

Psychological Features Affecting the Israeli-Palestinian Relations and Thoughts about Facilitating Peace in the Middle-East

Arie Nadler

Contents

1. General Historical Background of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
2. The Social Psychological Level: Conflicting Narratives
 - a. The Narrative of Victimhood and Phenomenon of Competitive Victimhood
 - b. How can Competitive Victimhood be Ameliorated?
3. Final Thoughts on Conflicting Narratives in Cross-Cultural Perspective

1. General Historical Background of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict may be the oldest remaining protracted conflict on the world stage today. Although Jews and Arabs have lived together on the stretch of land between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean for centuries the relationships between these two communities turned conflictual when the national aspirations of these two peoples began to collide in the beginning of the 20th century. The aspirations of the Jewish people for self-determination expressed by the Zionist movement was met by similar development in the Palestinian community. The clash between the two national movements became more violent and seemingly insoluble with the problem of Palestinian refugees created with the establishment of Israel in 1948 and intensified in 1967 when thousands of Palestinians fled to neighboring Arab countries as a result of the 6 day war.

Without setting blame or guilt it can be said that after more than 100 years of violent clashes between the Jewish and Palestinian national movements the Jewish national movement, i.e., Zionism, created a prosperous and advanced Israel, while the Palestinians continue to be a stateless people many of whom live under Israeli Military Occupation. There is much more to be said about the historical roots of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But because I want to center my attention on some

social-psychological aspects of this conflict I will limit myself to this general review of its historical background.

The seeming insolubility of the conflict is perplexing. For close to 25 years the majority of us in the region know the shape of a hopeful peaceful solution: A two state solution that will satisfy Palestinian and Jewish peoples' aspirations for self-determination. Even more than that. We know the general contours of such a solution. Since the 1993 Oslo peace accords, through the Clinton peace plan in 2000 which was extended in the 2001 talks in Taba, and reaffirmed in the Geneva initiative in 2003 and the Arab-league Saudi based peace proposal the shape of things to come is clear. It consists of an independent Israel and an independent Palestine, that are separated by the 1967 borders with necessary land swaps, and a Jerusalem that is divided into an Israeli and Palestinian capital cities. If it so simple, one may justifiably ask, why is it so complex? If we know the shape of things to come, why not go there? Why continue fighting?

The answers are many and on different levels. I want to focus on one of these levels: The psychological barriers to a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

2. The Psychological Level: Conflicting Narratives

Conflicts between groups and nations are costly in terms of human lives, sufferings, and physical destruction. To deal with these costs people need to believe that their cause is just and legitimate and worthy to suffer for. Therefore, groups in conflicts develop narratives that justify their position and increase their members' readiness to endure the costs of conflict and continue to fight. Many of these narratives serve to legitimize the group's position and demonize the enemy (Bar-Tal, 2013).

Israeli-Palestinian relations have been shaped by such conflicting narratives from day one. Early Zionists spoke of the Jews returning to Palestine as a "people without a land returning to a land without people". This was of course erroneous. In the end of the 19th century, when the first Zionists began to resettle the land, Palestine had Palestinians living in towns and villages. This narrative continues to shape the attitudes of Israeli Jews today. A recent survey reports that 62% of Israeli Jews believe that "Palestinians are Arabs who settled in Palestine that belongs to the Jewish people" and that "they have no right in the land because they are not its original inhabitants". This narrative de-legitimizes the rights of Palestinians on the land. The Palestinian narrative is based on a similar de-legitimization of the presence of Jews on the same land. They claim that the

Jews have no real connection the land. They are viewed by Palestinians as Western colonists who came to exploit the indigenous peoples as they did all over Africa and Asia for centuries. Both narratives are based on fallacies. The land was not empty, and the Jewish people have historical roots in it for more than 3 thousand years. But, the adherence to these narratives together with denial of the adversary's narrative sustains the conflict. It bolsters the legitimacy of one's position as well as the illegitimacy of the enemy's.

These narratives go beyond telling the "story of the past". They also talk about the impossibility of peace in the future. Moreover, both sides have a negative mirror image of each other. They view the other as untrustworthy, cruel, violent and immoral, while viewing their own group as a beacon of righteous morality. In a recent survey 77% of Israelis regarded Palestinians as untrustworthy and 60% viewed them as having lower moral standards than other human societies. Although I have no comparable data on Palestinian image of themselves and Israelis, I am confident that these would be similar, or even more extreme, than those of Israelis.

I want to turn my attention now to the analysis of one particularly destructive narrative: That of "Victimhood" and the phenomenon of "competitive victimhood" and how it can be overcome.

a. The Narrative of Victimhood and Phenomenon of Competitive Victimhood

Let me introduce the concept of "victimhood" and "competition for victimhood" by a personal story.

A few years ago I taught a course on intergroup conflict in which a group of Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews met to discuss the relations between these two groups in the Israeli society. Some meetings were conducted in the shadow of violent events in the streets of Ramallah and Tel Aviv and some during more hopeful times when the prospects of a more peaceful future were in the air. But beyond these differences, one thing was always there: Each group claimed the role of victim to itself. Usually, around the second meeting Jewish participants would bring up 2000 years of Anti-semitism that culminated in the Jewish Holocaust, and the Palestinian participants would focus on their national disaster in 1948 (the Naqba), when Israel was created and many Palestinians became refugees. Each group put its pains and victimhood on display as if asking to convince themselves and others that they are the "Real Victims". It sometimes seemed like there was an empty chair in the middle of the room and each of the two sides was rushing to occupy the seat of the "The Real Legitimate Victim". They did not listen to

the other side's story. Empathy was not to be found. The only empathy was with the sufferings of one's group's (Nadler, 2012; Nadler & Shnabel, 2015).

This competition for victimhood is not unique to the Middle East. I heard the same conversations, with different content, when I had been in meetings with Serbs and Croats in the aftermath of the Balkan wars, and in dialogue groups between Cypriot Greeks and Cypriot Turks. I came out of these experiences thinking that (a) Groups in conflict work hard to adopt and maintain the victim's role, and (b) that this causes them to be blind to the other's pains and victimhood, prevents empathy and is a major stumbling block on the road to reconciliation.

What are the main psychological ingredients of victimhood? Our research and theorizing on interpersonal and intergroup contexts reveals 4 major characteristics of what we label as a "victim-state identity" (Berman, 2014). First is the preoccupation with with the victimization that the group had suffered. On the societal level this is expressed in the contents of the educational system, media channels and leadership statements. Past victimhood is given an even bigger voice during times of stress and under threatening conditions. The second characteristic is the constant demand that others recognize the group's victimhood. Beyond the preoccupation with victimization and demand for its recognition, victimhood is associated with lack of empathy for the suffering and pains of others. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, when Israelis view themselves mainly through the prism of being the victims of anti-Semitism and the holocaust they have no much patience for the Palestinians who suffer under military occupation only a few kilometers away. The fourth characteristic that our research reveals is that adopting a victim identity allows the displacement of aggression from the source of past pains and humiliation to a present day adversary. Thus, Palestinians who like other Arab societies may have suffered from centuries of exploitation and humiliation by the hands of the West divert their aggression onto the Israeli enemy who is taken to be the symbol of this past colonialist exploitation. This association of victimhood with displaced aggression and lack of empathy for others makes it a perfect psychological background for continued violence.

But the question of Why Victimhood is still unanswered. Generally speaking wearing the mantle of victimhood can be a negative experience for individuals and whole societies. It puts memories of pain, loss and powerlessness at center. So why do groups in conflict adopt it? The answer lies in the secondary gains that comes with being a victim. A major reason is the moral justification that comes with victimhood. Even when one's actions are abhorrent and immoral, victimhood exonerates the actor from guilt and

provides them with moral justification. It builds a wall between the group and the moral responsibility for its past wrongdoings against other groups (Shnabel & Nadler, 2015). When Israelis are preoccupied with being victims of the holocaust they can easily divert attention from looking at the lesser wrongdoings committed by them today. In one experimental study in social psychology it was found that when Jewish participants had been reminded of the Holocaust they felt less guilt over wrongdoings by Israelis against Palestinians than those in a control group. Similarly, Americans who had been reminded of the 9/11 terror attacks reported feeling less guilt about immoral actions performed by the US army in Iraq (Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). Moreover, victimhood absolves the group from the responsibility to do something to change the current violence to a more peaceful future. Victimhood spells passivity. When a nation adopts a victim identity the other side needs to make the first step forward. The sense of entitlement that comes with victimhood translates to the expectation that “If they make the first step forward- we’ll see”. The destructive nature of victimhood when both adversaries adopt this position needs no elaboration. The paralysis between two nations that compete for victimhood is a significant element for the protracted nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The destructive nature of competitive victimhood is not limited to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Other research indicates that attitudes of competitive victimhood expressed in sentences like “our group suffered much more than the other group during the conflict” are related to lower willingness to forgive the enemy and lesser readiness for reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia (Noor, Shnabel, Halabi & Nadler, 2012). This tells us something important about the destructive role of victimhood in conflicts between groups.

How do societies nurture victimhood-based identity in their members? Leadership has an important role in this. I’ll begin with an example from the Israeli side of the fence. We live in midst conflict. Under these circumstances leaders are needed to make sense of reality for people. To make sense of the threats that surround us Israeli leaders have, too often, evoked the holocaust and anti-Semitic persecutions as a basis for a victimhood-based collective identity. Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust are not imaginary events. They are real historical memories and force us to be vigilant in our relations with others. But when this turns into the only perspective through which we are told to view the world around us, it robs us of the hope of ever escaping from this past. When the holocaust is used by an Israeli leader as the rationale for pursuing policies in the present it implies that everything and anything is justifiable to prevent a future slaughter. By the same token, Palestinians who wear the badge of the Naqba as the defining element of

who they are, do exactly the same. In fact, when one is a powerless victim, even horrendous terrorism that targets children can be morally justified.

Leaders of victimhood whose eyes are set on the past cannot lead us to an existence that is free of the demons of this traumatic past. I am saying this as one who is committed to the right of Jewish people for a secure national home in their ancestral homeland. I also remind myself that the threats that surround us are not imaginary. The supreme leader of Iran calls publicly for the destruction of Israel and there are many in our region who would truly like to see us evaporate into thin air. What I am saying is that when a leader in a society like ours adopts a victimhood-based collective identity he or she implicitly tells listeners that the painful past determines the future. It is bound to repeat itself. These victimhood-based messages disregard the fact that we can and should mold our own future. A future-based hope is also an alternative. I think that the late Itzhak Rabin understood it.

b. How can Competitive Victimhood be Ameliorated?

In the last part of my talk I want to consider ways in which victimhood-based collective identity can be overcome. I shall consider 2 major routes that have been empirically tested: The first is the induction of Common Identity between the adversaries, and the second considers how acknowledging the other's trauma causes them to step off the podium of victimhood-based collective identity.

In many conflicts, especially ones that are costly in human lives and sufferings, both groups are victims and perpetrators of pain and humiliation. Research indicates that when Israelis and Palestinians are induced to view themselves as both being victims of the conflict, they are readier to reconcile. This is also true when instead of viewing the enemy as the exclusive author of aggression and violence they are reminded that both parties are perpetrators of wrongdoings against the other (Shnabel, Halabi & Noor, 2013).

Sharing a common identity with the adversary as a "victim" or a "perpetrator" implies a relatively complex world-view in which "we" and "they" are all human beings that suffer and inflict suffering during conflict. This perspective is radically different from the uni-dimensional world-view associated with victimhood-based collective identity where our group is the innocent victim and the enemy group is the guilty perpetrator. It is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with a complete evil. Reconciliation is more likely when group members replace their tendency for a victimhood-based social identity to a more complex view that allows them to view

themselves and the “enemy” as victim and perpetrator. Echoing a similar position Desmond Tutu (1999) wrote that victims will forgive their perpetrators only if they could understand them, and Staub (2006) has based his work on reconciliation in Rwanda on a similar premise. This work encouraged Tutsi victims to understand the conditions and situations that drove the Hutus to behave as they did and accept the fact that under similar circumstances they could have had also succumbed to the social pressures that their tormentors had yielded to, and committed atrocities against the other group. This is an “in vivo” demonstration of the way in which replacing the black-white view of entitled victims vs. guilty perpetrators, into a more complex understanding that we are all united by our frail humanity that includes the potential for being cruel perpetrators and powerless victims, can further reconciliation.

The above indicates that ridding oneself of the exclusivity of victimhood-based collective identity plays a constructive role in intergroup relations. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, the opposite is also true. Substantiating and acknowledging victimhood also paves the road to reconciliation. A good place to begin the development of this argument is by considering its opposite: The effects of denying the group’s victimhood. A recent real world example for this is the negative impact that the public policy of Iran’s denial of the holocaust has had on Israelis of all walks of life and political persuasions. It made the collective identity of Israelis as victims more entrenched and increased their fears and concerns. For the victim the denial of victimhood is a re-victimization.

In our research we have demonstrated the positive effects of acknowledgment of the group’s victimhood by the adversary, on conciliatory attitudes towards the enemy in a number of studies conducted with Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian participants. In this research Israelis learned that a *majority or minority* of Palestinians acknowledge the victimization of Jews during the second world war, and Palestinians learned that a *majority or minority* of Israeli-Jews acknowledge their sufferings as refugees. I shall briefly describe the results of one such field experiment. Israeli Jews had been told that they will participate in two unrelated studies. In the first they would read about the findings of a recent poll conducted among Palestinians, and in a second they will participate in a large survey on various aspects of social and political attitudes. In the ‘acknowledgment of victimhood’ condition participants learned that 73% of Palestinians believed that the holocaust had been a heinous crime against the Jewish people. In the ‘denial of victimhood’ condition participants learned that only 23% of Palestinians held this position. In a different context they had received the large survey questionnaire

which included over 100 questions covering different topics. Among these there were a few questions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its possible resolution. I shall briefly summarize the results. In general, the information that 73% of the Palestinians acknowledge the Holocaust as a heinous crime against Jews led Israelis to trust Palestinians significantly more and express more conciliatory attitudes towards them than when only 23 % of Palestinians had been said to hold this position. But of greater interest are the responses indicating that the acknowledgement of the holocaust by Palestinians led more Israeli Jewish participants to support a two-state solution based on *the return of Israel to the 1967 borders with a land swap, "partition of Jerusalem to an Arab and Jewish cities and the administration of the sacred places by a joint Israeli-Palestinian body"*, than in the low acknowledgment condition. A parallel experiment in which Palestinians-Israeli citizens had read a survey indicating that 73% or 23% of Israeli Jews, agree that the creation of Israel caused much sufferings to the Palestinians showed a similar pattern of findings. For example, when their sufferings as a stateless refugees had been acknowledged they were more willing to agree that in a final settlement Palestinians need to give up on their demand for an unlimited "right of return" of Palestinian refugees into Israel, than when it had been acknowledged (Hameiri & Nadler, 2017).

This sends a hopeful note. The simple gesture of acknowledging the sufferings of the adversary led to softening of conflict-related attitudes. It led participants to advocate more pragmatic attitudes. It seems to have allowed them to step from behind the wall of the victimhood-based identity that has been a destructive force in our region.

Acknowledging the adversary's victimhood is not a magic cure but may be an important first step to building trust. The mutual readiness to acknowledge the other's victimhood expresses people's success in freeing themselves from the shackles of their need to monopolize victimhood and the self-centered identity that such an attitude nourishes. Unfortunately, all too often leaders in our region, and elsewhere, view victimhood as a zero-sum competition. They seem to believe that acknowledgment of the other's pains detracts from their group's justice and power.

Let me summarize by going back to where I began. The intractable nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is anchored in conflicting narratives in general, and competitive victimhood in particular. Yet, this is not an unchangeable fate. There are ways we can use that will ease our move out of a traumatic past into a more hopeful future. Acknowledgment of the other's victimhood is such an important first step.

3. Final Thoughts on Conflicting Narratives in Cross-Cultural Perspective

Cultures have different mechanisms and processes regarding the reconciliation of conflicts between individuals and groups. For example, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict parties are not sensitive enough to the adversary's cultural context. Most Israelis are not familiar with ways to end conflict in Islamic and Arab cultures. They are not familiar with the nuances that exist between concepts such as Sulha, Hudna and Salaam. Although I am not an expert on Islamic or Jewish culture and philosophy, I think that the Jewish culture is less nuanced than the Islamic-Arab culture regarding the gradation that exists between war and peace. I think that the Jewish culture, and maybe Judeo-Christian tradition in general, has a more dichotomous view of the distinction between war and peace. Not being aware of such cultural nuances may exacerbate conflict rather than ease it.

On a more general level, the distinction in social psychology between independent and interdependent selves is relevant here. This distinction was originally conceptualized as representing the differences between people raised in Eastern cultures like Japan and those raised in Western cultures like the US (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Briefly stated the Western self is labeled as an "independent self" driven by individualistic motivations for personal success and self enhancement, while the Eastern self is an "interdependent self" that is said to be driven by motivation for group achievement and social harmony. This results in many behavioral differences. For example, the independent self seeks to make itself heard in the group even at the cost of conflict with others, and the interdependent self seeks to maintain social harmony even at the cost of suppressing own individuality. These, and similar cultural, differences have direct implications to the field of conflict and reconciliation. The meaning of reconciliation and related concepts such as victimhood, perpetrator's guilt, apology and forgiveness are culturally determined.

I choose to conclude with these general comments. Much of the social sciences, social psychology included, is a Western-based science. This has resulted in a relative lack of attention to differences in social behaviors across cultures. Yet, the practices of ending conflict are anchored in cultural values and beliefs. Viewing reconciliation processes through a cross-cultural perspective is increasingly important in today's globalized world where new information technology are narrowing geographical distances between people and cultures.

References

- Bar-Tal, D. (2013). *Intractable conflicts: Socio-psychological foundations and dynamics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Berman, A. (2014). Post-traumatic victimhood: About the aggressiveness of those who suffers. *Sihot*, 28, 1-9. [In Hebrew]
- Hameiri, B. & Nadler, A. (2017). Looking backward to move forward: : Effects of acknowledgment of adversary's victimhood on readiness to compromise for peace in a protracted ongoing conflict. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 43, 1-15.
- Markus, H.R. & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98, 224-253.
- Nadler, A. (2012). Intergroup reconciliation: Definitions, processes, and future directions. In L. R. Tropp (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of intergroup conflict* (pp. 291-309). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nadler, A., & Shnabel, N. (2015). Intergroup reconciliation: Definitions, instrumental and socio-emotional processes, and the needs-based model. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 26, 93-125.
- Noor, M., Shnabel, N., Halabi, S., & Nadler, A. (2012). When suffering begets suffering: The psychology of competitive victimhood between adversarial groups in violent conflicts. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 16, 351-374.
- Shnabel, N., & Nadler, A. (2015). The role of agency and morality in reconciliation processes: The perspective of the needs-based model. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 24, 477-483.
- Shnabel, N., Halabi, S., & Noor, M. (2013). Overcoming competitive victimhood and facilitating forgiveness through re-categorization into a common victim or perpetrator identity. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49, 867-877.
- Staub, E. (2008). Promoting reconciliation after genocide and mass killing in Rwanda and other post-conflict settings: Understanding the roots of violence, healing, shared history and general principles. In A. Nadler, T.E. Malloy & J.D. Fisher (Eds.). *The social psychology of intergroup reconciliation*. N.Y., N.Y.: Oxford University Press (pp. 395-422).
- Tutu, D. (1999). *No future without forgiveness*. London: Rider.
- Wohl, M. J. A., & Branscombe, N. R. (2008). Remembering historical victimization: Collective guilt for current in-group transgression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 94, 988-1006.