



PERSPECTIVES

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A Truth-Telling Strategy to Advance Israeli-Palestinian Peace

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The US is usually thought to be biased in favor of Israel, even after its recent acceptance of UNSC Resolution 2334. But for many years, the US has been a big part of the reason why the diplomatic world accepts a false narrative of the Arab-Israeli conflict that harms Israel and makes it harder to achieve peace. Washington should move to a truth-telling strategy to dismantle the structure of false views that slander Israel and stand in the way of peace.

The widely accepted false narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is built on the following premises:

- Israel stole and now occupies Palestinian territory;
- there are millions of “Palestinian refugees” who have a “right of return” to Israel;
- Israel and the Palestinians have equal or comparable claims to Jerusalem;
- the Palestinian community and its leadership are ready to accept a two-state solution that will end Palestinian efforts to eliminate the Jewish state.

The US has consistently either supported or been unwilling to contradict these premises.

Palestinian leaders have an additional false view on which they insist when they speak in Arabic, and which they often proclaim to international audiences. This view is that the Jewish people did not, in fact, live in and rule parts of Palestine, including Jerusalem, for hundreds of years long before the beginning of Islam. While this false claim is not generally accepted diplomatically, UNESCO recently endorsed the fiction that the ancient Jewish temples were not built on the Temple Mount – a site

UNESCO calls “al-Aqsa Mosque/al-Haram al-Sharif” (Noble Sanctuary).

This Palestinian false history is not challenged by the US or by any other democracy. Had the US utilized an active strategy of telling the truth, the Palestinians would not have been able to continue to use their false picture to resist peace.

Rejecting false premises does not mean rejecting a peace agreement based on a two-state solution. The truth is compatible with a variety of ideas about what should be done in the future. Those who support a two-state solution can also support a strategy of telling the truth, as can those who doubt the feasibility of a two-state solution.

US policy has always been to ignore, and sometimes even to support, the falsity of these diplomatically accepted narratives in order to avoid contradicting the Palestinians and arousing the wrath of the Arab and Muslim nations. This longstanding American willingness to put reality aside to try to encourage negotiations has been unsuccessful thus far, and has become increasingly harmful.

For many years, US policy was to appear “even-handed” even at the expense of truth – that is, to be superficially even-handed between the arsonist and the firefighter, the terrorist and the victim of terror. Washington should switch to an even-handed policy of supporting truth, whether it comes from Palestinians or from Israelis: a policy of rejecting falsehood from both sides.

Of course, many statements are partly true and partly false, and often there are good reasons for different opinions about what is true. But there would be a great improvement in the diplomatic environment if the US took the lead in rejecting the most important and clearly false elements of diplomatic consensus.

A truth-telling strategy does not mean being absurd by always insisting on truth. The realities of human nature, and of politics and international relations, require substantial room for untruth. The US government cannot and should not act like an innocent who expects everyone to always tell the truth, and who views not doing so as evil.

The False Claim That There Is Such a Thing as “Palestinian Territory”

The biggest falsehood the US needs to expose is that there exists “Palestinian territory” that Israel refuses to “give back” because of its expansionist ambitions and purported security needs. It is controversial, rather than a falsehood, to say that justice and peace require Israel to turn over to a Palestinian state essentially all the land it seized in its defensive war in 1967. But there is a big difference between the *controversial* statement that the West Bank *should become* Palestinian territory as part of a peace agreement and the *false* statement that these areas *are now, or ever were in*

the past, Palestinian territory.

The distinction between saying that the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) *is* Palestinian territory and saying that it *should become* Palestinian territory is important for both the past and the future. For the past, the statement that the West Bank is Palestinian means that Israel stole land that was not Jewish and should “give it back.” For the future, the distinction determines whether Israeli proposals to provide land for a Palestinian state are returning stolen property or are offers to give up disputed land to which it has serious claims, in order to make a healthy peace with its neighbor. From the Palestinian point of view, it differentiates between an immoral submission to a thief who has more power and a wise compromise with neighbors who have overlapping claims of right.

A US truth-telling strategy would not ignore Palestinian assertions about “Palestinian land,” but would point out that the land in question is *disputed*. It is not Palestinian territory – despite US acceptance of a UNSC resolution that refers to it as such – because there is no Palestinian territory and never has been. Palestinians have never ruled or been sovereign over any land. This is an indisputable fact, not a question of policy or interpretation.¹

The West Bank is disputed territory: it is territory for which Israel has historic and legal claims based on League of Nations resolutions endorsed by the US government in the 1920s and confirmed in Article 80 of the UN Charter. The most recent sovereigns before the West Bank came into dispute were the British Mandate from the League of Nations to promote a Jewish national home (1922-48) and the Ottoman Empire (1517-1917).

Individual Palestinians certainly own much land in the disputed area, just as they own land in Israel, in the US, and elsewhere. But ownership of land by individual Palestinians does not make it Palestinian territory, either in Nablus or in New York.

Palestinian national rights to the land do not come from international law, but from a principle that has become widely accepted over the last century: that the people who live in an area should govern it. But this principle is not automatic and self-executing. Implementing it presents difficulties that require exceptions (or else east Boston would have become part of Ireland). Who the majority is in an area depends on how the borders are drawn. For example, Israelis are the great majority of the population of Area C in the West Bank – a Jewish majority that was not created by removing Arabs.

¹ The only recent and partial exception to this rule is Area A of the West Bank, which includes the Palestinian cities and neighborhoods where most Palestinians live, and which came under the rule of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1996/97. It would not be clearly false to say that Area A has become “Palestinian territory” although the Palestinians are not sovereign.

The Falsehoods about “Palestinian Refugees”

The second most important part of a new truth-telling strategy would be to expose how the Arabs have abused what they call the “Palestinian refugees” in order to maintain them as a weapon for destroying Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.

The politely accepted story in diplomatic circles is that there are nearly 5 million “Palestinian refugees” from 1948, more than a million still living in UNRWA “refugee camps” because Israel refuses to let them return home despite the “right of return” granted them by the UN General Assembly.

The reality is that only some 50,000 of the “Palestinian refugees” are refugees as the world defines the term. The others are descendants of refugees who have died. The Palestinian leadership and the Arab states have prevented these descendants, who never lived in Israel, from settling and living normal lives in any Arab state (except Jordan).

Furthermore, UNGA Resolution 194 did not, in fact or in law, grant the right of return to all refugees, and would have had no authority to do so even if it had tried.

It is widely recognized in private that the Arab insistence on the “right of return” does not come from concern over the wellbeing of the “refugees,” who have not been given any choice about their unfortunate status. The miseries imposed on them for three generations are the result of the Arab world’s decision to prevent their resettlement in the hope that someday, Israel will be forced to take in so many “refugees” that it cannot continue to be both Jewish and democratic.

The false diplomatic story with which the US has been playing along for generations is that the Arab position on the “right of return” is a plausible negotiating position that might prevail in the final stage of peace talks. The issue should not yet be addressed, so the thinking goes, because it is so hard to resolve. The truth, which is widely understood in the diplomatic community although no country will admit it publicly, is that the “refugees” do not have any real legal “right of return,” and Israel cannot allow them to move to its territory if it is to survive. It is well understood that the “right of return” is a weapon to destroy Israel, not a normal negotiating demand that can be compromised.

A truth-telling strategy would declare that peace depends on finally settling the “refugees,” and that it is needless cruelty to keep them in refugee camps and without normal citizens’ rights any longer.

The US should start the process of closing down UNRWA, the UN agency that has made it possible to conceal the truth about Palestinian “refugees.” And it should be made clear to the Palestinians that they will never get international support for the

notion of forcing Israel to take in millions of Palestinians.

It should be noted that the Israeli government has favored continued support for UNRWA. This is one of a number of instances where the government of Israel has chosen to appease international opinion rather than use the truth to defy it. It is time for Israel too to move away from such appeasement, which has not worked.

The more sophisticated diplomatic discussion of how peace might be negotiated asserts that the “refugee” issue does not prevent peace, because the Palestinian leadership already understands that no more than a token fraction of refugees will ever be allowed to move to Israel. The “refugees” will have to be satisfied with apologies and compensation – a premise widely acknowledged but never uttered out loud.

Diplomats around the world, particularly in the US, privately understand that Israel cannot and should never be forced to take in millions of “Palestinian refugees.” But no one says so officially, or tells that to the Palestinians. A truth-telling strategy would hold that it is time to say openly what everyone knows to be true.

Telling the truth that there is no “right of return” leaves open the question of compensation for Palestinian refugees from Israel and for Jewish refugees from the Arab countries. This does not have to be an obstacle to peace. It is indisputable that the creation of Israel led to at least as many Jewish refugees from Arab countries as Palestinian refugees from Israel. And the Jewish refugees, who were all resettled without international help (mostly in Israel), were forced to leave behind more assets than did the Palestinian refugees.

False “Even-Handedness” About Jerusalem

A much less important, but highly symbolic, piece of American truth-telling will be moving the US embassy in Israel to the country’s capital, Jerusalem. The US can further increase its truth-telling by allowing the passports of American citizens born in Jerusalem to record the fact that they were born in Israel. At present, Washington is unwilling to allow this truth to appear in American passports.

Because the US has been willing to ignore these truths for so long, there will be great Arab resistance to their being stated in public. The fiercer their protests, the more the Arabs will demonstrate the cost of having avoided truth-telling for so long. In the long run, a recognition that the US has a commitment to the truth will reduce the harm done by violent protests. Conversely, a policy of avoiding the truth in deference to threatened violence will lead to more such violence – or to US subservience to the rioters.

Jerusalem is a good example of the biased “even-handedness” that has long

characterized the US stance. Official statements always refer to Jerusalem as sacred to both sides – sometimes adding that it is sacred to Christians as well – and typically imply that a fair solution will require equal treatment for Israel and the Palestinians on Jerusalem. But in reality, there is very little symmetry between the Israeli and Palestinian connections to Jerusalem.

The al-Aqsa Mosque, which is located in Jerusalem, has significance for the religion of Islam (although its origins are controversial) – but it is in no way central. The city of Jerusalem is not mentioned even once in the Koran, nor in regular Muslim prayers. On the other hand, Jerusalem is a central feature of the Jewish religion and of daily Jewish prayer and identity. The climax of every Jewish wedding ceremony is when the groom breaks a glass to symbolize the exile from Jerusalem and repeats a quotation from Psalm 137: “If I forget you, o Jerusalem, let my right hand wither.”

Jewish and Muslim performance in ruling Jerusalem since 1948 has also been very different. Under Israeli rule over Jerusalem (West Jerusalem for 19 years and the entire city for 50 years), there has been freedom of religion and protection of the holy sites of all religions. During the 19 years of Jordanian rule over East Jerusalem, Jews were not allowed entry even to the Jewish Quarter, and Jewish religious sites were destroyed.

The religion of Islam takes no notice of Jerusalem as a city. Muslims have expressed interest in Jerusalem only when it was ruled by non-Muslims. For over a thousand years of Muslim rule over Jerusalem, it was never made into the capital of any part of the Muslim empire, not even the local district. From 1948 to 1967, when it was ruled by Jordan, Jerusalem was treated as inferior to Amman. By contrast, the city of Jerusalem has always been a major concern of the Jewish religion and of Jewish identity, including throughout the nearly 2,000 years during which it was in the hands of others. Israel cannot survive as a Jewish state without Jerusalem as its capital.

Israeli and Palestinian interests in the future of Jerusalem are not at all symmetrical. Israel needs Jerusalem to continue to be a vibrant working city. The Palestinians, by contrast, would make an important gain in their effort to destroy Israel if they achieved new arrangements for Jerusalem that allowed its health as a city to be undermined by violent conflict.

To follow an even-handed truth-telling strategy about Jerusalem, the US should state that a fair disposition of the city will acknowledge it as the capital of Israel, protect the religious concerns of all religions, and assure that the city’s health will not be jeopardized by internal conflict. The Palestinian interest in having Jerusalem as the capital of a new Palestinian state should be satisfied in a way that is consistent with these three values.

The False Assertion that the Palestinians are Ready to Make Peace with Israel

A US truth-telling strategy would also address the question of whether the Palestinian community and leadership are in fact willing to make peace with Israel. While there cannot be any indisputable truth about such a hypothetical and complex question, there is evidence that can be examined in order to respectfully try to understand the point of view of the Palestinians.

A search for truth would ask why the Palestinian leadership (both intellectual and political) takes such pains to falsely deny the ancient Jewish presence in the land. It must be unpleasant and difficult for informed Palestinians to tell such obvious falsehoods that there never was a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem (from which Christ could chase the money-changers), or that Jews did not rule the land for centuries before most of them were exiled by the Romans 2,000 years ago. This denial of history is not part of the religion of Islam; it is a recent Palestinian invention. Older Muslim sources explain that the Dome of the Rock was built on the Temple Mount *because* it was the site of the Jewish Temple. One of the traditional Arab names for the Mount is *Bayt al-Maqdis* (The Temple).

One plausible explanation why the Palestinian leadership is so insistent on such an extreme denial of reality is that if the Palestinian people knew the truth, they might be more willing to accept Israel on part of the land. This suggests that it might be constructive for the US to remind the Palestinians that according to Islamic tradition, the Temple Mount was built by Jews as the site of the Jewish Temple. A public airing of the fact that there is no doubt that there were ancient Jewish kingdoms in the land a thousand years before Islam might increase the readiness of the Palestinian people to make peace with the Jewish people, who share their connection to the holy land.

Persistent US truth-telling would so undermine the Palestinian leadership's efforts to deny basic historical truths that they would not be able to continue without embarrassing themselves before their own people. It would show the Palestinians that the US, and presumably other democracies, are not prepared to accept blatant falsehoods as justification to force Israel to accept a Palestinian victory. This would undermine one of the major Palestinian reasons for thinking they might still be able to destroy Israel: their hope that it is not too late to remove Israel from the land completely. That Palestinian hope is the fundamental obstacle to peace.

When Did the Palestinians Have an Internal Dispute about Making Peace with Israel?

If we are to gain a truthful answer to the question whether the Palestinians are now willing to make peace with Israel, we must also ask the following question: If the

Palestinian leadership and public are now willing to make peace with Israel, when did they change? And what was the political process that produced the change?

Since before the establishment of Israel, despite the deep desire of many Palestinians for peace, the Palestinian community and its leadership were determined not to accept a Jewish state on any terms and were committed to struggle to destroy it until it was removed from land that had once been Muslim-ruled. Whatever some Palestinians might have thought or said in private or in English, any suggestion of a basis for accepting Israel or of allowing the “refugees” to be settled outside Israel was taboo in Arabic public discourse for many years.

This is a statement of fact, not an accusation. The Palestinian political discourse is available translated into English on MEMRI. There is no evidence of Arabic public statements to the effect that it is necessary to end the struggle to destroy Israel, or that a major share of the “refugees” might not be allowed to enter Israel. Nor can one find many Palestinian political voices who say such things in Arabic in public.

Before there can be any major change in Palestinian policy, there will have to be a sharp public debate among Palestinians. Certainly there would be strong voices initially rejecting any willingness to give up the war to destroy Israel or to settle the “refugees” outside of Israel. This debate would be visible in public channels, and it would be possible to see which side was eventually forced to retreat.

There has been no such debate. Palestinian discourse still maintains the taboo against suggesting it is necessary or desirable to give up the war against Israel on any terms. Nor is it acceptable to discuss the possibility of some “refugees” not being allowed to move to Israel.

A truth-telling US strategy would not continue to assume that peace can be negotiated with the Palestinians if Israel makes appropriate concessions. Truth-telling is consistent with urging negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, but not from the position that the success of those negotiations will depend on what Israel does. A truth-telling strategy would recognize that agreement on peace can only happen after Palestinians have public debates about “refugees” and about accepting Israel.

Why the US Should Move Toward a Truth-Telling Strategy

A large edifice built on falsehood has come to define the diplomatic and policy environment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This structure of unreality has failed to produce useful results. Perhaps, therefore, the new US president, who campaigned on making significant changes to US policy, should adopt a new strategy of truth-telling, which might lead to better results.

International pressure is one of the main weapons with which the Palestinians hope to destroy Israel. They will not give up that goal until it has become clear that there is no way it can succeed. Demonstrating that the world will no longer pretend to believe Palestinian falsehoods might lead more Palestinians to see that they have no chance of eliminating Israel. They might then seek the benefits of peace.

Furthermore, forcing Palestinians to acknowledge Israel's historical and moral claim to the land would provide them with an honorable basis for compromise with Israel. If Israel were a stranger to the land, simply a colonial power taking Arab land by force, as the Palestinians falsely argue, it would be cowardly for them to yield.

When the American and European democracies accept Palestinian falsehoods, it creates a disincentive for the Palestinians and their supporters to face the realities of their situation. But these realities have to be the basis of any resolution of the conflict. A truth-telling strategy would offer a sound long-term foundation on which peace can eventually be built.

Why Israel Should Move Toward a Truth-Telling Strategy

Even with a new administration that has promised to break with the policies of the past, there may not be much chance that the US will depart radically from its policies of the last 50 years. But whether Washington alters past positions or not, Israel should advocate a truth-telling strategy for the US and the other democracies and pursue that strategy itself.

Israel is now imprisoned by an internationally accepted structure of falsehoods. It is tactically wiser for Israel to argue for truth-telling than to continue to appease the international consensus, for example by explaining why settlements are not the obstacle to peace, or that Israeli security requires that Israel occupy what people think of as "Palestinian land."

Israel needs to go on the diplomatic offensive. Framing its position as an effort to get recognition for the truth is more likely to get its story heard than simply making demands and claims. And criticisms of the Palestinians that Israel needs to make to change the diplomatic consensus will be more effective if they are made as part of a broader strategy of urging democracies to face the truths about the conflict.

It is politically difficult for the US or other countries to take positions that are more "pro-Israel" than the positions of the Israeli government. If Israel would like other states to move toward more truth-telling about the conflict, it needs to stop holding back from presenting its own case out of fear that criticism of the Palestinians and assertions of Israeli rightful claims would seem to conflict with negotiations for peace.

It is notable that the US is thought to be biased in favor of Israel even though it does not stand for the truths essential to Israel's position. Despite its longstanding alliance with Israel, the US under many presidents has allowed Israel to be forced to operate according to the international structure of falsehood that now dominates Israel's diplomatic position. This policy should be replaced by a truth-telling strategy.

Briefly, some of the main truths that the US has been denying or ignoring, and that a truth-telling strategy should make prominent in the international discussion, are:

- Although there are good reasons why there should eventually be "Palestinian territory," there is not now, and never has been, any such thing. No territory was "taken from" the Palestinians; nor can any territory be "given back" to them. They have always lived in territory ruled by others.
- West Jerusalem is located in Israel and is the capital of Israel. The Palestinian and Israeli connections to Jerusalem are neither equal nor symmetrical. Jerusalem is demonstrably more important to Israel than it is to the Palestinians.
- The Jewish people lived in and ruled most of the area of Israel in ancient times. Israelis did not come to the land as European colonialists; they came as a people returning to its homeland. Israel's rule over the land is not based only on its military strength; it has historical, legal, and moral claims.
- The Jewish international legal right to settle in the land from the Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea was established by the League of Nations' Mandate in 1922, in recognition of the Jewish People's millenarian attachment to the Land of Israel. It is not based on Jewish suffering in the Holocaust.
- The claim of a "right of return" for Palestinian "refugees" is not a humanitarian effort to provide help or justice to those unfortunate individuals, who are not truly refugees. It is an Arab weapon intended to destroy Israel via demographic subversion. And it is not a valid legal claim. Peace between Israel and the Palestinians requires resettling the "refugees" outside of Israel and ending UNRWA's mandate. (While this truth is not indisputable, it is the understanding held by independent and informed people, most of whom do not publicly say what they personally believe.)
- It is not an established truth that the Palestinian leadership and community have decided to give up the goal of destroying Israel and are ready to make a peace that accepts Israel if Israel makes appropriate concessions. The evidence

for and against this generally accepted assumption needs to be examined. Much of it indicates that the Palestinian community is not willing to make peace with Israel on any terms.

The US should be more genuinely even-handed between Israel and the Palestinians than it has been in the past. It could advance the cause of peace by telling the truth. It is not even-handed for the US to let one side's systematic falsehoods dominate the diplomatic discussion, when a truth-telling strategy could make the policy debate more realistic and improve the long-term prospects for peace.

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