayyad:16-17, R Khalidi 2010:94-95).

What is especially troublesome to the ethical pillars of Palestinian narratives of the conflict is that many of these parcels of land were inherited by leaders of the Palestinian Arab national movement, including prominent anti-Zionist Arab nationalists. Many of these national leaders sold this land to Zionists discretely via complicated legal chicanery designed to circumvent legal restrictions on land sales and peasant eviction (imposed by the British) while muting the ensuing hostility towards Zionists and the Arab vendors. According to Jewish Nation Fund (JNF) records reviewed by Stein, one standard procedure involved wealthy landowners taking out bogus loans from Zionist land acquisition agencies and then purposefully defaulting on them so that the agency could take possession of the land as collateral, paying the 'debtor' huge sums

under the table. This procedure also involved landlords evicting their own tenants in advance of the transaction in order to shirk British mandate laws protecting tenant cultivators (Stein 1984:71-72).

The full extent of the involvement of Arab nationalists in such land sales is not known, but Stein notes that according to JNF records, one quarter of the members elected to the Arab executive from 1920-1928 were involved in such practices either directly or through an immediate family member (Stein 1984:67). Included among this list is the father of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni, perhaps the most recognized nationalist leader in Palestine during the mandate period (Stein 1984:233). Another prominent example is 'Awni 'Abd al-Hadi who was a founder and president of the Arab nationalist *Istiqlal* (independence) party. Al-Hadi eventually came under fire for his involvement in the aforementioned Wadi Hawarith sale, where he acted as legal representative for the sellers and took bribes from Zionist brokers (Adler 1988:201, 211, *passim*, Stein 1984:68).

Rashid Khalidi discusses Zionist land purchases in his book *Palestinian Identity,* (1997/2010) in a section which reprints most of his 1988 article *Peasant Resistance to Zionism Before WWI.* Tracing journalism about Zionism in the Arab press, Khalidi focuses on how the struggles of peasants evicted by Zionist land purchases "caught the popular imagination and thereby played a vital role in mobilizing public opinion both in Palestine and the Arab world" (R Khalidi 2010:112).

Although Khalidi's discussion does not suffer from the same blindness evinced by many Zionist writers who fail to make the link between dispossession and anti-Zionism, he does conveniently miss an important part of the story: the involvement of the nationalist elite and the role that severe class antagonisms within Palestinian society played in creating a growing class of landless *fellahin*.

Even before the advent of Zionism, a landless class began emerging in Palestine as a result of usurious lending practices of Arab moneylenders, and evictions due to land sales for commercial developments - a trend which Zionist policies accelerated and racialized, but did not monopolize (Ruedy:131, Stein 1991b:64, Laqueur 2003:227, Farsoun and Zacharia 1998:45). According to Laqueur, a similar phenomenon was in effect in Egypt and other neighbouring countries unaffected by Zionism, where urbanization proceeded at the same rate as it did in Palestine (Laqueur 2003:227).

Khalidi's narrative instead highlights the role of "members of the Palestinian elite who opposed Zionism on grounds of principle" (R Khalidi 2010:114). Even more than his Zionist counterparts, Khalidi emphasizes the role of non-Palestinian absentee landlords almost every time he mentions land sales. This reflects the popular belief among Palestinians that will inevitably come up if one brings up the subject, that it was only the treacherous "Lebanese" Nashashibi and Sursuq families who sold land to the Jews. Khalidi mentions sales by Palestinian national leaders only in passing and without details, in order to rebuke Kenneth Stein, the most prolific historian writing about land issues in Palestine, for focusing on the matter in his writings. Khalidi's argument that Stein underestimates the percentage of land sold by non-

Palestinian absentees seems mostly to stem from an unwillingness to contemplate this aspect of Palestinian nationalist history as his arguments and numerical estimates do not seriously challenge the plausibility of any of Stein's contentions (R Khalidi 2010:113-114, see also R Khalidi 1987).

Regardless of the precise numbers, what Khalidi does not address is that Stein's research, like that of others who have written about particular cases involving dispossession (Schleifer 1993, Yazbak 2000, Swedenburg 2003, Mandel 1980, Stein 1984) suggests that to many Palestinian elites, nationalism had a very different meaning than it did for other groups, particularly the rural and proletarianized *fellahin*.

Genuine concern for the plight of evicted peasants seems not to have been a pressing issue for many urban Arab nationalists and national leaders. Among the urban elite, whose wealth was traditionally derived from the labour of the peasantry, disdain for the *fellahin* was the norm. Judging by the nature of their expressed grievances and petitions to the British mandate government, antagonism to Zionism was often primarily based on the fact that Jews would be encroaching on the administrative and commercial positions which had previously been their exclusive purview. For example, until the 1930s, when peasant landlessness reached crisis proportions prompting the British government to make a political issue out of it, protests to the government by Arab officials against Zionism mostly concerned Jewish immigration and Jewish competition in trade. Complaints about land sales were minimal (Stein 1984:218-219, Adler:205-206, Schleifer:173, Ayyad:36).

Although there were exceptions (see R Khalidi 2010:106-109), it has been argued that because of personal involvement in land sales, as well as general lack of empathy for rural people, Arab officials did not generally fight for the rights of peasants engaged in eviction struggles until the crisis of landlessness threatened their own political dominance (Stein 1991b:72, Adler 1988).

As late as 1934, Abdul Latif Tabawi, who served in the Education Department of the Palestine administration, wrote a letter to a British official asking for special permission to evict his tenants and sell his land to Zionists. According to Stein, his argument was "that he had to maintain a higher standard of living than did the tenants and that he should not be expected to suffer merely to provide a tenant with a means of living." Whether or not Tabawi's attitude was as "typical" as Stein claims, the fact that he would make such an argument as part of an official request, coupled with the fact the Arab recipient of his letter found this logic persuasive enough to assent to his demand, suggests much about the attitudes of the day (Stein 1991a).

ARAB REVOLT OR PEASANT UPRISING?

The Arab revolt of 1936-1939 is normally viewed as having been unified nationalist revolt against Zionism and British Colonialism (Lacqueur 2003, Morris 2001, Khalidi 2010, Sachar 2007).   However, according to scholars who have studied it specifically, it is more accurately described as a peasant revolt against all the forces oppressing them: Labor-Zionism, British Colonialism and the Arab landowning class (Shafir 1996, Yazbak 2000, Stein 1991a, 1991c and Swedenburg 1988, 2003). The actions of rural militia during the Arab revolt demonstrated a deep resentment against many sectors of the national elite, who fled the country in significant

43

numbers during the revolt for fear of peasant reprisals, including extortion and executions. As Ted Swedenburg notes in his ethongraphy of former rebels, *Memories of Revolt* (2003); for the *fellahin*, the national cause signified the peasant's struggle to preserve his land and livelihood, a struggle which in their eyes, the urban elite barely played any role (Swedenburg 2003:28, *passim*). The 'nationalism' of the *fellahin* was not the state hungry nationalism or the landowning elite, or middle class, but most commonly a form of Islamic traditionalism popularized by the radical preacher Izz ad-Din al-Qassam. This brand of nationalism stressed a return to traditional rural values and preservation of rural land, without an emphasis on statehood. It was a very rural ideology, as opposed to the secular nationalism of the Arab political parties (Schleifer 1993, Swedenburg 2003), all of whom "with the solitary exception of the Arab wing of the Communist Party," were "led by scions of wealthy landowning families" (Weinstock 1973:59). Out of all the anti-Zionist parties, only the *Istiqlal* party and the aforementioned Qassamite movement, which was a peasant movement not associated with any party, actively opposed British imperialism (Schleifer 1993:176).

The divisions within Arab society in Palestine are not lost on pro-Israeli historians. In *Palestine Betrayed*, Ephraïm Karsh (2010) devotes an entire book to the machinations and manipulations of elites against the lower classes in their self-interested attempts to prevent Arab-Jewish cooperation and coexistance, in pursuit of an Arab state. Predictably, every aspect of Arab elite betrayal is examined, with the convenient exception of land sales to Zionists resulting in evictions.

CONVENTIONAL NARRATIVES AND URBAN NATIONALISM

Since urban elites produce much more written evidence for historians to study than illiterate rural peasants do, it is not surprising that historians have a tendency to reflect the concepts and points of view of these groups. Thus it was in the urban areas of Palestine that the situation much more closely resembled conventional narratives of Zionist and Palestinian writers in terms of political nationalism being the central driver of Arab-Jewish antagonism. Even during the extremely violent Arab revolt, Arab peasants tended only to attack specifically those Jewish settlements which had both been involved in *fellahin* evictions, and which then had also excluded Arab labourers (as opposed to other Jewish settlements which allowed dispossessed Arabs to remain in their former villages as wage labourers, Shafir 1996). In contrast, in the cities, Arab nationalism was often synonymous with anti-Jewish racism. Urban anti-Jewish violence repeatedly targeted the historical pre-Zionist religious Jewish communities, most of whom had little or no involvement with land purchases or political activity at all. Further, where rural violence was often directed against property and involved relatively few murders, urban anti-Jewish violence regularly involved bloody massacres, such as the famous massacre of Hebron Jews in 1929 (see Weinstock 1973:60).

For many among the urban Arab elite, Arab nationalism symbolized first and foremost the continuation of their own elite status. Ahad Ha'am, the founder of the Cultural Zionism movement, which sought to establish a cultural center of world Jewry in Palestine (as opposed to the state-focused "political" Zionism), made a similar critique in regards to Theodor Herzl and the early "political" Zionists (see Ginzburg 1897). Ha'am accused the political Zionists of being more interested in a "Jewish" identified state than in actual Jewish culture or the well being of

45

actual Jewish people. We can see evidence of this in how Zionist leaders and publications

routinely misled their followers concerning inconvenient realities. For example while Zionist

leaders like David Ben-Gurion understood that the Arab revolt was in fact an insurgency, when

speaking in public and via official media, the attacks and riots were always described as "events"

incited mostly by Arab elites so as not to make the Jewish public feel that the whole Arab

population was against them (Swedenburg 2003:12-13).   It is not clear whether Zionist leaders

informed their public about land acquisition practices, but given the current popular narratives of

how land was acquired (as per Dershowitz above) and the surprise with which Arab hostility was

often met, it is likely that they did not. Although Jewish society was not as stratified as Arab

society, it would not be surprising to find that nationalism meant something different to the

average Jewish immigrant than what it meant to the Ben-Gurions, Weizmanns and Herzls, who

were comfortable dispossessing peasants and putting Jewish immigrants in a position of conflict

in the pursuit of the elite administrative positions which were denied them in anti-semitic

Europe.

COMPLIMENTARY CONSENSUS VS. INCOMPATIBLE MIRROR IMAGES:

THE FORCE OF EVIDENCE?

As we have seen, pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian historians who write from the "dueling

nationalisms" perspective tend to produce incompatible mirror image narratives in terms of the

moral protagonists and antagonists of the story. In contrast, those who write about land issues in

depth (i.e. via primary research and witness accounts) produce similar stories which highlight the

importance of land sales in creating Arab-Zionist hostility.

For example, a 1988 article by Raya Adler details the story of a 1930 land purchase which resulted in the eviction of 190 Bedouin families from the village of Wadi Hawarith. For more than four years after their official eviction, the residents and then former residents of Wadi Hawarith fought the order physically and politically in what became a national *cause célèbre*. Although the author's intention in writing the article was to look for nationalist links and motives among the dispossessed villagers, her conclusion is that such motives were not present. Rather, she is forced to conclude that their struggle was motivated primarily by attachment to their land and livelihood which defined their social existence. According to Adler, their "national identity was at most secondary to other senses of loyalty anchored in the lands of Wadi Hawarith." (Adler:216-217). She also notes the role of Arab nationalist leaders in facilitating land sales, and their unwillingness to take decisive actions to fight against them even as they publicly expressed solidarity with the displaced tenants (Adler:201, 205-206, 211).

Mahmoud Yazbak's 2000 study on the Arab revolt concludes that "economic rather than political or national factors played a major role in the outbreak of the Arab revolt." Yazbak posits his findings as a challenge to the traditional view of Zionist historians that the revolt was directed against Jewish immigrants, as well as to that of Palestinian historians who tend to view the revolt as a political rebellion (Yazbak 2000:94). His study also notes the role of the Palestinian nationalist elite in creating the crisis of landlessness (Yazbak 2000:103).

Kenneth W. Stein, who is active in contemporary Zionist causes such as teaching Jewish students the "Zionist narrative" (see Stein 2002, 2003, 2004) has written more extensively on the

relationship between Zionist land acquisition and Arab-Zionist relations than anyone (at least in English). He has written the only attempt at a comprehensive treatment of the land issue in the British Mandate period in the English language (Stein 1984). Despite his pro-Israel stance, he does not conflate Arab resistance by *fellahin* to dispossession with nationalist political motives, consistently describing their antagonism to Zionism as motivated by dispossession fears and realities (Stein 1980, 1984, 1984b, 1987, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1999). Interestingly, since the failure of the Oslo Accords and the advent of the second *intifada*, he has stopped publishing about land issues entirely. His Emory University wesbiste which used to host a great number of his fascinating scholarly articles in full, has since been reduced to a biography emphasizing many of his recent articles on diplomacy and his Israel educational projects. There is no mention of his numerous and groundbreaking articles on land issues, besides the title of his 1984 book *The Land Question in Palestine, 1917-1939*. One can only speculate as to the reason for this, but it is not far fetched to imagine that as someone who is likely to shares the conventional Zionist understanding of what happened at Oslo, he may have feared that his earlier works may be put to use by Israel's enemies.

Israeli "Post-Zionist" sociologist Gershon Shafir has written one of the only books about the origins of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which points to land acquisition policies as a primary causal factor. He also discusses the crucial role that labor-Zionism's exclusion of Arab labour had on poisoning Arab-Jewish relations, which tended to be harmonious where labour was mixed (see Shafir 1996).

Whereas all of these authors have different politicial leanings and ethnic origins, the stories they produce are essentially the same. It would be interesting to revisit the conventional narratives by integrating them into the main story.

AN ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT?

Once the mutual land-related holes in the Zionist and Palestinian versions of history have been filled, the kernel of a new narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict suggests itself:

The Zionist-Arab conflict began when Zionist organizations purchased land occupied by Palestinian peasants from Arab elite landowners who then evicted the peasants from land which they had been occupying for hundreds of years. The fathers and grandfathers of these elite landowners had largely acquired these lands by deception from the fathers and grandfathers of the peasants who by and large did not understand that the land was no longer theirs until they were being cleared out for Jewish settlements. The eviction of entire villages and of thousands of villagers engendered fear and hostility among rural peasants towards the new Jewish immigrants. In the early decades of the conflict, these evictions resulted in violent reactions on the part of evicted villagers towards Jewish settlements and then eventually, towards the Arab elites who had legally robbed them of their lands.

In urban Palestine, traditional landowning elites, middle class professionals and merchants (who together formed the core of the rising nationalist movement) viewed Zionism and Jews as a threat to their dominance, and potential dominance of a future Palestinian state. These nationalist leaders, many of whose families had sold and some of whom were still selling land to Zionists, stoked traditional Islamic enmity and condescension towards Jews to further their political ends.

50

Meanwhile, newly arriving Jewish immigrants were told by Zionist leaders that the land they were living on had been purchased legally and for exorbitantly inflated prices from wealthy Arabs, but not about how that land was acquired. In light of this, the Jews largely understood Arab hostility towards them and attacks on them in terms of the mainly racist and religious motivations of the pogroms of the eastern Europe countries that they were often fleeing from. This idea was actively promoted by Zionist leaders. Variations of this narrative dominate Zionist understandings of the conflict to this day.

Despite the conflict inherent in the race between Jewish and Arab nationalists to dominate a future state, the early decades of Zionist immigration saw peaceful cooperation between immigrant Jews and native Arabs, in trade relationships and also labor organizing. Arab-Jewish relations were peaceful between those Zionist settlements which employed Arab labour, and neighbouring Arab villages. This is even true of those settlements where expropriated Arab labourers now worked as employees. These Jewish settlements generally had close and friendly trade relationships with neighbouring Arab communities, the sincerity of which is revealed by the fact that they escaped the violence of the Arab peasant rebellion of 1936-1939 which targeted Jewish-only settlements built on land involving evictions, Arab landowners and British colonial officials (Shafir 1996). Meanwhile, over a period of five decades leading up to 1948, Jewish and Arab labourers in various industries, regularly and repeatedly attempted to band together to form fraternal mixed Jewish-Arab labour unions (Lockman 1996).

These harmonious relationships and situations were deliberately sabotaged and thwarted by both Zionist and Arab elites because they conflicted with their nationalist goals, even as they

promoted peace and social integration. The labour-Zionist movement successfully did everything in its power to replace mixed labour settlements with Jewish-only labour. Arab and Zionist labour organizations consistently worked to squelch every attempt by their members to form mixed unions against the economic interests of the workers they were supposed to represent (Lockman 1996).

The war of 1948, and subsequent events and wars leading to today are the fruit of the dynamics described above. To this day, political elites willfully but also unknowingly misrepresent current and past events to their constituencies. The most spectacular example of this is reflected in the mirror image popular understandings of what why the Olso process failed. The current tragedy of a conflict which drags on and intensifies despite the fact that most people on both sides agree on a tolerable solution must be examined in this light.

In conclusion, conventional Zionist and Palestinian narratives of competing nationalisms need to be re-examined through the lens of class, and the age old human story of people, and particularly elites, conflating group interests with their own interests.

The importance of the conventional foci of people who write about the roots of the conflict: nationalism, religion, racism and colonialism, is indisputable; however, the dynamics of divergent interest of political elites vs. those of the general populations, are at least as important, yet almost always unexplored when it comes to this conflict. A narrative of nationalist elites on both sides doing their best to thwart cooperation between their peoples, while engendering

hostility and racism in the pursuit of their own personal and class goals is not only likely to

resonate with the experience of people living in the early 21st century, but it also suggests hope

for an alternative path to peace.

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