



The Palestinian Victimhood Narrative as an Obstacle to Peace

by Col. (res.) Dr. Eran Lerman

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 309, October 7, 2015

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The false Palestinian narrative of one-sided victimhood is a major hindrance to all efforts in the direction of Israeli-Palestinian peace. Global actors need to help the Palestinians move beyond wallowing in self-pity and rituals of bashing Israel, and towards difficult compromises with Israel.

The speech delivered by Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas at the UN General Assembly last week was proof, once again, that the Palestinian “narrative” of victimhood has become a threat to any practical prospect for peace. Palestinian leaders consistently advance an interpretation of history which is at odds not only with the facts but also with their people’s best interests.

At the core of Abbas’ plaintive narration is the notion of the Palestinians as innocent victims, whose right to statehood and independence has been taken away and brutally ignored for much too long. In this telling of history, the Palestinians deserve to be backed by coercive intervention, as soon as possible, so as to impose on Israel a solution which would implement their “rights.”

This would include implementation of “all relevant UN resolutions” – meaning UN General Assembly resolution 194 (the so-called “right of return”) as well as the Arab (mis)interpretation of resolution 242 as demanding withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 lines.

Moreover, this is translated into the demand, explicitly made by Abbas, for “international protection” (*Himayah Duwwaliyyah*); a term of uncertain practical import, yet indicative of the Palestinian reluctance to settle down to the hard work of striking a workable compromise with Israel.

There is no room, therein, for the long litany of Palestinian past mistakes and misjudgments. These are deftly expunged from the record. No mention can be made of the recent rise in Palestinian terror activities; no mention of the Palestinian decision to walk away from the framework advanced by US Secretary of State John Kerry; no word on Hamas' habitual shelling of Israeli civilian targets.

There is also no mention of the collapse of all past peace efforts; of the fact that only in 1988 did PLO (putatively) recognize Israel's right to exist. No reference is made to the long years of terror, including the brazen attack on the Olympic Games in 1972; no hint of their rejection of partition in 1947; no mention of Hajj Amin al-Husseini's relationship with Hitler and Himmler; no mention of the massacres of Jews in Hebron in 1929 and Jaffa in 1921.

In other words, all that the Palestinians have ever suffered – and their suffering was real enough, even if it pales in comparison with what has befallen the Syrian people and others in the region in recent times – is someone else's fault. It is Israel's fault, above all, and the world's.

Over the years, this narrative of victimhood has become so entrenched as to be an integral part of Palestinian identity. Yasser Arafat even had a way of insinuating that Jesus of Nazareth must have been a Palestinian, given his suffering. Acknowledgement of the tragic aspects of Palestinian history, including the "Nakba" (catastrophe) which befell them in 1948, has become commonplace in Israel and elsewhere.

However, references to the Palestinians' own role in the chain of events which led to their defeats remain quite rare – even more so at higher political echelons. This, in turn, feeds not only the sense of grievance and the ensuing justifications for violence. It is an active barrier to any practical compromise, and to reconciliation and peace.

Every once in a while, some attempts – few and far between – have been made to wean the Palestinian leadership and people off these habits of thought. Former US Middle East peace coordinator Dennis Ross recalls (in his 2004 book *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*) how President Bill Clinton unexpectedly wove this theme into his comments before the Palestinian National Council in Gaza in December 1998, "acting as much as a preacher and teacher as world leader."

He did so by invoking a speech made by the first Governor of Arkansas after the US Civil War, obviously a theme of great emotional import for a President who had served in the same position many years later, and was painfully familiar with the tragic history of the South. The words he quoted were pithy and direct: "We have all done wrong."

This may indeed have been, as Dennis Ross felt, "the best speech ever given on peace." But he is wrong to assert that "the Palestinians in the hall were visibly moved" – at least not by the Arkansas story. Those of us who watched that speech live noted the departure from the

prepared text – and felt that it actually fell on deaf ears. Its meaning did not seem to register with the Palestinian audience.

To speak of peace had become acceptable, but to cross the threshold into acceptance of *mutual* victimhood – and mutual moral responsibility – was beyond the Palestinian abilities, then as now. Still, the effort should have been persistently pursued. It was not.

This is not to say that Israel needs to endorse a strategy of counter-accusation, stressing Jewish victimhood. Despite all that has transpired since 2000 (or Oslo, or Madrid) the point is not that what was committed by the other side entitles us to dismiss the prospect of a negotiated agreement. Abbas seemed to take up this line of argumentation in his recent UN speech. But this is not Israel's best choice. Indeed, in his UN speech Prime Minister Netanyahu chose to emphasize that Israel's hand remains extended for peace, and that a breakthrough is still possible.

What needs to be done, however, particularly in disputation or in dialogue with those who are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause (whether it be the BDS crowd or more even-handed interlocutors) is to make the point, again and again that endorsement of the Palestinian narrative harms the Palestinians' own future.

By tagging the Zionist project as “colonialist” in nature (i.e., transient and perishable), those who do so help consign the Palestinian people, whom they purport to help, to an ideological, political and diplomatic cul-de-sac.

More than two years have passed since Kerry used a straightforward formula for success, as he tried to usher in, in July 2013, a new phase of negotiations. Kerry spoke of “reasonable compromises on tough, complicated, emotional and symbolic issues.”

Indeed, any sober assessment of what it would take to strike an Israeli-Palestinian deal inevitably leads to the clear understanding that painful but practical political compromises are required from both sides. Alas, this concept seems alien to many in the region, particularly to Palestinians; and the international community is not doing its part to help the Palestinians mature towards this realization.

The false Palestinian narrative of one-sided victimhood is a major hindrance to all efforts in the direction of peace. Global actors that want to help achieve peace need to assist the Palestinians in moving beyond wallowing in self-pity and rituals of bashing Israel.

** Col. (res.) Dr. Eran Lerman has joined the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies as a senior research associate. For the past six years, he served as deputy for foreign policy and international affairs at the National Security Council in the Israeli Prime Minister's Office. For 20 years prior to that, he held senior posts in IDF Military Intelligence, and also was Israel director of the American Jewish Committee.*

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family