

# Chapter 3

## National Narratives in a Conflict of Identity

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### Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has claimed many victims and has taken a high toll on both sides. Simultaneously, many efforts have been made to resolve or settle it by means of traditional diplomacy (Track I diplomacy), which consists of negotiations between formal representatives of both sides, such as the Oslo process, or by means of alternative diplomacy (Track II diplomacy), which is based on direct contact between the two hostile parties, either with the aid of a third party (Kelman, 1979, 1987, 1997) or without it (Maoz, 2000).

This chapter posits that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a conflict over identity, anchored in opposing meta-narratives and national narratives, and is therefore difficult to resolve. Nonetheless, the gap between the two sides can be reduced by distinguishing between meta-narratives and national narratives (a distinction to be discussed below), thereby lowering expectations for the revision of contradictory meta-narratives and focusing instead on efforts to bridge clashing national narratives.

First, I will present a theoretical discussion in which I draw a distinction between a conflict over identity and a material conflict, and between meta-narratives and narratives. I will then offer examples of conflicts that were resolved with the help of the mechanism of narrative incorporation, and finally, I will focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a conflict over identity. I will present the meta-narratives of both sides and show how focusing on national narratives, rather than meta-narratives, could promote resolution of the conflict.

### Material Conflict and Conflict over Identity

A material conflict is a conflict over “real” material assets such as territory, water, oil, border, security, and the like. For example, the territory of Alsace-Lorraine

was the cause of a dispute between Germany and France over the course of many years, repeatedly changed hands (in the wars of 1870, 1914, and 1939), and fanned the flames of hostility between the two countries. The Allied victory over Germany in World War II resulted in the return of the territory to France as part of the resolution of the conflict. This is an example of a material conflict that was settled by traditional diplomatic means. Israel's agreement to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt (including the disputed area of Taba) following prolonged negotiations between representatives of the two countries, even though it was not enough for a warm peace.

These and other examples demonstrate that material conflicts are subject to agreement and solution. At times they are part of a larger conflict, with ideological and symbolic dimensions, in which case they are more difficult to resolve (such as the territorial dispute between Israel and Syria over the Golan Heights, which is overshadowed by the national-ethnic conflict over identity with the Palestinians, or the conflict among India, Pakistan, and China regarding Kashmir). At times the conflict is purely material, such as the conflict between Japan and Russia regarding what Japan calls "the northern territories" and Russia calls "the southern Kuril Islands." The resolution of such a conflict can be a lengthy and complex process, but when the parties decide that the cost of prolonging the conflict over the disputed territories exceeds the cost of the compromise necessary for its resolution, they will presumably bring the conflict to an end by traditional diplomatic means.

*A conflict over identity*, in contrast, is a conflict in which at least one side sees the national identity of the other side as a threat, or, translating this identity into the political sphere – that is, into a "nation-state" – as a danger to its independent national identity. The one side therefore rejects the definition of the other side as a nation or, at a minimum, denies its right to realize this identity in the context of national statehood. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is, in essence, a conflict over identity because its origin and the cause of its continuation are rooted in denial of the nationality of the other side and that side's right to establish a state in the territories of Israel/Palestine. Throughout more than 100 years of conflict, the Palestinian side, backed by Arab countries, refused to recognize the right of the Jewish people to establish a state in part of the land of Israel. The Palestinians, for their part, regard denial of their national identity and their right to establish

a state in the territory of Israel/Palestine as justification for continuing acts of violence against the Jewish community and the State of Israel. A significant change in the Israeli-Arab conflict took place with the signing of a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979. In contrast, no real change in the identity-based character of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has taken place. At least until 1988, the Palestinians saw their struggle with Israel as geared towards eliminating Israel as a Jewish state, as expressed in the Palestinian Covenant. On the other side, Israel took steps the essence of which, in practice, was denial of Palestinian rights to establish a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which Israel had captured in 1967. The Israeli- Palestinian conflict was somewhat moderated with the Oslo process, but this process never sufficiently progressed to resolve the conflict. In recent years, Israeli-Jewish willingness to acknowledge the national identity of the Palestinians has increased,<sup>32</sup> while among Palestinians – especially Israeli citizens – the voices denying the national identity of the Jewish people and their right to a nation-state have become clearer and harsher. We will return to this point later.

## **National Narratives and Meta-Narratives**

A *narrative* is a story about events that took place in history or are taking place in the present. A narrative has a dramatic plot that develops over time, with clear starting points and endpoints. A narrative is etched in the memory because of its internal cohesion, which is achieved by means of a clear and solid foundation based on the five elements (Shuman, 1903) known in journalism as the five W's: Who, What, When, Where, and Why. Later the question "How?" was added (Manoff and Schudson, 1986). The plot's unity is based on a logical relationship among these five elements, and it gives the narrative force and helps make it memorable.

*National narratives* are concrete stories about dramatic events in the recent history or distant past of a nation. These stories are centered on a national hero

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<sup>32</sup> In their paper "Public Opinion and National Security" (2007), Ben-Meir and Shaked present the results of public opinion surveys that were published over the course of three years (2005-2007) and had been conducted by the Lucille Cohen Center for Public Opinion Surveys at Tel Aviv University, by request of the Institute for National Security Studies. The surveys indicate no less than 55% support among Israel's Jewish population for a solution of two states for two people. This support is grounded in an assumption regarding the existence of a distinct Palestinian national entity.

who has legendary spiritual or physical powers, embodies the ethos of the people and its national identity, and provides it with a source of national pride and comfort at times of trouble. One example among many is Yosef Trumpeldor, the amputee hero who was killed in battle while defending Tel Hai. As in other cases of this sort, the hero has been immortalized in history books, songs, stories, and a monument that has become an annual pilgrimage site for youth on the anniversary of his death.

Academic researchers turned the story of Trumpeldor into a “myth” – a legend-story of doubtful historical credibility (Zrubavel, 1996). For children who sang Abba Hushi’s song “In the Galilee in Tel Hai,” however, Trumpeldor is a real, true hero. His story, like the story of Judas Maccabeus’s battle with the Greeks or Bar-Kochva’s with the Romans, is a link in the chain of stories about suffering and courage that are passed down from generation to generation and identified as “chosen traumas” and “chosen glories” by Volkan (2004). These are national narratives that illustrate for the people – especially for youth in the pre-state community and the newly formed state fighting for its existence – the values of Jewish activism and of uncompromising struggle to the point of self-sacrifice. The power of these narratives comes from their close affinity to the meta-narrative.

*A meta-narrative* is a *super-story*: it is the holistic, hierarchical framework that embraces the national narratives and creates and feeds them, while the national narratives revive, reinforce, and feed the meta-narrative. Jean-François Lyotard, one of the foremost post-modernists, asserts that one of the salient characteristics of post-modernism is the increasing skepticism towards the grand meta-narratives: Christianity, the Enlightenment, Marxism, liberalism, and the like. At the same time, he admits that national meta-narratives continue to affect people deeply (Lyotard, 1988, 1992). This assertion is apparently especially true for people in the early stages of building their national identity and consequently – in many cases – in conflict with another national entity, against which they are building their own identity. The national meta-narratives include the ideological and moral foundation of the nation being formed, and they represent its ethos as well as the legitimacy of, and justification for, its establishment and existence. From this follow the sanctity and authority of the meta-narrative and the resistance to, and difficulty of, questioning or changing it.

The national meta-narrative addresses three very important questions for a group that is struggling against another group over its right of national identity and the translation of this identity to sovereignty over the disputed territory that both claim: 1.) Who are we? 2.) What are our ties and our rights to the disputed land? 3.) What is our role in history generally and in relation to the second group specifically?

The academic discourse on the objective-primordial significance of national identity (Smith, 1993) – as opposed to its subjective, “imagined” significance (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990) – is echoed in the “real” argument among various national groups. Often the argument gets away from itself, to the point of contradictory stances such as: we are an ancient nation with proven historical ties to the territory of which you – a religious (or cultural, social – anything but national) group – claim ownership. That is, the primordial theory is embodied and proven within us, while you artificially invented yourselves as a people (or nation or nationality – the distinctions are unclear both within the academic discourse and outside of it) with a groundless claim to our territory.

The meta-narrative that rests on the abovementioned postulates regarding identity and links/rights to territory is reinforced by another argument, which, as of the mid-1990s, has become the core theme of the meta-narratives of the parties to the national conflict: we are the victims of those who have risen up against us throughout history and especially of “you” who rob us of our identity, our own land, and our victimhood.

Every people, in the early stages of establishing its identity, will seek to bequeath its meta-narrative to the next generation and to generations to come in order to fortify and nurture its identity and the solidarity surrounding its identity. Its abstract nature, however, makes granting it to the general public difficult, which is why national narratives are necessary.

While meta-narratives are super-stories establishing the national identity of each side in an identity conflict and are very hard to modify, particularly so in the early stages of conflict resolution, national narratives are plot-centered stories that derive their force and inspiration from the meta-narratives. Were it not for these tangible narratives, the abstract values of the meta-narrative would remain a dead letter, devoid of meaning. On the other hand, were it not for the meta-

narrative, the national narrative would lose its power and its ability to serve as an educational lighthouse towards the consolidation of the nation in formation.

## **The Role of National Narratives in a Conflict over Identity**

In a conflict over identity, the national narratives are usually formed as a series of binary opposites. All five of their elements are clearly and sharply marked in a way that does not leave any room for confusion between “our” side and the other side. The mirror image formed by the dichotomous gap between the narratives of one side and those of the other side causes each side to identify with its own stories and to vehemently deny the “distorted” versions of the other side. The “ideal type” of national narrative in a conflict over identity is structured according to the following format:

**Who?** The hero of a national narrative is the embodiment of the good and the noble of this world, someone who personifies the entire national entity as it is or as it should be. Examples include Trumpeldor or Bar-Kochva on the Jewish side of the conflict, and alternatively, Salah Ad-Din, who defeated the Crusaders on the Palestinian-Arab side. On the other hand, the hero can also symbolize the suffering of the people and its continuing sacrifice. Trumpeldor’s missing arm, like Samson’s blindness, invite empathy and compassion alongside admiration and, thus, identification as well. On the Palestinian side, Mohamed A-Dura, the boy who was killed (according to the Palestinian version, which some question) on 30 September 2000, at the beginning of the second *Intifada*, turned into the ultimate *shaheed* (martyr) of the Palestinians, through stories, songs, monuments, and stamps (Auerbach with Lovenstein, 2010).

**What?** The central plot of the national narratives turns on the existential war of the two sides. In each of the above examples, as in other national narratives, the narrative tells of a glorious victory – usually miraculous as well – that was achieved with the intervention of God. Alternatively, it might tell of a humiliating defeat on “our” side, the side that is right, brave, and heroic, at the hands of the other side, which is murderous and rose up to destroy “us” with no justification.

**Why?** The answer to this question matches the expectations of attribution theory, which actually relates to the individual, but the postulates of which seem applicable to the collective as well, all the more so in the case of a collective

engaged in a conflict over identity. The attribution theory postulates that in such a case, the sides will act as follows: each side will attribute its good deeds – peace initiatives, release of prisoners, etc. – to internal factors such as the pursuit of its own inherent sense of peace and justice, while negative acts – the killing of children, terrorist attacks, targeted killings, etc. – will be attributed to external factors and usually to the enemy, as it is the enemy, in its wickedness and aggression, that forced us to act this way out of self-defense. This pattern is reproduced in inverse form with relation to the enemy: its seemingly good deeds, such as a cease-fire initiative, result from constraints such as military inferiority or pressure from the superpowers, while its atrocities are the natural result of its inherent baseness.

The questions of time (When) and place (Where) are also subject to this binary pattern:

**When?** When the event took place is not just a point in time on the calendar; rather it is a mythical point in time that links what happened “in those days” to “these times.” For both parties in a conflict over identity, time undergoes a process of “collapse” (time collapse) in which “the interpretations, fantasies and feelings about a past shared trauma commingle with those pertaining to a current situation” (Volkan, 1997, p.35). Trumpeldor is the successor of the heroic Samson, Judas Maccabeus, and Bar-Kochva. Just as Samson reached the peak of his heroism alongside the peak of his inferiority – his blindness – while making his declaration: “Let me die with the Philistines,” so too Trumpeldor the amputee declared upon his death: “It is good to die for our country.” The two mythical declarations embody the ethos of sacrifice by which the Jewish people are to be educated in light of its continuing suffering and military inferiority in the face of enemies bent on its destruction. From the Israeli-Jewish angle, the Arab rioters whom Trumpeldor fought are the symbolic successors of the Philistines, the Greeks, and the Romans, who sought to eliminate the Jewish people physically and culturally. Likewise, the Jews’ “invasion” into the Land of Israel/Palestine is compared in the Arab world to the Crusaders’ invasion. Then as now, this invasion is expected to conclude with the glorious victory of the Arabs over their enemies from the West.

**Where?** Where the event took place is not a meaningless geographical point; rather it is a “place of legend” charged with historic connotations that illustrate the

age-old ties to the homeland. The dispute over names of places *within* the Land of Israel/Palestine and *over* the name Israel/Palestine itself echoes the dispute over the link between the place and those who fight for and over it while making use of the national narratives that have come to be tied to this place.

The national narratives are intended to unite members of the collective and instill them with the values embodied in the meta-narrative. The history taught in Israeli schools draws on identity-forming narratives from various sources, starting with the Bible and its heroes, through the myths of the Second Temple (Judas Maccabeus, Bar-Kochva, El'azar Ben-Yair), to the period (skipping over 2000 years of Diaspora), before the founding of the state (such as Trumpeldor, Hannah Senesh, Mordechai Anilevich), and concluding with the heroes of the Israel-Arab wars. These narratives embody the basic values of heroism, sacrifice, daring, and love of the people and the land, without which it would be hard for the people to survive the existential war against its enemies.

The recurring and repeated story of the national narrative is intended not only to establish the people's belief system, but primarily to infuse these beliefs with emotions that motivate action of the sort that is needed for defense of the people and the homeland: admiration, identification, aspiration to emulate, and a powerful motivation to belong to the community and to adopt its values (Oren and Bar-Tal, 2004).

It is worth noting that the jingoistic, closed, and coherent national narrative described above is an "ideal type" in the Weberian sense of the term. The fit between the ideal type and reality is constantly shifting. The veracity, meaning, and operative force of the meta-narrative and the national narratives are subject to constant debate among various sectors of the community. Within what is known as the "nationalist right" camp, there are those who usually see the national narratives as solid historical facts that must be recalled and retold to the youth in order to reinforce belief in the righteousness of the cause – certainly against those perceived as enemies who threaten the people's very existence. Among the academic and literary elites, in contrast, there are usually those who call for a "softer" reading – or even opposite reading – of one's own narratives, alongside awareness of the other side's narratives. The regarding of biblical and historical stories as myths worthy of review and research (Ohana and Witrich, 1996) implies the possibility of casting doubts on the absolute veracity of the national narratives

and sparks a debate on the issue. Those who dig into the historical foundations of the Jewish meta-narrative (Grinberg, 2000; Zand, 2008) are at odds with the representatives of Zionist orthodoxy (Eisenstadt, 2004; Shapira, 2009), and so the debate continues.

Nonetheless, the academic debate about national myths and narratives has not permeated all levels of society. As long as the people continues telling itself – through prose, poetry, and drama – the national narratives that support its national meta-narrative, the latter will continue to withstand all challenges. Even if subversive versions about “what Trumpeldor really said” have produced cracks in the shell of the accepted narrative, these are not enough to dismantle the core that has been instilled in the people’s consciousness through more than 30 poems and songs (Tahar-Lev and Naor, 2003, p. 74) that glorified the Galilean hero and turned him into the ultimate representative of the Zionist ethos.

The narratives are subject to the influence of the “zeitgeist” (spirit of the time). Modernism displaces memory generally, and national memory specifically, in favor of imagination, creativity, sobriety, and criticism. Orthodox reiteration of narratives from the past is considered old-fashioned and reactionary. Modernism and post-modernism meet in the realm of doubt, which seeks to question existing truths and undermine them, whether in order to find a new truth (modernism), or to show that there is no absolute truth (post-modernism). The further along that societies progress from modernism to post-modernism, the less willing they are to exalt the stories of the past, and thus their doubt about the truth of these stories grows. It follows from this that the greater the synchronization of progress towards post-modernism between two nations engaged in a conflict over identity, the greater their chances of drawing nearer through recognition of the other’s narratives and willingness to accommodate them alongside their own narratives or within them. Conversely, if only one side shows willingness to doubt and critique its own myths and to recognize the narratives of its rival, while the other continues to buttress itself behind its national myths and to use them in order to establish its identity by way of absolute denial of the other’s narratives, then the chance of their drawing nearer on the basis of mutual incorporation of narratives decreases.

Globalization, the essence of which is exchange of material and symbolic products among companies and nations throughout the world, is also likely to

contribute to the softening and loosening of national narrative boundaries. In contrast to the past, there is no problem of real-time knowledge today. Each side to a conflict can learn the other side's narratives with respect to every development in the conflict. Moreover, the cumulative knowledge enables both sides to realize how similar in structure their narratives are, even if they contradict each other in content, and the extent to which each side tells itself that it is right and the other is wrong. This knowledge could lead to understanding and empathy, thus lowering the walls of ethnocentrism and hatred behind which each side fortifies itself. At the same time, globalization carries the risk of obscuring the uniqueness of each society and culture. Even a people whose national-cultural identity is grounded and solid will have concerns about assimilation through globalization, which most see essentially as "Americanization," and try to handle it by returning to their roots. In France, for example, the law states that 60% of television programs must be locally produced (Zuckerman, 1999, p. 85).

If this is the reality in western European countries – whose national identities have been consolidated over the course of hundreds of years and who could perhaps allow themselves the permissiveness of post-national globalization – the fear of cultural assimilation is all the more powerful among Islamic nations that are trying to revive past glory (Antonius, 1938; Lewis, 2004, 2006). It would appear that the more the collective is preoccupied with establishing its national identity and with the need to consolidate it, the greater its belief in the exclusive righteousness and justness of its national narratives. Similarly, the greater the belief in the exclusive truth of its national narratives, the more these play a strong and central role as barriers to resolution of the conflict over identity between the warring nations.

In a conflict over identity, at least one side cultivates its own national narratives and does not tolerate any questioning of their force and validity. These narratives serve to strengthen the national ethos and to educate the young generation to be prepared to fight and even sacrifice their lives for this ethos. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is a double conflict over identity (each side denies the national identity of the rival), there is no symmetry in the stages of the identity-building process between the two sides. The Palestinians are in an earlier stage of their identity-building and very much need solid, unifying national narratives in order to fortify their meta-narrative. But neither has the Israeli-Jewish side fully

come to terms with its identity, which is threatened by a multitude of schisms. The asymmetry in the balance of power between the two nations intensifies the need for national narratives to compensate each side for its weakness in relation to the other. The Palestinians' sense of humiliation as a conquered people (in the territories captured in 1967) or as second-class citizens (in the State of Israel) drives them to try to compensate by cultivating narratives about past heroism in the face of current victimization. The Israeli-Jewish side as well – in its double stance as an occupier and as the target of threats from the Arab and Islamic world, to which the Palestinians see themselves as belonging – seeks remedy in stories of the past in which glory and victimhood are inextricably intertwined.

On the face of it, therefore, it would appear that the conflict over identity is caught in a vicious cycle: the meta-narratives of the two sides are consolidated and contradictory belief-systems. The collision between them is increasing as more and more national narratives are accumulated to illustrate and intensify the meta-narrative and infuse it with new blood (literally and figuratively). Nonetheless, there have been prolonged, violent conflicts that were resolved in one way or another, usually on the basis of political and principally economic interests, though also on the basis of an understanding that progress is not possible without addressing national consciousness, collective memory, and narratives. The key mechanism for furthering such a process is the incorporation of narratives through joint writing of history books.

## **The Incorporation of Narratives as a Means of Conflict Resolution**

Incorporation of the other's narratives is a complex process that requires awareness of the other, recognition of its legitimacy – that is, the right of the other side to tell the story from a different angle – and, finally, integration of the other's narrative in the national narrative or alongside it – in particular by means of joint history books (Bar-Tal, 2007; Dwyer, 1999).

The Chinese and Japanese, for example, undertook such a process in relation to the “Nanking massacre,” which had been a stumbling block to the closer relations that the two countries sought for political and economic reasons. China expected

that Japan would acknowledge its culpability for the slaughter of approximately 400,000 Chinese, but Japan refused to do so for a long time. In 1972, after years of silence, a public debate began in Japan regarding Japanese war crimes after the newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* published a series of articles about crimes against the Chinese, including the “Nanking massacre.” The massacre returned to headlines in Japan in 1982 after the Japanese Ministry of Education erased all mention of it in high school textbooks, claiming that there was insufficient historical evidence of its occurrence (Nanking Massacre, Wikipedia).

Even though political and economic relations between the two countries had improved greatly since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1972, public opinion in China shifted in the opposite direction. Strong anti-Japanese demonstrations erupted from time to time. Ninety-three percent of Chinese surveyed in public-opinion surveys said that Japan’s stance in relation to its past – that is, the denial of its atrocities – is the principal obstacle to improvement of Chinese-Japanese relations and that the first association that comes to mind when they hear the name Japan is “Nanking massacre” (Qiu, 2006, p.41).

The governments of China and Japan understood that political and economic cooperation was not enough to eradicate the mutual hostility and that resolution of the conflict required them to come to terms with history and specifically with the history of the conflict as each side related it to itself. Historians from both sides gathered, under instruction of their governments, to study this history. They focused on the elements of the conflicting narratives, particularly with respect to the events of Nanking. Eventually a new version of the story was published, one that presented each side with its own version as well as that of the other side (Chinese, Japanese, 2007).

Germany and France took an advanced step in the direction of conflict resolution by learning and including both narratives in April, 2008, when they presented their high schools with history textbooks entitled *Europe and the World from the Congress of Vienna Until 1945*. This was the second history book written cooperatively by German and French historians (the first one surveyed the period after 1945). Its importance lies in its engagement with the profound dispute that continued over the course of three bloody wars, which claimed a massive number of casualties on both sides. As it turned out – perhaps surprisingly – the points of dispute in the writing of the book were not many (Rollot, 14.4.08).

The French-German initiative served as a model for emulation by the governments of Poland and Germany, which, in June of 2008, announced their decision to jointly compose history textbooks for high school students as a step towards improving relations between the historical enemies (Poles and Germans, 2.6.08). The challenge facing these two countries is much more difficult because the wounds of past hostilities between Poland and Germany run very deep. Poland was brutally conquered by the German army and, unlike France, was divided and deprived of its independence. Its citizens were made serfs, and many were expelled, killed, or tortured. Poland began to reestablish its national and independent identity only after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. An important element in the formation of a new Polish identity was the embracing of a collective memory in which relations with Germany occupied a central, and negative, role. One form of proof of these difficulties was the great tension between the two countries surrounding the Germany suggestion to establish a monument for Germans who had been expelled from Europe – including Poland – after World War II. This suggestion gave rise to Polish concerns over the possibility of demands for compensation. The Poles were no less offended by the attempt to compare the suffering that they had inflicted on the Germans with the suffering that the Germans had inflicted upon them. In other words, the Poles are unwilling to relinquish their sense of victimization, which is a central element in the formation of the national ethos of nations that have a history rife with chosen glories and, all the more so, chosen traumas (Volkan, 2004).

Another example of the importance of national narratives – both as barriers and as enablers of the resolution of a conflict over identity – is the agreement signed between Armenia and Turkey in Zurich on 11 October 2009 establishing diplomatic relations and opening the borders between the two. There is no doubt that economic interests (especially on Armenia's part) and political interests (Turkey's desire to join the European Union and strengthen its stance as a regional power) drove the two countries to resolve the conflict that had been dividing them for close to 100 years. Both sides understood, however, that complete resolution would not be possible without addressing historical memory. At the heart of this memory are the conflicting narratives of the two sides regarding what Armenia views as genocide – the planned slaughter of a million to a million and a half Armenians by the Turks – and what Turkey views as a legitimate act of war during World War I. Political and territorial confrontations (the struggle over

the region of Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Turkey's ally) did indeed serve as the principal justification for the closing of borders between the two countries and did create tension, but the bitter war over the historical "truth" regarding the events of 1915 was the main stumbling block to resolving relations between the two. Because of its relative weakness, Armenia was forced to relinquish its demand that Turkey recognize the genocide and take responsibility for it, but Turkey was forced to agree to the formation of an international commission of historians to examine the issue. Neither the meta-narrative regarding identity nor the territorial rights of either side will be explored here, but the narratives of each side in relation to the specific event over which their opinions differ serve to fan the flames of the conflict. A final resolution of the conflict between Armenia and Turkey depends very much on the readiness of Armenian public opinion, particularly in the Diaspora, to regard the mechanism of a commission of historians as an adequate response to their demand for investigation into the "truth."

These examples illustrate the centrality of national narratives as barriers to the resolution of conflicts over identity, as well as the possibility of overcoming these barriers by both sides' recognition of the importance of coming to terms with conflicting national narratives and through their efforts to include the other side's national narrative in their own or alongside it.

It is important to understand that, in all of the abovementioned examples, the rival parties had made significant progress in resolving the conflict between them before they approached the process of embracing contradictory narratives. In contrast, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is still very far from a solution or settlement. Many fundamental issues still stand between the two sides to this conflict, and the perception of existential threat fans the flames between the rival sides. It would appear that the chances of joining the circle of states that have resolved their dispute by, among other means, incorporation of narratives are slim. Next we will present the difficulties in incorporation of narratives within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and will further refine the distinction between the meta-narratives and the national narratives in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## **Narratives and Meta-Narratives in the Israeli (Jewish)-Palestinian Conflict**

Researchers of the narrative aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict emphasize the deep divides between the two sides' narratives and conclude that these divides cannot be bridged (see, for example, the collection of papers in Rotberg, 2006; Scham, Salem, and Pogrund, 2005).

It would seem that this decisive conclusion results from a blurring of the distinction between meta-narratives and narratives. Salem, Scham, and Pogrund place what they term "the traditional Israeli narrative" against the "traditional Palestinian narrative" and, in the process, they confuse the principal tenets of the two sides regarding basic questions of identity, rights to territory, and victimhood (hereafter termed "meta-narratives") with the two sides' versions of historical events that took place during the course of the conflict, which I have termed "national narratives" (Scham, Salem, and Pogrund, 2005: 1-12).

Bar-On also explores the possibility of bridging the Palestinian and Israeli narratives and claims that it is impossible (Bar-On, 2006, p. 143). In contrast, Bar-On and Sami Adwan are slightly more optimistic. Their cautious prediction regarding the possibility of bridging the narratives is based on their experience with meetings between Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish teachers who sought to present the national narratives of both sides to their students (Bar-On and Adwan, 2006). It should be emphasized that although the two researchers did not distinguish between the terminology of national narratives and meta-narratives, they focused on narratives – that is, stories surrounding difficult events in the history of the conflict – and they ignored the meta-narratives. The meta-narratives are the key article of faith of the two sides and the foundation of their existence, their identity, and the internal and external legitimacy behind their demands. The need of each side to fortify its meta-narrative and cultivate solidarity around it is so great that the chances of agreeing to any change within it are miniscule to nonexistent. The national narratives, in contrast, for all of their importance, are slightly more flexible, and it is possible to bring the two sides' positions closer to each other in some of their aspects (those linked to the five elements detailed above). Next I will present the principal points of the two sides' meta-narratives in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Palestinian meta-narrative received its first formal expression in the framework of the “Palestinian National Covenant” (Harkabi, 1971), which provides clear answers to key questions comprising the meta-narrative of collective entities struggling over their self-definition and for their rights in the face of an enemy who denies them. The question of “*who are we and who are they?*” receives a clear response: the Palestinians are the people who have been residing for generations in Palestine, and the Jews are a religious, not national, group with an executive body in the form of the Zionist movement. Zionism is a fanatical, racist movement in its essence, aggressive, expansive-colonialist in its goals, and fascist-Nazi in its methods. Israel is the tool of the Zionist movement and a base for global imperialism.

The question of *links or ties to the territory* is also beyond any doubt: only the Palestinians have a right to the homeland of Palestine, and from this follows the right of return of all Palestinians who were expelled from the homeland as well as the right of their descendants. The Jews who resided permanently in Palestine until 1947 are permitted to live there as Palestinian citizens without any national rights.

International decisions that recognize the right of the Jews to a homeland in Palestine (the Balfour Declaration, the Mandate, the partition proposal), the Zionist movement, and the State of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories, including the territory of Israel as per the 1967 borders, turned the Palestinians into a **victim** of aggression within territory that belongs to them and for which they therefore have a right to fight against the perpetrators of injustice. The armed struggle for the liberation of Palestine, which is grounded in these rights and is intended to repel the Zionist and imperialist invasion of the Arab homeland, is a pan-Arab national duty.

On 15 November 1988, the Palestinian National Council announced the “Palestinian Declaration of Independence.” This declaration was formulated by Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish, and its answers to the three fundamental questions of the meta-narrative (Who are we and who are they? What is our link and what is their link to the territories in dispute between us and them? Who is the victim in this conflict?) are identical to the answers provided by the Palestinian Covenant, but with greater emphasis on the Palestinians as victims. Unlike the Covenant, the Declaration regards the 1947 proposal in a positive light,

even though it denies the Palestinians their right to all the territories of Palestine, if only because it provides international legitimacy to the Palestinian demand to establish a sovereign state in Palestine. Recognition of the State of Israel is implied by recognition of the partition proposal but is not explicitly stated. Although the Declaration does not explicitly call for war against the Zionist entity, it does express admiration for the PLO for its management of the just struggle of the Palestinian people against those who deny its rights and slaughter it (Text of the Palestinian Declaration of Independence – Algiers Declaration 1988). The Declaration was not intended to replace the Covenant and does not repeal its main paragraphs.

As part of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinians were required to repeal those paragraphs of the Palestinian Covenant that contradict the Oslo Accords, in particular the central paragraph, which denies recognition of the Israeli nation and declares that the Palestinians have the exclusive national claim to the Land of Israel/Palestine. The question of whether the Palestinians honored their promise to do this is not the subject matter of this article. In any event, no alternative document that would clearly present the foundations of the Palestinian meta-narrative, for both internal and external purposes, has been formulated to date.

The initiative to redraft the basic principles of the Palestinian meta-narrative actually came from Israel's Palestinian citizens, who composed the documents known as "The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel" (detailed below). The documents are a challenge of sorts by the Palestinians within Israel to the Palestinian Authority for having, since the signing of the Oslo Accords, ignored them and neglected its duty to advance the national rights of Palestinians, whoever and wherever they are. Paradoxically, this initiative expresses, on the one hand, frustration and disappointment of Palestinians who are citizens of Israel over what they regard as a policy of exclusion and detachment on the part of state authorities towards the Arab population, as well as, on the other hand, a growing confidence in their position as a collective with rights, demands, and especially the option of making their voices clearly heard on fundamental matters of Palestinian identity that touch upon not only Palestinians living in Israel but also *all members of the Palestinian nation, whoever and wherever they are*. In addition to functioning as a basis for negotiations with Israeli authorities regarding the private and collective rights of Israel's Palestinian citizens, the "Vision" documents are a

clear conceptual and ideological manifest that no initiative for resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can ignore, and for this reason they matter as a barrier to resolution of the conflict.

The “Vision” documents include a piece written by Dr. Yousef Jabareen, “An Equal Constitution for All?” and published by the Mossawa Center in November, 2006; “The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel,” published by the National Committee for the Heads of the Arab Local Authorities in Israel in December, 2006; a proposal for “The Democratic Constitution,” published by the Adalah Center in February, 2007; and “The Haifa Declaration,” sponsored by Mada al-Carmel – The Arab Center for Applied Social Research in Haifa – published on 15 May 2007, the date marked throughout the Arab world as the day of the *Nakba*, and deliberately designed in the format of the State of Israel’s Declaration of Independence.

In response to the *question of identity*, the “Vision” documents define the Palestinians as the original inhabitants – “a homeland minority” (Haifa Declaration, 2007, 14) – in the place over which Jewish Israelis claim ownership. By presenting this claim, the authors of the “Vision” have sharpened the identity dimension of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Jews in the State of Israel, in contrast, are not recognized in these documents as part of a people with a national history and a distinct, solid identity. In the Haifa Declaration, unlike the Vision document, there is indeed mention of a “Jewish people” (Haifa Declaration, 2007, 7; 14) but without any historical context or aspect of continuity. The Jewish state is “the outcome of a settlement process initiated by the Zionist-Elite in Europe and the west and realized by Colonial countries contributing to it and by promoting Jewish immigration to Palestine, in light of the results of the Second World War and the Holocaust” (Future Vision, 2006, p. 9).

With respect to the question of the *ties to the territory*, the various founding documents unequivocally define Palestine as the exclusive historical homeland of the Palestinian people and deny any authentic historical ties of the Jewish people to this piece of land. The Jews’ link to the place is by force of colonialism and conquest. All Jewish settlement activities in “Palestine” are nothing other than judaization of the Palestinian land and erosion of the Palestinian history and civilization (Future Vision, 2006, p. 10).

The Haifa Declaration defines the Palestinians as the ultimate *victims* of the conflict and of the State of Israel, which “carried out policies of subjugation and oppression in excess of those of the apartheid regime in South Africa” (Haifa Declaration, 2007, 13). The formative “victimizing” event was the *Nakba*, during which many of the Palestinian people were murdered; a majority of the people was uprooted from its homeland, and the remaining became a minority with citizenship that is “without the genuine constituents of citizenship” (Haifa Declaration, 2007, 14).

Palestinian acts of resistance, such as the events of Land Day in March 1976 and the Jerusalem and al-Aqsa Day in October 2000 (the violent eruption of the second *Intifada*), are mentioned under the heading “milestones traversed in our collective journey, which served to strengthen our identity,” and they are a source of “pride” (Haifa Declaration, 2007, 9).

The Holocaust is a “catastrophic event, which concerns the whole of humanity” and is what grants the Jews the title of victims and earns them empathy (“We sympathize with the victims of the Holocaust”), but its main role, in the eyes of the drafters, is in “exploiting [it] ... in order to legitimize the right of the Jews to establish a state at the expense of the Palestinian people” (Haifa Declaration, 2007, 15-16).

The treatment of the three key questions – identity, territorial ties, and victimization – forms a solid, coherent meta-narrative that is diametrically opposed to the Jewish-Israeli meta-narrative as the latter is expressed in the Declaration of Independence.

The first words of the Declaration of Independence weave together the answers to the two most important questions of the meta-narrative: who we are and what our ties are to the land of our dreams: “The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national ... significance.” The opening words contain three various mentions of the national character of the people of Israel: “people,” “statehood,” “national[ity].” This is the blunt response to anyone who casts doubt, or might cast doubt, on the veracity and force of the Jewish answer to the question “who are we?” The ties between the Land of Israel and the people of Israel are reinforced by the following sentences: “After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with

it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom. Impelled by this historic and traditional attachment, Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland. In recent decades they returned in their masses....” These historical ties between the people and the land are confirmed by international recognition and documents such as the Balfour Declaration, the Mandate of the League of Nations, and the United Nations resolution of 1947 (Declaration of Independence, 1948).

The motif of *victimization* is presented as proof of the need to find a national-territorial solution for the Jewish people in its land – the Land of Israel: “The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people – the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe – was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem.... Survivors of the Nazi holocaust in Europe, as well as Jews from other parts of the world, continued to migrate to Eretz-Israel ... and never ceased to assert their right ... in their national homeland.” Nonetheless, according to this document, the Holocaust was not the reason for the establishment of the state in the Land of Israel. It was “*another* clear demonstration” (emphasis added) of the need for a territorial solution for the ancient nation that had been exiled from its land. In this way the Holocaust reinforces – but does not justify – the age-old claim of the people of Israel, not once abandoned throughout the course of history, to re-establish its sovereignty in its land.

The Declaration’s drafters avoided placing blame on the Arabs or the Palestinians and were content with intimation: “We appeal in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months – to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.” Although the Palestinian residents of Israel are not granted distinct national recognition and not referred to as “Palestinians,” they are not denied national membership in the “Arab nation,” to whom full and equal citizenship in the state of the Jewish people is promised.

The question of the extent to which Israel upheld the commitments it made in the Declaration of Independence is not the subject matter of this article. Our intent is to examine, side by side, the two nations’ founding documents, which include the meta-narratives of each.

As we see, the answers provided by the Declaration of Independence to the key questions contradict what is written in the founding documents drafted by the Palestinian citizens of Israel. The importance of the founding documents derives from their having been deliberately designed as a meta-narrative response of the Palestinian people, throughout the world and within Israel, to the Zionist meta-narrative. The documents, which reflect a tendency to “converge inwardly,” are indeed directed primarily towards the Palestinian-Israeli population and even sparked many debates within this community, particularly on social issues affecting the Palestinian population itself or the relations between it and the authorities in Israel (Rekheiss and Rudnitzky, Chapter 2, pp. 33-34). Nonetheless, there is full agreement among Palestinians, within and outside of Israel, regarding the principles expressed in the Vision documents, which are echoed in every negotiation towards a possible resolution of the conflict.

Founding documents such as these, which unequivocally present the articles of faith of a community engaged in a conflict over identity with members of another community, are usually grounded in a culture that includes formative beliefs and implicit assumptions about the “collective identity” of this group, as well as its motives, goals, and means of action. Among other things, the culture also defines its threshold of vulnerability and its reactions to suffering and catastrophe.

The Palestinians see themselves as part of the Arab nation, which some characterize as a *shame-based culture* shaped by a heightened sensitivity to humiliation and to offense to honor at both the personal and the collective level. The humiliation of the Arab nation by the West – from the Crusader conquests, through Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt, and up to the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916 – forms part of a live memory, painful and embarrassing, sparking hopes for revenge against Israel, which is regarded as the ultimate agent of the West in the region (Fattah & Fierke, 2009).

The media generally, and Al-Jazeera in particular, channel the humiliating images from various fronts into every home. Pictures of Israeli soldiers on the land of “occupied Palestine” and pictures of Iraqi brethren being degraded by the Americans turn the historical memory into an experience of “here and now.”

The contrast between the Palestinian-Arab meta-narrative and that of the Jewish people is further fuelled by the Jewish people’s cultural affiliation with the Western (Judeo-Christian) world, steeped in a *guilt-based culture*. Members of

this culture cope with suffering and catastrophe in different ways than members of a culture of honor. While members of the *shame-based culture* will put the blame for their misfortune on the “other,” members of a *guilt-based culture* will search for the source of their failures in their own behavior and deeds, will try to cope with them through self-examination and retrospection, and will expect their rival to do the same. The differences between a culture of honor/shame and a guilt-based culture contribute to the communication breakdowns between these two cultures.

Additional foundations of the Jewish meta-narrative that deepen the divide between the nations are choice and covenant. A constant theme throughout Jewish tradition and the collective Jewish subconscious is the sense of choice and the faith in a special covenant with God. The covenant with God was formed in the days of Abraham and was sealed forever at Mount Sinai. Even if the people knew torment in the Diaspora, the pogroms, and the Holocaust, they are still promised redemption in the chosen land (Smith, 1999).

Admittedly, these inflated perceptions of national aggrandizement, which emphasize the elements of choice and covenant, are not predominant in the mainstream of Israel’s Jewish population and are to be found primarily among national-religious Jews. Along the continuum between the right-wing/national-religious extreme and the leftist/post-national extreme, a vigorous and often highly animated debate takes place with respect to the fundamental postulates of the Israeli meta-narrative.

On the Palestinian side as well, collective identity can take on various forms with different points of emphasis against a background of changing political and social contexts. Moreover, different expressions of the culture of shame and honor are subject to internal criticism in the documents themselves. The meta-narrative of the national Arab humiliation, however, has a strong foothold in diverse sectors of the Arab world, including the Palestinians. The acute sense of humiliation that the Palestinians experienced twice in 20 years (1948 and 1967) creates a powerful barrier to resolution of the conflict with Israel, which, in their view, bestowed upon them their greatest – and, in particular, their most humiliating – catastrophes.

The polar opposition between the “super-stories” of the Jews and the Palestinians and the central role of these stories in the reinforcement of both sides’

national identities do not allow for any compromise between them, certainly not at this stage of the conflict, which is still intense and bloody. Arguably, attempts to reconcile these meta-narratives will aggravate hostilities. Indeed, the effort undertaken by the “Israel Democracy Institute” to bring Jewish and Palestinian intellectuals together in order to formulate a charter laying out joint guidelines for coexistence between these two communities, based on incorporation of the essence of both their meta-narratives, concluded with disappointment on both sides and no agreement (Benziman, 2006).<sup>33</sup>

The disappointing results are not surprising. It is reasonable to expect that, under circumstances of a conflict over identity, each side will fortify itself behind its positions and buttress them in the face of the other side’s denial of its legitimacy. This claim is especially valid with respect to the Palestinians, whose efforts at building their collective-national identity began relatively late and are only now at their peak. Moreover, in contrast to the Jewish side, the Palestinians have not yet actualized their aspirations to statehood. In contrast, the Jewish-Israeli public – which is still dealing with problems of identity in the face of many divides, of which the national divide is only one – is better prepared for a “post-national” self-examination that tends towards tolerance of the meta-narrative of the “other.” Yet, the more the Jewish public is confronted with the Palestinian meta-narrative, which questions its very legitimacy (in the midst of continuous violence), the more it feels threatened and will, therefore, harden its stance and fortify itself behind its own national meta-narrative.

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<sup>33</sup> Between January 1999 and January 2001, 20 women and men, Jewish and Arab intellectuals with Israeli citizenship, gathered in the Israel Democracy Institute in order to try to formulate a charter that would define the relations between the majority and the minority populations in the state and their mutual relations. This was an exceptional effort: the participants shed all their “protective layers” and spoke from the heart about their self-identity, how they define their nationality and civic participation, and their expectations of their co-discussants. The participants struggled with fundamental questions touching on their ability to live together according to the definition of “citizens of the State of Israel.”

The discussions took place over the course of 17 meetings and focused on defining the identity of the state, on ways to find a common denominator among the experiences of Jews and Arabs as citizens, and on the chances of bridging the internal tension in defining Israel as a Jewish and Democratic state. The group also discussed proposals for legislative change to address the Arab minority’s expectations of improved standing, on the one hand, and preparedness to take on civic duties such as military service, on the other hand.

Nevertheless, it is possible to create discussion fora for engaging with specific narratives, a discussion that would deal with concrete events and be structured on the basis of answers to the question of the five W's mentioned above. Such efforts are undertaken from time to time where there is goodwill on the part of both sides. Thus, for example, the late Prof. Dan Bar-On from the Department of Behavioral Sciences at Ben-Gurion University and Prof. Sami Adwan from Bethlehem University initiated a project to compose textbooks for Israeli and Palestinian students to enable members of the two nations to learn the relevant and contradictory narratives of the formative events in their shared history, such as “the 1920-1921 riots or events” (in the Jewish narrative) vs. “the national uprising of 1920” (in the Palestinian narrative); “the 1929 pogroms” (Jewish) vs. “1929 revolt” (Palestinian); “the Great Arab Rebellion” (Palestinian) vs. “the 1936-1939 riots or events” (Jewish); “the War of Independence” (Jewish) vs. “the *Nakba* of 1948” (Palestinian), and likewise for the wars of 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982, the first *Intifada* in 1987, the Oslo Accords, and up to the start of the second *Intifada*. The meetings between the teams of teachers who tried to cope with the contradictions between the different narratives were not easy, but nonetheless they achieved their purpose. In contrast, the authorities on both sides rejected the books out of fear that such a far-reaching move would not be well received by the general public (Kashti, 8.4.07).

As we can see from the examples described earlier in this paper (Japan-China, Germany-France, Germany-Poland, Turkey-Armenia), the process of conflict resolution does not begin at the narrative level. All of the abovementioned examples required years of reducing tension and drawing closer on the basis of shared interests between the countries, as well as agreement – among elites as well as the general public – that the time has come for normalization and real peace. Only when these conditions are ripe is it possible to embark on a process of addressing the national narratives of the two sides.

As noted, the conditions are not yet ripe for resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A significant characteristic of the conflict, which distinguishes it from other conflicts, is its complex and multi-layered nature. On one side of the barricade is a state, and on the other side, a national entity lacking sovereignty. Some of the Palestinians are on “occupied territories” that are not even clearly defined. Although in Israel this term represents the territories that Israel

captured in 1967, the official positions of the Palestinians, as expressed in the abovementioned formal documents (the Palestinian Covenant of 1964, the Declaration of Independence of 1988, and the “Vision” documents of 2006-2007) and in statements of Palestinian leaders in all their negotiations with Israel, regard all the lands of the British Mandate, including the territory of the State of Israel preceding 1967, as occupied Palestinian territories. There is a large Palestinian Diaspora outside of the Middle East that includes many academics, such as the late Edward Said, and Walid Khalidi, who provide ideological support to the conflict and prevent it from fading away. Every compromise proposal put forward during talks between Israeli and Palestinian representatives is examined through the multitude of prisms of the Palestinian public in all of its variety and, indeed, of the Arab countries, which have a shared Arab nationality with the Palestinians and each of which also has its own interests, at times leaning towards compromise but more often towards aggravation of the situation. This complexity makes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict extremely difficult and predicates its resolution on a mixture of uncontrollable international, regional, and internal developments. On the other hand, the physical proximity between Israelis and Palestinians and the interaction between the rival populations – making the conflict so tangible and taking such high human and material tolls from both sides – are likely to spur the two nations to resolve the conflict. One of the ways – not necessarily the only or initial way – is through awareness of the national narratives.

Awareness of the other’s narrative can come from “above” – for example, a government decision – or from “below” – such as an independent initiative of the media in its many forms. It is worth recalling that the debate in Japan about war crimes against the Chinese – including the “Nanking massacre” – was sparked after a mainstream Japanese newspaper published a series of articles on the issue. Still, a media debate does not guarantee readiness for compromise. In-depth and accusatory investigative stories about events (national narratives) in the joint and bloody history of the two nations might have a “boomerang” effect of renewed fortification behind the national meta-narrative.

The media is usually regarded as inflaming conflicts because of its tendency to highlight “interesting” developments, such as war and violence, and to play down “boring” stories about reconciliation and rapprochement between enemies (Gilboa, 2000; Kempf & Luostarinen, 2002; Shinar, 2002). In contrast to the

values of immediacy, simplicity, and drama, which guide journalistic practice, a peace process is long, complex, and gradual in nature; thus an inherent tension exists between the two (Wolfsfeld, 2004; Wolfsfeld, Alimy & Kaliani, 2008). The phenomenon of talkbacks, which encourage emotional and unrestrained expression (Cohen and Neiger, 2007), further exacerbates the situation. Nonetheless, the media can also play a positive role in the lowering of hostilities by bringing the narrative of the “other” and recognition of their suffering to the attention of its audience. This happened in Northern Ireland, for example, where news agencies that followed the peace process helped to advance the peace (Wolfsfeld, 2001).

In addition, the media has become more “global” and less obligated to forms of national ethos (Liebes & Kampf, 2007). The process of surveying national narratives can help transcend the binary nature of identities and introduce other, transnational identities. Parents of children who were hurt by Palestinian terror could find a common language with parents of children killed in retaliatory acts of the IDF, and another type of narrative discourse, different from the official discourse, could develop between them.

The case of Mohammad al-Dura (September 2000) exemplifies the two faces of the national narrative, both as a barrier and as enabling the two sides to draw closer. Its significance as a barrier is clear: when the story, filmed by a Palestinian photographer and showing the boy Mohammad al-Dura killed in the arms of his frightened father, was broadcast on FRANCE 2, it became a mythic narrative in the Palestinian media. The Palestinian newspapers that had followed the developments at the Netzarim junction fully embraced the first version, as detailed on the French channel. According to this version, Mohammad and his father were innocently caught up in the “Shuhada junction” (martyrs junction) and killed in cold blood by IDF soldiers, who have been trained since early times to murder children. The Palestinian press completely ignored later revelations of the German reporter Esther Shapira and the French media analyst and businessman Philippe Karsenty, who questioned the credibility of the report to the point of determining that Al-Dura’s death was staged by Palestinians for propaganda purposes. The Palestinian media rebroadcast the original version and repeatedly described and praised the various acts of immortalization (naming of streets and town squares after the boy, printing of stamps and posters in his memory, and the like), which took place throughout the Arab world for the sake of preserving

Mohammad al-Dura's name as the ultimate *shaheed* (martyr). The boy became a symbol of Palestinian sacrifice in the face of Israeli brutality and occupation. He enabled every Palestinian father and mother to identify with Mohammad's parents and enjoy the material and symbolic compensation that victims deserve without themselves losing their children.

The Israeli talkbacks in response to internet news reports (Ynet, Walla!) formed the mirror image to this presentation. They reacted vehemently to the revelations by Karsenty and Shapira: web surfers expressed anger towards Israeli and world sources that supported the Palestinian narrative, including, for example, Major-General Giora Island ("the leftist general"), the Israeli public relations system ("fucked-up"), journalists and intellectuals ("Rappaport the leftist journalist"; "Meir Shalev, who represents the traitorous media"), and global media ("it's time to get off our backs"). They used the new version that questioned the IDF's role in killing the boy in order to support the Israeli meta-narrative that was "betrayed" by these sources, in their words. Reactions of the following nature appeared with great frequency: "it's just like the Palestinians to shoot him and blame us," "please don't let the facts confuse those who hate us," "Jews are always charged with blood libel," as well as: "The IDF is the most moral military in the world" (Auerbach with Lovenstein, 2010). These declarations were meant to tell the world, and to no less extent the public at home, that we the Jews, not the Palestinians, are the victims; that from the earliest of times we have been the victims of pogroms and blood libels, and that in this case as well we are the victims of Palestinian lies, propaganda and brutality.

On the face of it, it would appear that both sides have withdrawn behind their national narratives, reinforcing the opposing meta-narratives regarding national identity, territorial ties, and especially victimization. Yet, as noted, the Al-Dura story has another aspect: the traditional Israeli media (news stories in the papers Haaretz and Yedioth Ahronoth) had been prepared to accept the Palestinian version of the circumstances of Al-Dura's death almost in full, although this version threatened the Israeli meta-narrative and reinforced the Palestinian one. Even the investigations of foreign sources, such as Shapira and Karsenty, which could reinforce the national meta-narrative, were received in the Israeli media with silence. Moreover, one of the Israeli reporters (Smadar Peri, Yedioth Ahronoth) initiated an "identity breaking" meeting between Mohammad al-Dura's parents

and the parents of a Jewish girl – Bat-Chen Shahak – who had been killed in a terrorist attack in Tel Aviv. The parents were prepared to meet in the context of a shared identity of grief.

A meeting between grieving parents is a significant step in the breaking of barriers of mistrust between the sides. Grieving parents from both sides of the barricades who meet with each other are essentially saying: let us not forget what happened to us, but let us try to channel our painful memory in a positive direction. We will try to draw conclusions from this experience with respect to our similarities, not only our differences. In every story along the lines of Mohammad al-Dura or Bat-Chen Shahak, the heroes embody the two sides with their clashing collective identities: the Palestinian people and the Jewish people, who are fighting over the same territory and inflicting great suffering on each other. When victims from both sides meet, however, and discuss shared experiences of loss and sorrow, they can inspire understanding and empathy that transcend the national consciousness embodied in the meta-narrative, which pits them against each other.

In contrast, deliberate efforts to undermine the validity of the other’s meta-narrative will encounter fierce resistance. Questioning of the other’s meta-narrative is tantamount to eliminating the very basis of its existence. If and when people are ready, however, to come down from the symbolic peaks of the conflict – from the meta-narratives of both sides – to the narrative plains and to focusing on the plotlines of their story regarding the “what,” “who,” and “why” of the plot – then the story becomes more human and takes on universal significance. Then they will discover that on both sides there are fathers, mothers, and children whose world of experiences and senses is formed not only by their national identity but also by other aspects of their identity. Familiarity with the stories of the other side and awareness of its suffering are necessary cognitive stages in the process of reducing the conflict over identity. It can produce emotional empathy and lead to political action, such as compensation and apologies by leaders of both sides. Gradual progress of this sort on the path to conciliation will pave the way for a warm and stable peace between nations that have been engaged in a prolonged ethno-national conflict (Auerbach, 2009).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not yet ripe for the process described above. The Israeli media, with the exception of talkbacks, did indeed demonstrate

willingness to recognize the Palestinian narrative regarding Mohammad al-Dura, but the Palestinian media is holed up behind its story and its reinforcing implications for the Palestinian memory and meta-narrative. A clear illustration of this approach can be found in the Palestinian press's reporting on Mohammad al-Dura's mother's pregnancy and her quote: "the womb of Palestinian women is more powerful than the reactor in Dimona." In other words: we, Palestinians, are still not willing to see a woman and a mother as "just" a woman and a mother, of the sort that exists on the Israeli side as well. The Palestinian mother is first and foremost a womb, that is, a weapon that can compensate the Palestinians for their military inferiority in the face of the Zionist enemy.

## **Conclusions**

At the close of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, predictions about resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appear to be highly pessimistic. Attempt after attempt to bridge between the two sides through traditional diplomacy has failed. A realistic survey of the situation led the researchers Agha and Malley to assert that it might be impossible to move forward without a serious effort to come to terms with the past. In their opinion, it is perhaps time to deal with the painful chapters of the past on both sides of the conflict and to bridge between them. In our words: to try the path of national narrative incorporation (Agha and Malley, 2009).

National narratives are a "cornerstone" of nations engaged in a conflict over identity. Fortification through these narratives provides the strength and endurance to survive the long-standing, bitter, and bloody conflict between them. Nonetheless, we see that people who have been engaged in bitter and protracted conflicts have found a way to overcome the barrier. The governments of China and Japan, Germany and France, Germany and Poland, and, to a lesser extent, Turkey and Armenia have discovered that the path to conflict resolution requires examining conflicting national narratives and making an honest attempt to incorporate at least some elements of the other's narratives into their own. Is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ready for such narrative incorporation? The answer in this article is, unfortunately, no. Yet, alongside this pessimistic conclusion, there are also seeds of hope. This study argues that a distinction between meta-

narratives and national narratives could pave the way for incorporation of narratives and, consequently, for overcoming barriers of mistrust between the sides. The meta-narrative – that is, the super-story that embodies the national ethos of the warring nations – is not subject to bargaining or compromise. Questioning it exacerbates the sense of threat and the urge to defend national existence by taking a more extreme patriotic stance. It is possible, however, to examine narratives surrounding identity-forming stories about specific events by breaking the narrative down to its five basic components and trying to reach agreement with respect to all or some of them. Recognition of the other side's national narratives can take place – and in fact has taken place in recent years in parallel to escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – as a private initiative of academics, by way of less ethno-centric media coverage, or through the initiative of meetings between grieving families from both communities. These seemingly small steps can produce hybrid identities that break the binary nature of “us and them” and generate understanding and empathy for the other side. The path from here to the resolution of the conflict is long, but even “a journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step,” according to the Chinese. The Chinese-Japanese experience of incorporation of narratives as a means to overcoming a barrier between enemies, like the examples of other countries mentioned in this article, can help chart a course for the warring sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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