

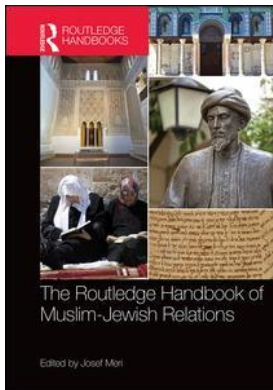
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Palestinian-Israeli conflict

A contest in word and deed

Donna Robinson Divine

The Arab-Israeli conflict is a subject more thoroughly discussed than understood. Consider the many names of the dispute that have gained popular currency and note the implications for its scope, its combatants, and even its aims. The Middle East as modifier suggests the conflict is primarily regional, telling us little about its global dimensions. To call it an Arab-Israeli *confrontation* implies a dynamic arising from antagonistic self-interested territorially bounded states rather than from the contested claims of two people fighting over the same land as a means of securing their national identities. However, the notion of the conflict as primarily a Palestinian-Israeli rivalry for the same land may lend geography more of a coherence than is warranted when regional and global factors that have frequently turned ominous threats into armed clashes are brought into the accounting. Most recently and with seemingly increasing assent, the conflict has become wrapped around religious principles ostensibly providing fertile ground for a zealotry that translates all notions of compromise into violations of sacred commandments. The varying terms that have entered the lexicon to describe the conflict are not simply indicators of disagreement about what to do to resolve the long-standing dispute but rather indicators of profound discord about what is actually at stake.

These names beg another puzzling question about the narratives from which they emerge. Do these narratives actually describe how Arabs and Jews, particularly in the region, conduct their lives? To what extent does the problem of naming the conflict reflect what is actually taking place on the ground? To interrogate these narratives is, of course, to raise questions about their power, but it also opens up the possibility of seeing the Arab-Israeli conflict from the perspective of those who have found ways to live with it and thus transform what appears a persistent clash of interests and values into a more subtle and complex set of interactions. Indeed, the vexed conflict between Arabs and Israel, Palestinians and Israelis, and Muslims and Jews has also generated ways in which the populations have interacted and engaged with one another. The paradigm of conflict rests on a set of narratives, but it offers a striking contrast to the many accounts of peaceful and productive interactions that have been sustained and even, despite a vindictive polemics, become deeply anchored.

The narratives

Still, the words used to describe the conflict cannot be dismissed as mere rhetoric because they perform several vital functions: They communicate its intensity as well as its traumas; they rally support, recruit allies, and presume to show who is right and who is wrong. Violent conflicts may be contests for territory, but they are also no less struggles for meaning. In this particular contest for meaning, the word at its center has been *nakba*, invoked by Palestinians to refer to the establishment of a Jewish state in 1948, a victory understood as precipitating the loss of their homeland and their dispersal as a people.¹

Nakba (literally, “disaster”), as a term and event, now carries enormous causal weight and symbolic significance. However remarkable for its expression of destruction, *nakba* is still more remarkable for its adoption as a metaphor for the political agony spread across the Middle East. Although deeply enmeshed in a specific dispute over land, *nakba* has become the event that presumably changed the region’s politics forever, rendering old options obsolete and endowing new ones with unforeseen urgency. The idea of redeeming the losses of 1948 and the injustices dealt Palestinians and Arabs has become a defining element of Arab nationhood, shaping the stories leaders tell themselves and one another about what they think they are doing. 1948 is described less in terms of its military effects than as a first cause of suffering, a dislocation always stalking politics in Arab lands and, typically, a justification for the acts of domestic repression that necessarily accompany a crisis. The term thus requires an explanation from Palestinians not only for a military disaster following decades of diplomatic defeats but from the Arab leaders whose successes and failures are often measured by how much they do to keep the conflict alive, at least in their words if not in their deeds.

To say that the conflict nourishes language, however, is not to ignore what else it does – produces violence and casualties. Although words and injuries cannot be entirely separated, they are also not always joined together in common purpose. The conflict has been a powerful magnet for violence and not simply for Palestinians whose redemption from the consequences of the *nakba* has become an Arab mission. For many, the idea of Palestine as a territory with two states for two peoples is not only unjust, it is also inconceivable. The very idea forecloses acceptance of any proposals to divide the land, including the United Nations Partition Resolution in 1947. It causes the Palestine Question to become a crucible for structuring governments in the Middle East and presumably for shaping and sanctifying policy decisions that justify and perpetuate a permanent mobilization for war. Not even the decision by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to participate in a peace process set in motion by the 1993 Oslo Accords has entirely convinced most Arabs to reject the idea of resistance and the need for violence.² For many, the inalienable rights that justify Palestinian claims to a homeland mean the land can never be shared no matter the costs or number of casualties.

For generations of Palestinians and Arabs, the *nakba* has left an indelible imprint on their political culture, but for Israelis, it has generated quite a different set of stories. What symbolizes destruction for one people marks rebirth for the other. For most Israelis, the 1948 War brought them their independence (*milhemet ha-atzma’ut*) and liberation (*milhemet ha-shihzur*). Because it cast men and women into extreme situations and summoned up the most visceral of emotions, 1948 was absorbed into Israel’s national consciousness as a matter of life and death for individuals as well as for the nation, evoking a sense of moral certainty about the decision to wage war for a Jewish state. Hence, another name for the war defines the conflict as existential, a war for political sovereignty as a struggle for existence or *milhemet ha-komemiyut*.³

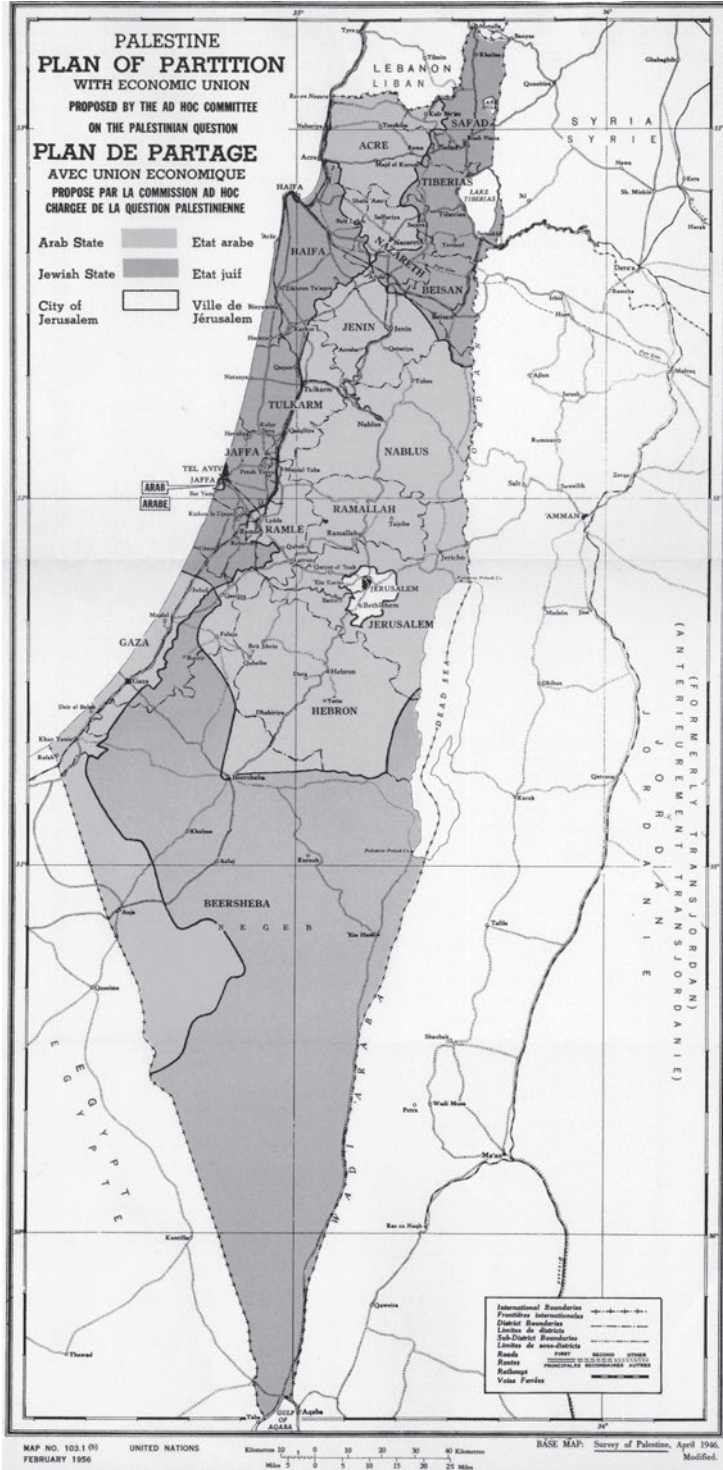


Figure 14.1 Map of the 1947 United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine. United Nations map No. 103.1 (b), February 1956.

Possessed of its own redemptive ambition to create a just society that would set new political and social standards for the world, Israel, too, has had to live with the burdens of what the society was supposed to be but never became. Israel's founding as a Jewish state in 1948 was largely the work of nationalists who deemed themselves "secular" and who led the Zionist movement from its establishment in the last decades of the nineteenth century. However, a number of these Zionists, driven by necessity to seek a political solution to the problems encountered in an age of nationalism and dictatorship, generated ambitions not simply for a state and society like all other nations but also for redemption, the hope that a Jewish state and society would provide a new kind of social order without hierarchy, without exploitation, and with justice and equality for all. By tying a humanistic mission to a struggle for sovereignty, Zionist politics were frequently pulled in different directions.⁴ The tensions between the movement's utopian idealism and its capacity to set priorities meant having to come to terms with the fact that the promises of founding a Jewish state on the purest of Zionist visions could not be kept. And while the differences could often be hidden in abstractions or ambiguous language, they could not be entirely avoided.

Despite many different and conflicting goals and values, Zionism managed to establish the coordinates of a widely accepted and highly regarded relationship between land, people, and language. Reviving the Hebrew language was to be an instrument to transform a people once defined by their religious traditions and law into a nation bound together by a shared, albeit often newly invented, set of mores and, most significantly, by living as citizens in a sovereign state. The creation of a culture whose literature and ideas were expressed in Hebrew and whose ancient laws and rituals could be translated into national traditions was the groundwork both for a liberation that Zionists sought from religious authority and for a state offering Jews something they believed could be found nowhere else – full rights and the opportunity to adapt and take advantage of the modern world. Zionism imagined Jews could interact with other societies without risking their distinctiveness but only if their culture and society had a permanent address.

The images so indelibly inscribed in the conventional histories of Israel's founding tend to confirm the notion that a Jewish nation was remade and a new collective identity formed. A land with no natural resources claimed by a movement possessing too little capital for the tasks it undertook, Israel seems to have been established by a collective act of will. Zionist leaders pushed this notion to its extreme by presenting the agricultural collectives (*kibbutzim*) – never encompassing more than a tiny percentage of Israel's population (less than 1 percent in some years) – as emblematic of the Jewish National Home. These communities were presumably bound together by a shared commitment to the principles of freedom, love of the land, physical labor, and of revitalizing the Hebrew language – all seemingly accomplished by sheer will.⁵

Aiming to transform the structure of Jewish life without totally detaching it from its history and from many of its traditions, Zionism looked simultaneously backward and forward. Preaching rebellion as much against the shackling of Jews by alien rulers as by the agents of Jewish religion, Zionists argued that independence would liberate Jews from the rule of rabbis no less than from that of the Czar, the police, and that most timeless instrument of persecution: the mob. Still, there were more debates and controversies than agreement or consensus over how to achieve independence and about what it would mean for the kind of society to be created in a truly Jewish state. Religiously observant Jews could not help but feel discomfort with the radical transformative vision projected in classical Zionist discourse, until their own spiritually inflected redemptive message seemed to match the full power of the vast territorial changes after the June War in 1967.⁶

For both Palestinians and Israelis, the idea of homeland as national aspiration is connected to discourses of Diaspora and Exile. Instead of building confidence, however, the narrative of homeland became a source of anxiety often unleashing the demons of political disorder. Both peoples created wildly improbable expectations for their homelands as resolving all the problems associated with their lives in exile. Palestinians speak of revising their history and of returning their dispersed kinsmen and their descendants to the villages or homes they left more than six decades ago. Israelis cling to dreams of establishing a society where people live exemplary moral lives in accordance with their national creed and by keeping faith with their humanistic mission.

However, while the narratives penetrated the public discourse of both Palestinians and Israelis and have some characteristics in common, they are also quite different. The Palestinian narrative conjures up a vision central to its moral claims and political actions. The Zionist idealism echoed in Israeli public discourse is enshrined in school curricula and transmitted through the country's literature, providing the basis for a shared national culture but not a blueprint structuring public policies.

Zionism's redemptive message, however powerfully it inspired songs and stories about how Jews in the land of Israel should live, did not set the strategic course that led to establishing a Jewish state in 1948. Conscious of their own vulnerability particularly while witnessing the collapse of European Jewry, Zionist leaders could not easily pursue or sometimes even proclaim goals that absolutely clashed with the interests of their British overlords in Palestine. Nor could (or can) Israelis even today totally ignore the norms of the international community whose decisions and good will are viewed as vital for the country's security and prosperity. Zionist nation-building idealism might remind Israel's leaders of their failure to translate their visions into reality, but these grand and inspiring projects did not reflect how most Jews lived in Palestine nor were they ever deployed as sustainable models for the policies forged that led to the founding of a Jewish state.

For Zionists, in their imaginative nation-building roles, the future was always more imperative than either the past or the present, but their function as state-makers inevitably drew their concentration to the present and to the possibilities of the moment. The potential conflict between nation-building and state-making aims was always at hand in Zionism, but it was made more acute by the principles undergirding the authority of the British Mandate for Palestine – establishing a Jewish National Home in the newly defined country. With this unprecedented access to global sponsorship, Zionists may have expected to be able to reach both their state- and nation-building goals, but they quickly learned that seizing the opportunity for national transformation could easily hurt the prospects for founding a state.

This was particularly true for the generation struggling for radical change. When it turned its attention to mobilizing resources for economic and political development, it discovered that the tactics and strategies functioning effectively for one purpose could fatally damage the other. How this conflict flowed through Zionist political developments during the period of British rule is rather complicated, but two examples may serve to illustrate the complexity. Negotiations over immigration policies exposed not only the differences between Great Britain and Zionists but the contradictions within Zionism when efforts to bring visionaries devoted to social change to Palestine's shores failed because resources were insufficient and preference was extended, instead, to those possessing capital for investment.

Another striking illustration of the sometimes unbridgeable gap in the conflicting course of action set by nation- and state-building aims comes from the need to proclaim homeland and exile as binary opposites for purposes of transformative social change while the project of creating a state could not afford to posit so radical a polarization. Without a genuine exchange

between Diaspora and National Home, there would be too few Jews choosing Palestine if other options were available and thus far fewer exposed to Zionism's principles. State-making required consensus and compromise and familiarity with Jewish institutions in Europe; nation-building demanded absolute adherence to a newly designed set of principles and insulation from contamination by Diaspora organizations and values.⁷

Palestinians, too, were susceptible to a redemptive politics but for different reasons. Clinging to a vision of unity fostered during the last decades of Ottoman rule, Palestinians opposed the very idea of dividing Arabs into separate nation-states. Once they lost the battle over the Middle East map, however, Palestinians made demography their salient principle as grounds for opposing British support for the establishment in Palestine of a Jewish National Home. All general Palestinian proposals for structuring the country's self-governing institutions revolved around their overwhelming numbers in the population, seemingly acknowledging but never claiming loyalty to a doctrine of popular rule. To those Palestinians barely clinging to the margins of their community, the subtext of an implicitly "democratic" argument against British support for Zionism gave reason to hope for empowerment and full integration. To Palestine's traditional leaders, the notion of an egalitarian community implied by their demographic claims brought fear over the possible loss of power, status, and privilege. While ideological opposition to Zionism rested on the presumed democratic principle of empowering the masses, the political strategy of Palestinian notables focused on creating organizations reflective of traditional hierarchies and values. A loyalty to past values and social hierarchies prevented Palestinians from consolidating a unified national identity that might have enabled them to confront the challenges of the present and, at the very least, avert what turned out to be a massive rupture to their community and the disappearance of the land that had for so long secured their civilization. These failures produced cascading calamities in 1948, opening the way for the brutal forces of history to stamp Palestinians with the distinctiveness of misery and displacement.

Palestinian nationalism was thus built around a narrative of defeat and arose at a time when many Arabs blamed their political failures on imperialism and corruption and embraced programs of radical social and political reform. Those programs were intended to empower the Arab states and ultimately carry Palestinians back to their homes from their dispersion. Palestinians were naturally expected to pledge fidelity to the struggle to overturn the imperialist order that would ultimately wipe away their failures and defeat, even as it often entangled them in the domestic political predicaments of other lands.⁸ Perhaps because the narrative of *nakba* had such power and meaning for other Arabs, it remained fixed for Palestinians despite the dramatic changes engulfing the Middle East since 1948. For that reason, *nakba* not only provided Palestinians with an explanation for why and how they lost their homes and lands, it generated an insurrectionary vocabulary for assessing their priorities.

Unlike Zionists, whose political culture was formed partly in the context of moderating their claims and goals in return for international acceptance, Palestinians forged their politics in settings that rewarded struggle and opposition to what were deemed the assaults of global imperialism.⁹ The eruptive force Palestinians symbolized eventually became magnified to mythic proportions, making it almost impossible to develop separate state- and nation-building strategies that might offer a realistic assessment of the powers arrayed against them and how some might be harnessed to improve people's lives. This was the ultimate clash of civilizations deeming the forces responsible for the disasters that befell them – Zionism and Imperialism – so thoroughly evil that they had to be destroyed. Redemption would come only from regaining lost land and lost honor. The *nakba* also suggested that something

happened to Palestinians in a particular moment, rather than something Palestinians brought about over a period of years. And because all Palestinian political movements established their legitimacy by embracing the *nakba*, none fully engaged in a sustained rereading of the past and of the strategic choices adopted that led to such massive losses.¹⁰

Even before it was destroyed in the 1967 War, the core idea that resolving the Palestine Question was first and foremost an Arab responsibility and a task to be undertaken by the Arab states was in the process of unraveling. The notion that the Arab states would launch a war to liberate Palestine already seemed less relevant in the aftermath of the 1956 War, which ended attacks on the border Israel shares with Egypt, whose president, Gamal Abd al-Nasir, was considered the region's most charismatic and powerful leader. Egypt sponsored the establishment of a PLO in 1964, presumably to check those forces pressing the country to launch a war against Israel that it could not win, thereby giving ordinary Palestinians little hope for the future and a reason to break out of what they saw as a dysfunctional and decaying Arab nationalist strategy.¹¹

Despite clear signs that Arab nationalist promises to return Palestinians to their home could not be kept, the 1967 War losses shocked Palestinians and Israelis into a new and unexpected political awareness and sense of purpose. The swiftness of Israel's victory on all fronts, and the fact that at the end of six days Israel had swept away the strongest and most well-equipped armies that Arabs could send to the battlefield and was left in possession of all of mandatory Palestine (and more – the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights), stunned as many men and women in the so-called Arab street as in the ruling palaces. For many, the war's devastations were not only unforeseen, they could not be imagined, even after the fighting was halted. Arabs were not only defeated, they were also humiliated and uncertain about where they should turn for a future. Because the very idea of Pan-Arabism lay in absolute ruins, Palestinians reacted by asserting their right to lead their own charge for the liberation of their lands and people. Palestinians were Arabs but claimed a distinctive culture and society and an attachment to a land whose people survived war, colonial exploitation, exile, and dispersion. The great wave of Arab nationalism that had carried Palestinians forward from the *nakba* was obviously fraying at the edges, leaving them still dispersed and dispossessed. However, although the march from refugee camp to their family's homes in Palestine seemed unbearably long and blocked, it was re-energized by the rise of a new leader – Yasir Arafat – who became head of the PLO in 1968. Arafat's leadership helped the world to see how Palestinian suffering might touch their lives while showing his own people that the only way back home would come from their own personal and collective commitment to a war for national liberation. Arafat argued that Palestinians could defeat the forces organized against them if they were prepared to unleash the furore they had for too long held in check as refugees. The trouble Palestinians should fear, he contended, was entropy, not chaos.

I focused initially on the conflict's narratives not only to examine how they have informed decisions taken by those in power but because I wish to probe, in the following pages, how they forged the context for decision making and ultimately how they have influenced the ways ordinary people live their lives. It is a central claim of this chapter that the conflict's words and deeds are not fully joined even when they cannot be entirely separated. Violence generates narratives, and narratives frame actions, but words are not the same as deeds. The defining elements of the conflict are complicated sites where anxieties about identity, national purpose, and resources are negotiated, sometimes producing painful wounds but, at other times, serving as a common ground for people to bridge their differences. While social visions may remain rooted in the past, the conduct of daily life has to accommodate the present.

Let me, first, dispense with two widely held misconceptions about the conflict. The first argues that the conflict is timeless and unchanging. Relations between Israel and other Middle East countries remained as explosive as ever even after the country's government signed formal peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and agreed to engage in a diplomatic resolution of its conflict with the Palestinians, but the threats that had once come from Egypt and Jordan now come from Lebanon and Iran. The rise of new adversaries also introduced new weapons systems into the region and changed not only the nature of warfare but the prerequisites for peace. The second dominant distortion is motivated by an attempt to offer a balanced assessment interpreting the conflict's dynamics as stemming from the deployment of parallel, if not identical, strategies and tactics. Pundits are apt to view Palestinian and Israeli actions as mirror images differentiated only by the resources at their disposal. Hence the skepticism about whether Palestinians are capable of ending their dispute by recalibrating their goals and whether Israelis are genuinely interested in sharing a land they now control.

Ottoman Palestine

J. C. Hurewitz's classic, *The Struggle for Palestine*, begins with the assertion that "Palestine, as a modern geographic and political unit, was the creation of World War I and its peace settlement."¹² Palestine may have been mapped for the first time after the British conquest, but it was not newborn politically. Before Great Britain governed Palestine, beginning in 1918, and was charged with the responsibility "for placing the country under such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish national home...and the development of self-governing institutions," Palestinian Arabs already had had their first encounters with Zionism.¹³

How their encounters took hold in the minds of those Arabs and Jews foreshadows the later rupture even as they generated terms that provided opportunities for interactions and for claiming a shared historical legacy. Zionists and Arabs talked about one another in terms of religious and racial differences. The language of religion and race allowed Arabs and Jews to define their own needs, but it also permitted them to see and acknowledge their commonly shared values and overlapping religious histories. Despite clearly opposing political aims, Zionists and Arabs in Palestine understood their past as binding them together to a place and even to a shared set of ideas. Arab writers did not need to deny Jews a Biblical heritage in the land of Israel to denounce the political aims of the Zionist movement. And some Zionists could see in the Arab peasant characteristics of their own Biblical ancestors.

Conventional wisdom has cast this period as the birth of the Arab-Israeli conflict, suggesting a bipolar dispute, but differences divided Jews and Arabs in Palestine on many different levels. When Arab intellectuals read Jewish religious texts and Jewish history, they could see a national history, but only a few could perceive how it could be re-imagined or that it would take Jews into a future confrontation with Arabs. Zionism, during the years of Ottoman rule over Palestine, may have been an instrument and a symbol of Jewish creativity in the land of Israel, but without significant international backing and the financial resources sufficient for making a state, it posed no real threat. A few prescient Zionists tended to accent the possibility for coexistence with Arabs in Palestine even as they also knew the population would be a source of danger. What they could not figure out was how to dispel the deepening perception of increasing numbers that Zionist gains meant automatic Arab losses. Or if they were conscious of the impending collision and proposed extending material benefits to Arabs, they knew the Zionist movement lacked sufficient resources to practice

what it preached about the benefits it could bestow on Palestine's Arab population. Instead of addressing what would become an open wound for Arabs and Jews in Palestine, Zionists turned their attention inward in an effort to forge a new national identity for Jews.¹⁴

What was special about Zionists in Ottoman Palestine in its last decades was not simply that ordinary people were remaking their cultures – that is, of course, what ordinary people always do. What was distinctive was that almost every public activity was subject to intense debate among people claiming allegiance to the Zionist cause, reexamining and reinterpreting every aspect of Jewish history and ritual: Should Hanukkah be ignored because it marked the victory of religious fanaticism over the so-called enlightened proponents of Hellenism or was it rather to be celebrated as a class struggle, as some Socialist-Zionists argued, and the triumph of a peasant underclass?

These conflicts could have fragmented the small Zionist community and destroyed any chance it had to establish a culture that had lasting value for Jews. By conducting their debates in Hebrew, however, Zionists gave all Jews a stake in the outcome. Zionists living in Ottoman Palestine seized on reviving Hebrew, a language possessed of deep emotional and traditional significance for Jews, as the way to claim both authenticity and modernity. Transforming Hebrew from its status as a language suited only for religious discourse into one that could be deployed to express the most intimate aspects of everyday life was the center of their cultural project. This would be a daunting challenge under ordinary circumstances, and the late Ottoman Empire could by no means be described as providing ordinary conditions for national development. Resurrecting a language not only shaped lives and created the foundations of community and culture but instilled in Zionists the notion that their mission was as much about culture as about politics and infused many with the confidence necessary to withstand the hardships that were to come in the process of building a Jewish state.

Ottoman Palestine offered many Zionists the chance to cross cultural boundaries and immerse themselves in what some imagined as an Arab society bearing traces of a Biblical past Jews had long ago abandoned. For some, the thrill of reconnecting with their ancient roots compensated for the painful dislocations of immigration to an empire challenged from within and without and one whose economy struggled in the best of times and was perilously close to collapse in the worst. Still, the belief of many Zionists in the spiritual depth of Ottoman Palestine's Arabs had its inverted form in the suspicions of many more who viewed the so-called oriental culture of these people as subversive of the modernizing ambitions of the Jews.¹⁵ Not even the romantic notions extolling Bedouin customs and the assertions of historic links between Jews and Arabs could erase what was a growing awareness of a clash of interests between the two peoples living in Palestine. However, while the nationalist discourses gravitated toward confrontation, daily life necessarily moved Arabs and Jews toward ever-more economic interactions and to increasingly having to share public space.

Great Britain and the Mandate for Palestine

The end of the World War I marked the beginning of enormous unrest for Palestinian Arabs. Discerning a danger in the map drawn by European diplomats in a Middle East no longer governed as part of the Ottoman Empire, Palestinian Arabs, along with Arabs from other lands, attempted to block its imposition. When the resistance to the new territorial divisions was broken, Palestinian Arabs redirected their struggle against colonial rule into an active strategy of confrontation with Zionism. In riots in several cities, Jews came under attack. Jewish property was destroyed in an effort to convince British policymakers to

abandon their recently proclaimed intentions to permit Jewish immigration and Jewish land purchases, but Arab resistance collapsed under the weight of British firepower.

Palestinian Arab leaders saw in Zionist activities an imperative requiring a strong response. The Zionist project was contested by many within and without the Middle East for compromising commonly held notions regarding political legitimacy, but for most Arabs in Palestine, it was also a crisis of confidence. The rapid success of many Zionist endeavors provoked among Arabs a sense of the weakness of their own leaders and society. It was less the number of newcomers than their definition of settlement that threatened Palestinian Arabs. Generations of Palestinian Arabs had inscribed on the countryside their own version of an ordered landscape – villages, sacred sites, hills covered with olive trees, plains cultivated with grains but often empty of permanent dwellings. Jews remade the land and the landscape. They plowed the fields more deeply than the Arabs, and they irrigated more extensively. They enclosed their property with wire fences. On the collective farms, settlers constructed central dining rooms, schools, barns, and stables, adding to the inventory of unfamiliar objects injected onto Palestine's landscape.¹⁶

The use of the land changed as much as the structures placed on it. Jewish settlers were only learning how to be farmers, but they came equipped with modern tools and the capital to purchase the latest agricultural techniques. New crops and methods ushered in not just another way of doing things but another way of thinking, all of which had a profound and unsettling effect on Palestinian Arabs. Coming at a time of enormous uncertainty for Palestinian Arabs and the need to recover from a long and difficult war, the flourishing of Zionist enterprises was particularly troublesome.

Zionist activities quickly became a focus of protest, but it was the British framework of government that ought to have claimed more focused Palestinian Arab attention. Already set in the first decade of British rule were the trends that eroded the economic and political structures sustaining Palestinian Arab leadership. As power and position depended heavily on control over agricultural production, any assessment of Palestinian politics during the period of British rule must begin with a discussion of regulations regarding land. Despite a determination not to intervene directly in the countryside, the British elaborated new principles of determining landholding and land ownership – principles that accorded with European rather than Ottoman notions of measurement and boundaries. New terminology charted territory with a geometric precision alien to a terrain customarily divided along natural and familial lines. Once in control of the most fertile areas of land – formally or informally – upper-class Palestinian Arabs now had to be willing to pay a high price to sustain their ownership of it. Success in holding on to the lands depended, in part, on putting political needs ahead of economic interest, on being willing to invest in new technologies or to assume unprofitable financial burdens. Most important, during the British Mandate period in the Jewish sector, land became a commodity freely traded by Arabs but not by Jews.¹⁷

Though conscious of the political consequences of land sales, Palestinian Arabs – even notables identified with the Palestinian nationalist movement – found it difficult, for many reasons, to refuse to sell land. First, a significant rise in the Palestinian Arab population, the result of declining infant mortality and increasing life expectancy, meant that not all those born in the countryside could be absorbed on the land. In Palestine, land was expensive, and the price rose considerably in some regions as a result of expanding Jewish interest and increased purchases. For many Palestinian Arabs, the choice was to sell and reap a quick profit, intensify cultivation at burdensome costs, or farm at the very margins of arable land.

The latter two options were likely beyond their means or without potential for a reasonable return on their investments.

British economic policies changed the concentrations of wealth. At the individual level, moneyed families could now build handsome houses in newly established neighborhoods, import European furniture, and send their children to European-sponsored schools. Education had a clear impact on mobility and employment options.¹⁸ Unfortunately for most Palestinian Arabs, education was beyond their reach financially and/or geographically, even at the primary level. Tuition was expensive, and those who wished to enter high school often had to bear the costs of room and board. Palestinian Arabs castigated the mandatory government for not providing funds to spur the expansion of a system of public education. The British government itself acknowledged failure in not building a larger number of elementary schools across the Palestinian countryside.

By the end of the first decade of British rule, Palestinian Arabs saw a rising tide of Zionist activity wherever they turned. Unwilling to embrace British rule as long as it was associated with a commitment to developing a Jewish National Home in Palestine but unable to convince the mandatory power to change course, Palestinian Arabs resorted to violence, declaring a revolt in a series of pitched battles directed first against Jews, beginning in 1936, and later at one another, becoming a full-scale civil war by the time the British put an end to all attacks in 1939.

Palestinian society was fraying by the time violence erupted in the 1930s. Many Palestinians grew up in an atmosphere charged with fear of Zionism and the forces it supposedly unleashed that thrust them from their villages, their traditions, and the social ties configured to shelter them from hardship and rupture. By the second decade of British rule, it was clear to many Palestinians that they were no longer protected by their traditional leaders nor were they able to sustain themselves or their households through their customary work. Stagnant village economies compelled Palestinians to rush into the economically dynamic cities where they took jobs, becoming nodes in a system of commercial exchange that offered them no relief from the discomforts of social change. Zionism was not the only reason for their problems, but public rhetoric blamed it for Palestinian pain and suffering. If the behavior of ordinary Palestinians is examined, however, it tells quite a different story. It shows a pattern of resentment directed against the mainstream nationalist movements that generated a surging condemnation of Zionism without creating even the image of a unifying common culture.¹⁹ Denouncing Zionism without promising to revise the patronage networks and hierarchical relationships pervasive in the nationalist organizations could only raise questions for Palestinian men and women about whether defeating Zionism would actually bring their own sense of displacement to an end.

Ironically, Islam offered cultural compensation for what was perceived by many as an outmoded system of domination that increasingly abused more than helped Palestinians to withstand the turmoil confronting them. Islam provided an energy particularly to those young men repressed by established social power relations. It also gave them hope of finding a secure place in a world whose vernacular of community they understood. Apart from the words deployed to denounce the building of a Jewish National Home in what they took to be their land, Palestinians had not yet invented a language of nationhood that they could say belonged exclusively to them. Whenever they looked at a map, most Palestinians saw lines drawn by their foreign overseers, whose policies may have benefited an educated urban elite but were gradually divesting the rural poor of land and birthright. Turning to Islam to take stock of their condition, then, seemed natural and gave Palestinians the vocabulary with which to confront not only their Zionist enemies but the forces assigned to preserve their

passivity and keep them at the mercy of other people's directives. Taking the measure of their resources and power, Palestinians notables had also often folded their ideas into a religious discourse that would appeal to Muslims across the globe. Calling Muslims to assemble in Jerusalem in 1931 became a rallying cry against Zionism but not a plea for transforming a community increasingly riven by inequality and multiple levels of oppression.

However, the cry for an armed insurrection that came from Syrian Sunni cleric Izz al-Din al-Qassam did resonate with the poor because it invested Palestinian grievances with a new religious valence. The Shaykh demanded a war for justice and dignity, borrowing familiar Muslim tropes and tapping into reservoirs of deeply felt emotions. He rallied many young Palestinians to his cause and to his militant strategy. And this was not to be the first time Islam would be conscripted for social and political criticism as well as for a purported final reckoning for control over Palestine.

Some argue that the attacks inspired by Izz al-Din al-Qassam triggered the 1936–1939 Arab Revolt and deepened the fissures already dividing Palestinian Arab society: the rich and the poor, the countryside and the city, notable families who were rivals for power and disagreed over strategies. Spreading war sent thousands out of the country to escape the line of fire. It cast some leaders into prison and others into exile. Existing hierarchies were weakened, if not destroyed, leaving the economy in ruins.²⁰ Some Palestinian Arabs were labeled enemies simply for advocating strategies of non-violence. Traumatized by the defeat, Palestinian Arabs may not have noticed that they achieved their diplomatic aims when the British announced in 1939 that it would end its mandate and grant Palestine its independence at the end of five years. Ironically, by the time their battles gave Palestinian Arabs what they always said they wanted, it arrived too late to have any effect: Land sales could not be stopped, and a second world war brought only a temporary halt to immigration. Another reason Palestinian Arabs seemed unaffected by the newly proclaimed British policies is that they were no longer representing their own interests at the conference table. What were to have been their seats were now occupied by other regional Arab heads of state. Having always insisted on a mandate commitment to keep Palestine undivided, the country's Arab leaders were now subdued and silenced, their authority dispersed and weakened even as Great Britain announced that it would comply with their core demand.

United Nations Partition Resolution and war

Apart from marking territory, the 1948 War left an indelible imprint on Palestinians and Israelis: for one, the losses, and, for the other, the gains. Replacing the Arabic with Hebrew names for villages became a vivid example of the loss of place and identity for one people even as it symbolized revitalization for the other. By May of 1948, those Arab states that had initially criticized the war were drawn into its action. Arab leaders came to feel it was more dangerous not to respond militarily than to do so, and while all fought to deny the Jews sovereignty, none waged war to give Palestinians independence.²¹

When the battles halted in 1949, the boundaries drawn were not stable nor were they recognized as legitimate or final even by Israelis. Perhaps because the war ended with no declarations of peace, it became, quite easily and naturally, a metaphor for Palestinians, whose painful wounds could not be healed until their land was reclaimed and repossessed, and for Israelis a dividing line in danger of becoming the site for the clash of civilizations.

No peace treaty was signed. The fighting simply became much less intense, much less organized, and, from the perspective of Israelis living in the country's population centers, more distant. The ceasefire did make a difference. For Israelis, it denoted an end to the

possibility of massive destruction and death. For Palestinians, the war proved impossible to forget. The reminders were everywhere: in abandoned homes and villages, in refugee camps, in families now stretched across borders. All found themselves living in a different world – even those who had not lost their homes. Those who could not adjust to the new circumstances and feared persecution were likely to go underground. The story of this war became a powerful source of rhetoric for Arab regimes and a tool for justifying perpetual mobilization and vigilance.

During the 1948 War, it seemed to many Palestinians caught in the battles that all that had made them Palestinian, and all that had made the land theirs, was in their homes. If the loss of a house explains the suffering, it also gives it a depth – the failure to protect the family. Palestinian doubts about their own identity must have been magnified by both their own loss of home and community and by their dispersion across so many Arab lands. It was non-Palestinian Arab intellectuals who initially sought to contain the suffering of war and dispersion by organizing it into the *nakba*, the modern story of catastrophe for this region. Palestinians kept relatively quiet about their suffering and for good reasons. Many were illiterate or at least not quite literate enough to narrate their own experiences. Many felt compelled to defer to the record endorsed by their Arab overlords who gave them sanctuary. Some must have been silenced by their own suffering.

However, if their loss – which seemed so personal and particular – was described as a disaster for all Arabs, would a recovery that clawed away land from Israel necessarily return Palestinians to their own personal possessions and locally distinctive lives? The *nakba* not only suggested a catastrophe beyond their control but a redemption they could neither time nor ignite: Palestinians would have to await it because it was one that would come to them. Dependent on the Arab states for their safety and for offering them shelter as refugees, Palestinians were also beholden to them for their message of salvation through Arab national unity. Most Palestinians could not press their own claims or exercise their own political autonomy under these circumstances, nor did they have access to their own resources.²²

After achieving independence but not recognition from the Arab states in the region, Israel assumed there would be another war. Independence itself did not give the country the security it sought, particularly along its frontiers, where Israelis (sometimes newly arrived immigrants) faced hostile populations living under regimes still committed, at least according to their rhetoric, to destroying the Jewish state. As long as Palestine's refugees remained in camps, there would be efforts made to cross borders, sometimes to reunite families, sometimes to carry on the war by attacking Israel's citizens. Striking hard at villages sending their men across Israel's borders allowed the Jewish state to display its resilience and its military might. An unstable frontier and the constant exchange of fire and bloodshed eventually led to a war against Egypt in 1956 that while demonstrating the military power of the Jewish state, also showed Israel's relative global political weakness when it was forced to withdraw from territories conquered from Egypt. Despite the international pressures and threats, and perhaps because a much less clear military outcome in 1948 had swept away or threatened several post-colonial Arab regimes, the 1956 military victory for Israel checkmated, at least for 11 years, the outbreak of war.²³

The June War of 1967

The event of 1967 offered both Israelis and Palestinians the opportunity to redefine their respective relationships to their homeland. For most Israelis, their military victory in 1967 rescued the country from an unexpected existential threat across a border made peaceful

through international agreements and guarantees that unraveled over the course of several weeks. For some Israelis, however, the war's outcome fostered a determination to revive and revise a Zionist goal that promised personal and collective redemption on a land made sacred by ancestors and one that could now be remade as holy through the establishment of Jewish settlements. Like the dominant visions of the past, this one, too, possessed an imaginative and moral power for some, but it was also accompanied by a clear weakening of the public support for Zionism's original egalitarian transformative mission.²⁴

Small groups developed a narrative of spiritual rebirth based on building homes and communities on sites woven into Judaism's sacred story. These communities were intended to symbolize a strengthened dedication to Zionism and Judaism and to give both a new scale of expression.²⁵ However, the many Jewish settlements and religious institutions that dot the hills and towns of the West Bank also tapped into ideals of individualism and personal prosperity, sentiments that had in the past been marginalized or even buried by Israel's dominant labor Zionist culture. After the 1967 War, the country's economic expansion enabled many Israelis – aided by government subsidies – to build their dream house and recast Israeli culture from a celebration of a Spartan labor ideal into a nation that could offer more liberty to its citizens in their quest for material prosperity and for communities of like-minded families provided with the kinds of local services – religious or not – congruent with their lifestyles. The word *settlement* – once summoning up images of a return to the soil, to agricultural labor, and to a work imbued with an egalitarian ethic – became the incarnation of a new spirit of individualism taking over the society.

If, in earlier years, Zionist debates revolved around which lands the Jews could safely hold and which they could rightfully claim, after 1967 discussions focused as much on communities and demography as on historic rights. Israelis became more disposed to talking about the land as a critical element in forming homogeneous local communities – many around shared religious values and practices – than in establishing the basis for a just society. Thus, when the Israeli government renamed the West Bank Judea and Samaria, stamping the territories with their Biblical names, it invented a language to symbolize that this new settlement mission was as Jewish as it was Zionist and injected a linguistic currency that further destabilized the secular thrust of the classical Zionist nation-building paradigm even as it sought to co-opt it with a powerful historic resonance.

At the same time, a defeat so decisive made room for the rise of a Palestinian nationalism that issued its own call for liberation in tones not registered since the Revolt of 1936–1939. For Palestinians, 1967 became a year of elation and hope; for amid the ruins of the war, a new political order seemed to be taking shape that would bestow upon them power over their own fate. What had been a series of wars between Israel and several Arab states was about to be transformed into a confrontation between the Jewish state and Palestinians. Palestinian militias began marching through the streets of Arab capitals. Refugee camps were turned into bases for training fighters, all of this threatening to shut down local economies in several Arab cities and to pierce the thin skin of civility if the swaggering freedom fighters with their Kalashnikov-wielding anger did not get their way and their stipends. Joined together in a newly reconfigured PLO, Palestinian fighters promised a battle for land and a fight against imperialism and Zionism – the sources, they claimed, of their suffering. The transformation of Palestinians from passive and silent victim to assertive freedom fighters prepared to disrupt any country or attack any people in order to strengthen their movement and advance their cause illustrates the powerful effect of political rhetoric.²⁶

Just how the Palestinian national liberation war would play out was not known, though its threat to provoke disorder in countries with significant numbers of refugees did not have to

be imagined, as became evident in civil wars in Jordan in 1970 and in Lebanon for a decade or more after the violence was let loose in 1975. Arab states extolled the political energy of the Palestinians, filling the PLO coffers with money, to keep the action and attention of the militias trained against Israel or Israeli interests, ever conscious and always fearful that insurrection abroad could spark revolution at home. To claim power over their own political future, Palestinians had to seize the initiative from Arab regimes on whose hospitality they relied for sustenance. The expansion of funding to the PLO was itself a manifestation of the strengthened sense of national honor that Palestinians managed to extract from their newly energized movement, but it was one that attracted as much suspicion as support.

There is no doubt that the PLO reborn in 1968 changed the way Arabs and the world thought and wrote about the Palestinians. Carrying their battles into Israeli towns and cities transformed the once passive image of Palestinians as victims, but it was intended to extricate this people from their total dependence on the various Arab states that gave them shelter, nourishment, and jobs as much as to display their steadfast opposition to the Jewish state that deprived them of their lands and homes. Even those inclined to celebrate the Palestinian cause had to grapple with the fact that the PLO turned universal principles of national rights into a surge of violence channeled in many directions across many borders. Events in Jordan and Lebanon offered incontrovertible evidence that revolutions could quickly descend into civil wars.

Although recognized as the legitimate custodian of the Palestinian cause, the PLO could not serve as an engine of national consolidation committed to the liberation of their lands from the Jewish state without turning the growing numbers of refugees into an instrument to extract financial support from the regimes that had thus far failed to return the dispossessed back to their ancestral homes. Arafat, as PLO chair, injected a revolutionary faith into the consciousness of Palestinians for what he called their reinvigorated struggle even as this new activism could be turned in any political direction. Despite his confident tone, however, Arafat knew he was sailing into the political equivalent of uncharted waters.

The Palestinian movement became the mobilization point for an array of revolutionary and self-proclaimed progressive forces across the globe. It exerted a strong pull on the Arab masses for whom ending the *nakba* was expected to bring into being a just world for them as well. For that reason, many regimes feared the new Palestinian movement was preparing for a war with such high stakes that it could drag sometimes brittle and fragile Arab states into whirlpools of large-scale fighting that they had a clear interest in avoiding. The PLO transformed the suicide bomber into an icon of martyrdom and resistance, but it was also viewed as encouraging the Arab impoverished, alienated, and brutalized masses across the region – who were subjected to all sorts of indignities and expected to respond with stoic endurance – to see in Palestinian actions models for their own emancipatory impulses. With Palestinians no longer expecting their deliverance to come from the Arabs, the Arabs now might find Palestinians themselves pointing the way to empowerment. Rather than denying the threat posed by the Palestinians, Arafat exploited it to extract revenue in return for proffering Arab regimes a guarantee of domestic peace.

A campaign of violence with no obvious end in sight frightened many regional leaders, leading them to a wariness as they saw in Palestinian actions a possible foreshadowing of their own country's fate. An endless supply of recruits for killing can take its war to many different capitals and streets or simply radiate instability and generate problems too numerous or volatile to contain or manage. Several heads of state understood that the outcome of a prolonged national liberation struggle would not only fix the boundaries of Palestine and Israel, it would determine how the region was ruled and how it would

interact with the international community. Particularly after the region's experience with the prolonged civil war in Lebanon, rulers were torn between their identification with the Palestinian cause and the sentiments of angry crowds on the one hand, and a disposition to prevent the collapse of another state into anarchy on the other, a trajectory that sometimes seemed the inexorable consequence of the actions of the various Palestinian militias leading the charge against Israel. A gap began to emerge between the Palestinian groups wishing to press their case and the leaders of Arab countries who started to embrace the idea of a negotiated settlement.

Thus, as soon as it received unequivocal recognition as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, the PLO had to confront a number of strategic adversaries: Arab states such as Egypt prepared to broker an agreement with Israel; a Lebanese civil war entrapping it in its religious divide; and the Intifada, a decision taken to confront the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip by those living under its grip and initiated in late 1987 without prior approval from the organization that was claiming sole custodianship over the Palestinian cause.

The Intifada indicated that control over Palestinian political action had slipped out of the hands of the PLO. In an effort to regain the initiative, PLO leaders funded and escalated a more violent West Bank and Gaza Strip confrontation against Israel and at the same time promoted the once-rejected idea of partitioning the land, a notion that would necessarily involve negotiating with the Jewish state. And while the PLO's diplomatic gambit won support from the United States, it deepened the divisions within the Palestinian nationalist movement not only over how to achieve its aims but, more important, over what aims were achievable. The Intifada also allowed new organizations to form – most notably Hamas – that established a foothold in the Gaza Strip. (The much smaller Islamic Jihad backed by Iran found roots in the Gaza Strip several years earlier.) Islamic Jihad and Hamas challenged the PLO's exclusive right to speak for Palestinian interests and denounced its apparent acceptance of the idea of dividing the country. An offshoot of Egypt's Muslim Brethren, Hamas embraced Palestinian national rights not simply as an Arab issue but as a Muslim obligation. Declaring all of Palestine holy ground meant that abandoning any part would not only leave an open wound for Arabs but violate a sacred commandment for Muslims.

Palestinians caught between past and present

Thus we must ask, did the defeats of 1967 really produce an independent and united Palestinian national liberation movement (Figure 14.2)?

The PLO certainly wanted people to believe that it had returned power over their national destiny to Palestinians, but a fortified PLO still could not be divested of its dependence on Arab regimes for financing, logistical support, and shelter, nor could its militias operate without weapons supplied by one or another global power. Arab rulers might acknowledge that a resolution of the Palestinian problem was the benchmark of justice yet not want their regimes to be drawn into paying the price for a strategy unlikely to achieve much except raise the level of hostility in the region, threaten the stability of their rule, and provoke attacks from Israel.

No one doubted the importance of Palestine. When the times were good for the Palestinians – speeches and votes at the United Nations, Arab summits devoted to their agenda – people forgot that the times were ever bad and that Arab societies could turn against these people even while they embraced their cause. It is important to remember that at its founding in 1964, the PLO was viewed as a little more than a fiction – not even



Figure 14.2 Israel and the Occupied Territories. ChrisO: Wikimedia Commons. Released to the public domain based on UN map No. 3584 Rev. 2.

purely Palestinian because of its Arab League lineage and not totally committed to liberation because its actions were circumscribed by Egypt.

However, the illusion endures that the PLO eventually unified Palestinians into a single mission of liberation. With such a powerful mystique, the PLO often supported multiple, even conflicting, strategies – a diplomatic process promising to resolve its dispute with Israel through negotiations while proffering aid to those who were prepared to wage unlimited war against the Jewish state. However, while the diplomatic and war strategies may have been politically co-dependent, they could not be sustained for very long. The more Israelis were killed on buses and in hotels or restaurants, the less Israelis believed negotiations with Palestinians could secure their lives. Even Palestinians had trouble understanding the benefits of this dual approach. So many Palestinians have paid such a high price to sustain the sanctity of their struggle that it is easy to understand why so many who see so little improvement in their lives from negotiations would pivot to Hamas, not part of the PLO framework and not at all interested in engaging in peace talks with Israel.

However, while the PLO leadership has managed to change how people view its relationship with Israel, it has not been able to consolidate a unified national authority, common strategy, or set of shared aims. Too many Palestinians are trapped between maximal expectations and hopes, given the rhetoric they hear, while they are confronted by a daily life where little has changed and, if it has, has sometimes gotten worse. And while Palestine remains an open wound for all Arabs and a fixation for regimes, it has not prevented Arab societies – Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, and now Syria – from turning against the Palestinians living on their soil when, correctly or not, they see them as enemies of order, stability, or regime interests.

The narratives of struggle may have an emotional power that has convinced Palestinians of their immemorial rights, but no narrative has been able to produce coherent and inclusive state-building political programs that bind together all classes and sectors of the population.²⁷ None of its institutions – even those woven around Islam – have succeeded in bringing together the entire Palestinian nation. Acknowledging the sacredness of Jerusalem has not convinced Palestinian Muslims that they must recognize the city's clergy as its national leaders and charge them with representing the nation's interests. Although Islam has gained more prominence in shaping Palestinian national narratives, it has divided as much as united the population around a political program of action.²⁸ The refugees and the idea of displacement and dispossession have become the foundational and unifying element in Palestinian narratives since the 1948 War. To restore Palestinians to their ancestral homes and homeland has become the definition of a just resolution to the conflict, but that goal possesses more sanctity than credibility, given what we know about the current distribution of power and influence in the region.

Ordinary Palestinians are thus caught not only in the crossfire of violence and checkpoints but in the clash of diverse political forces that subject them to a multitude of conflicting imperatives. Palestinians struggle with an explosive mixture of strategies for independence, national liberation, and what might be called redemption. None of the strategies pursued by the various Palestinian political movements has been able to offer guidance on how to accommodate the contradictions inherent in simultaneously trying to build a state, create a unified nation, and restore justice to a people whose very identity is etched in the injustices meted out to it: exile, dispossession, and subordination.²⁹

Hence, all Palestinian organizations from the PLO to Hamas confront a profound disharmony of political forces. State-building requires the structuring of political life around institutions and laws within borders that can be drawn on a map. This process calls for

calculating the costs and benefits not only of policy options but also of adherence to sacred principles. National liberation inserts Palestinians directly into highly volatile Arab political dynamics as they seek both material resources and land bases for their confrontations with Israel. For this reason, Palestinians are as much creatures of Middle East politics as they are instruments deployed by the area's various regimes to service the latter's own particular interests. For Palestinians, mobilizing resources and support from the Arab states without diminishing their own autonomy is an almost impossible task to imagine, let alone to discharge.

The Palestinian issue stands squarely in the center of a fluctuating regional security complex where alliances can change or intensify and often unexpectedly ignite, escalate, or mitigate tensions between Palestinians and Israelis. Whether pursuing armed struggle or negotiations or both, Palestinians and Israelis have had to contend with a complicated, sometimes highly unstable, extensive constellation of allies and adversaries. Consider the high price Gaza Strip residents have paid for rockets fired from their territory by Islamic Jihad and Hamas into Israel. These militant actions may have preserved Iranian patronage and funds, but Israeli counterattacks had to remind Gazans of the gap between their own interests and those of the movements presumably championing their cause. Palestinians suffer the heaviest losses and possess the weakest organizations for preserving their own interests. With Palestinian organizations so fragmented, eager hands are always quick to reach in from all sides of the region to grasp for its parts.

When regional animosities are grafted onto the Palestinian confrontation with Israel, the results can be calamitous, as the most recent round of fighting in Gaza illustrates. This third war in Gaza in six years is said to have underscored the irrelevance of Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestine Authority, and the futility of diplomacy. Many believe it generated gains for Hamas and substantial losses for Israel. In reality, it changed little except for the extent of wretchedness in Gaza and the growing intrusion of an explosive regional dynamic on the conflict's kaleidoscopic security complex. The dramatic changes in the constellation of regional alliances shaped both the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas and prolonged its duration. And while a more extensive Israel-Palestine conflict certainly generates more lethal dangers that Israel must parry, it also produces new opportunities for forging new regional alliances. At the same time, by steadily drawing in more countries, the Palestinian Authority and the major liberation movements render themselves less independent and less able to take the kind of action they have deemed as serving their interests.

Polling data report a surge in Hamas' popularity, but after 50 days of raining bombs across Israel, the movement agreed to a ceasefire document it could have signed before 2,000 Palestinians lost their lives and a quarter of the population were rendered homeless. While approval was extended to Israel for defending its citizens from attacks, as casualties in the Gaza Strip mounted, condemnations of the scale of the country's military response became commonplace. Notwithstanding the criticism of Israel wrapped in war crimes charges from organizations claiming the formidable doctrine of human rights, seven weeks of bombardments did not impose radically new thinking on Israel, the Palestine Authority, or Hamas about how to accelerate a resolution of their multiple disputes.

Nor has a new template been produced for generating positive interactions between the Palestine Authority and Hamas. Despite their shared hostility to Israel, the Palestine Authority and Hamas remain deeply divided over how to form an inclusive government of technocrats to reassure donors that the money sent will be used to rebuild for residents above and not for fighters below ground in Gaza. The war did not convince Hamas to disarm, nor did it persuade Egypt and Israel to alter their security calculations about the

need to monitor access to an area posing an immediate danger to both. Egypt continues to destroy the smuggling tunnels that became a lucrative source of money for Hamas. And while the movement has managed to sustain its military and financial assistance from Iran, Turkey, and Qatar, it still encounters enormous opposition and suspicion from other Arab countries.

However, Palestinians are not only caught in troubles not of their own making, they are bleeding from self-inflicted wounds in battles warranted by memories of past injustices. The impulses at play in what I have called a “redemptive” politics mean that the idea of returning to Haifa can command more attention and resources than creating the institutions necessary to establish a state. Redemptive politics, with its narrowly construed ethical choices, always promises much more than it can deliver because it remains forever tied to an unchanging set of goals taken to be pure and sanctified. Assessing how to best gain their independence in the future need not preclude turning to their past, but as much as Palestinians are haunted by their history, they should not become trapped by it.

Thus, *nakba* is recruited for a succession of narratives sometimes intended to clarify and justify fundamental policies and decisions but just as often to shore up a particular distribution of power and resources. It marks not only the dispossession of homes and homeland but an implied contract committed to restoring the losses. The contract binds Palestinians to a commitment to ending their dispersion in only one way – by offering them the possibility of returning to their ancestral homes. Furthermore, dispossession is regarded as the key cause of social disorder for Palestinians as well as for all Arabs. However, a cultural narrative that stretches back to an earlier world is not so easily or fluently translated into a political agenda that must confront and contend with a region that has changed its configurations of power many times since 1948. A narrative aimed at unity by focusing not on what can be done in the present but rather on what should be undone from the past is likely to be as disruptive as it is reassuring.

Dedicated to redeeming the nation from the miseries wrought in the past, the PLO as well as the Islamist movements have consequently failed to provide Palestinians with a currency useful at today’s exchange rates for navigating their common interests. The narratives bestowed on Palestinians have been created to produce a consensus, not to build a political order. The term *nakba* has often been deployed to patch up contradictions or to avoid admitting vulnerabilities and weaknesses that arise from the many centers of power governing Palestinian politics, but this linguistic convention cannot advance progress toward achieving a state. On the one hand, Palestinians are confronted by ongoing negotiations that are stalemated over issues both sides consider too sacred for compromise, while on the other, Palestinians are asked to commit to an armed struggle delivering resources not to them but rather to the militant organizations embracing this strategy. What it brings to ordinary Palestinians is not military victory but only a sense of satisfaction from perpetual attacks against a hated enemy. What neither option offers Palestinians is the chance to build their own society and economy. Palestinian options are still too much determined by other powers while their lives continue to be overly regulated by an agenda formed by political interests disproportionately shaped by regional and global power struggles. Most Palestinians still conduct their lives in an environment based on someone else’s understanding of what is important.

The very notion that a Palestinian-Israeli settlement is possible because the outlines of an agreement are known as defined in the negotiations throughout the 1990s may have now been eclipsed by a set of new political dynamics. It is not only that the groups and interests on both sides that are able to veto the concessions required for peace have proliferated but,

more ominously, that the number of rulers who have powerful incentives to promote the narrative that has thus far helped them stay in power has multiplied.

No wonder that increasing numbers of Palestinians have come to regard Israel's occupation as too strong to be removed in their lifetimes and so have opted to try to ignore politics and search for opportunities through education and business that involve cooperation with the Jewish state. Palestinians have introduced the Israeli curriculum into their schools to enable students to attend the prestigious universities and colleges in the country. They have sought access to Israel's health system and investment opportunities. Noting that no combination of military force or diplomatic pressure can dislodge Israel from its occupation, no less an authority than former al-Quds University president Sari Nusseibeh has called on Palestinians – perhaps with some degree of irony – to do exactly what increasing numbers are already doing: ignore politics and focus on making their way through the institutions and opportunities provided under the current politically problematic conditions. Palestinians can enter first-rate educational institutions; they can start businesses, plan their own careers, and develop their own talents through their own initiative.

Despite being infused with great expectations, the negotiations initiated by the Oslo Accords have foundered many times, but the failure to develop a strategy for bringing an end to the conflict has not stopped efforts to persist in reviving diplomatic engagement even when conversations about the core issues have necessarily been nasty, brutish, and short. To say that the Oslo Peace Process may have run its course, however, is not to say that the two-state proposition must be abandoned. This objective may not be achievable now, given the current array of political forces, but it is the only proposal that links an end to the conflict to preserving Israel's national Jewish identity. Apart from possessing international legitimacy, the goal of establishing two states for two peoples has been endorsed by successive Israeli governments and by the PLO. While a resolution of the conflict should not be taken for granted as inevitable, it should also not be deemed impossible to accomplish. Any idea, such as the so-called one-Palestine proposal, that amounts to divesting Israel of its Jewish identity is axiomatically dismissed by the overwhelming number of the Jewish state's population as a threat to the political and cultural framework sustaining their lives and destiny.

Since 1967, Palestinians have charted a course of hostility against the powers that kept them weak and exiled from their homeland. The story of dispossession they embraced promoted a politics of opposition that left little room for finding accommodation with the dominant powers signified as enemy. However, many Palestinians, admittedly caught in less than ideal circumstances, are discovering that resistance may not be the best way to structure their own lives and nurture their own interests or create for themselves and their families a better life. Attempting to remind the nation of the importance of political action, the Palestine Authority has increasingly been using the vocabulary of unilateralism, stating its intention to seek independence through the United Nations and a rigorous application of international law against the Israeli occupation, but the expectation that deliverance can come from global forces that are divided on almost every major issue is unclear. To some extent, the trumpeting of unilateral action by Palestinians may also trigger a backlash from an Israel deciding, on its own, to redraw its borders and redeploy its security forces in accordance with its own calculations. A looming threat of international pressure and a continuing gap on core issues may push Israel into unilateral decisions that could have fatal consequences for Palestinian dreams and interests.

Israel between state and nation

Israelis, too, have gravitated more frequently in recent years toward the virtual battlefield of narrative and away from the practical domain focused on the resolution of particular grievances. The demand that Palestinians recognize Israel as the historic homeland of the Jewish people unwittingly blurs what had been the historic Zionist distinction between the sovereign Jewish state and what was typically defined as its antithetical and powerless counterpart in the Diaspora. While the original Zionist notion that posited a radical difference between exile and homeland was drawn more starkly in theory than in practice, that distinction did mean that religious identity alone could not confer citizenship. When Palestinians call for a “right of return” for all those holding refugee status, they, not surprisingly, tap into a politics that challenges Israel’s sovereignty, effectively contesting the Jewish state’s right to control its own borders and immigration policies. However, by insisting that Israel be recognized as the historic homeland of the Jewish people, the country’s political leaders now ironically embrace an idea that, like those put forward by Palestinians, also threatens Israel’s sovereignty not so much by narrowing its scope but rather by expanding it, conflating the country possessed of the power to grant citizens political rights with a state serving as the node for cultural unity and spiritual inspiration for Jews wherever they reside and vote.

Since 1967 – almost half a century – Palestinians and Israelis have been obsessed with defining and defending their national narratives. These narratives tell the stories of their past, with all its traumas and achievements, and dispose both people not only to cherish their history but to consider it sacred. The gap between these narratives is unbridgeable but, in the conduct of their daily lives, Palestinians and Israelis are more and more drawn together. Narratives and daily lives tug in different directions, the one to the past, the other to the present and, potentially, to the future. One offers emotional ballast while the other has the possibility of providing sturdy enough ground for a future course of development where two states for two people live side by side.

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Further reading

General surveys of the Arab-Israeli conflict are typically useful for understanding one or more of its characteristics, even as most display a sympathy for one side while casting the other as the source of conflict. Very few scholars possess the linguistic skills to read all the primary sources. The most comprehensive and readable is the relatively short book:

Dowty, Alan, *Israel/Palestine* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012). He has written a study reflective of a deep understanding of Zionism, and of Israeli policies as well as of Palestinian politics.

Other general and useful surveys include:

Gelvin, James, *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: One Hundred Years of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). An excellent discussion of how Palestinian political developments intersect with regional dynamics.

Lesch, David W., *The Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History* (New York: Oxford, 2008).

Smith, Charles D., *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents* (Boston, MA: St. Martin's, 2012)

For a good overview of Palestinian history, see:

Kimmerling, Baruch, and Migdal, Joel, *Palestinians: The Making of a People* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).

On the evolution of Palestinian national consciousness and identity, see the excellent studies:

Khalidi, Rashid, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of a Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

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