Between Past and Future:
Persistent Conflicts, Collective Memory, and Reconciliation

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In this paper, I use Jewish Israeli attitudes and emotions towards the Palestinian narrative of the 1948 war to study the connection between collective memory and readiness for reconciliation. In Palestinian collective memory, this war is viewed as the Nakba, a calamitous event. In the collective memory of Israeli Jews, however, the 1948 War of Independence represents a dream come true after 2,000 years of oppression and persecution. A public opinion survey was conducted to examine Jewish Israeli attitudes towards a possible official acknowledgment of the Palestinian collective memory of the Nakba. The survey reveals that disapproval of such acknowledgment is strongly connected to a lack of empathy for the other side's sufferings, as well as to fear for the existence of Israel, rooted in Jewish collective memory. The survey also shows that the strength of tolerance (intolerance) for the other side's narrative is highly correlated with the extent to which the respondents identify with the political ideology of the left (right). The same conclusions are reached by a follow-up study of the attitudes and actions of politicians from opposing ends of Israel's political spectrum (left and right). Since in Israel the more left wing citizens and politicians are, the greater their willingness to make concessions required for a peace agreement, the survey indicates that ability to accept and tolerate the other side's collective memory reflects readiness for reconciliation. My main conclusion is that the extent to which Israelis accept and express empathy to Palestinian collective memory and historical narratives reveals emotional readiness for reconciliation and the compromises it requires.

Key words: collective trauma, chosen trauma, collective memory, Israel-Palestine conflict, Nakba

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"It's time to decolonize history"
Boualem Sansal, 30.9.12 [2]

I. Introduction: Collective Memory and the Psycho-Historical Aspects of Persistent Conflicts

Years of exploring conflict resolution have shown that formal peace agreements do not guarantee lasting peaceful relations (Bar-Tal & Bennink 2004). The search for a more comprehensive understanding gave rise to the notion of reconciliation, defined as a "process of developing a mutual conciliatory accommodation between formerly antagonistic groups," which is manifested in "relatively amicable relationship typically established after a rupture in relations involving one-sided or mutual infliction of extreme injury" (Kriesberg, 1998, p. 351). In response, peace studies have shifted toward a focus on reconciliation (e.g., Bar-Tal, 2000a; Kreisberg, 2004; Lederach, 2008; Ross, 2004), based on the understanding that once a formal resolution of the conflict has been achieved; there is a further need for a "formation or restoration of genuine peaceful relationships between societies that have been involved in intractable conflict" (Nadler, Malloy and Fisher, 2008, cited in Bar-Tal, 2011, p. 24). The new trajectory of studies has also highlighted the important role of emotions, societal beliefs, narratives, and collective memory in conflicted groups' ability to reconcile and maintain long-term peace.

Ethnic and national conflicts entail two major aspects – defined by scholars as a socio-political aspect and a socio-psychological aspect – with the latter no less crucial than the former (Salomon, 2004). The socio-psychological aspect pertains to a wide range of issues relating to the community, including a community's sense of identity and self-perceptions, its fears and sense of collective threats, perceived past, and portrayal of its role in the conflict. Bar-Tal suggests that the socio-psychological aspect of national conflicts comprises three main elements: collective emotional orientation, ethos of the conflict, and collective memories (Bar-Tal, 2007, 2011). The socio-political aspect involves issues such as land, natural resources, economic and political dominance. Despite the complexity of the socio-political matters, in situations of intractable conflict it is the socio-psychological aspect, as well as history, that dominates the relationship between the involved adversaries and plays a central role in interpreting and fueling persistent animosity (Salomon, 2004; Nadler, Malloy and Fisher, 2008).

As Halbwachs (1992) was the first to show, the way history and emotions are tightly combined is manifested in collective memory - an image of the past, not necessarily its historical record, which serves the group's present needs and self-portrait (Halbwachs, 2011). It has since become widely accepted that collective memory is a powerful factor in any group's life, and that within the intricate relationship between historical knowledge and a group's present socio-political framework, the shared past is not only passed on but is also constructed by memory agents, creating a comprehensive narrative: a collection of stories, beliefs, aspirations, and current explanations that a group holds about itself and about its surroundings (Salomon, 2004). Collective memory has been shown to consolidate in-group cohesion, mostly by strengthening ethnic myths and symbols while clearly distinguishing between the group and others (Shwartz, 1982). Even when members of the group differ in their views on the past or the present, collective memory, mainly in its officially supported narrative, enables the group to share a sense of collective, though differently comprehended, experience (Goldfarb, 2009). Moreover, usually each group perceives its own narrative as the only truth that morally excludes the narrative of the other side. These group narratives enhance the sense of being right, but also evoke fears of the other side's intentions, and of the reoccurrence of past traumas.

Emotions and history are therefore two extremely powerful pillars that play a crucial role in a group's ability to reconcile and to adopt new sets of attitudes towards a settlement of a persistent conflict. Indeed, the combination of psychology and history often blinds the adversaries from seeing that a practical compromise on their socio-political interests is close at hand (Volkan, 2006),

causing them to reject alternative solutions and withdraw into societal beliefs in the maliciousness of the other side, re-evoking old fears and hatreds.

In order to emphasize the effect that this combination of psychology and history exerts on the perpetuation of a conflict, I suggest the term psycho-historical aspect. Comprised of the emotions and deep-rooted collective memory that feed the group's fears and societal beliefs[3] the psycho-historical aspect of the conflict shapes the group's current decisions and undermines, even destroys, political agreements, diminishing the success of formal and informal discussions, and blurring solvable issues (Keynan, 2009).

Naturally, a peaceful resolution to a conflict requires addressing both psycho-historical and socio-political aspects. Yet, multiple studies have shown that moving towards rational thinking on concrete issues can be achieved only after the conflict's psycho-historical aspects have been resolved (Volkan, 2006; Bar-Tal 2000a). Moreover, unresolved psychological issues can escalate negative emotions of fear and anger into inter-group hatred, which has rigid, dichotomous characteristics and which undermines all attempts to create a more balanced perspective of history and of the other group's narrative (Halperin, 2008). Thus, it may be concluded that the reconciliation process - especially in intractable, persistent conflicts - requires a profound change in the psycho-historical aspect (see Auerbach, 2009) in order to reduce group members' deep involvement with the past, which hinders rational action (Goldfarb, 2009). Nonetheless, most political peace negotiations focus on the socio-political aspect of the conflict while the critical role of the psycho-historical aspect is often given little attention, if any.

In this paper, I investigate the role of psycho-historical aspects in reconciliation of persistent conflicts by examining the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This conflict is particularly apt for the study of readiness for reconciliation as it strongly involves themes such as collective memory, identity, and victimhood (Auerbach, 2009). Specifically, the paper focuses on the collective memory of the 1948 war, which led to the establishment of the State of Israel. Although over 60 years have passed, the conflict involves a fervent controversy over the contrasting narratives of the war: In the Palestinian collective memory it is the Nakba, a term that denotes the Palestinian perception of the 1948 war as a disastrous event, whereas for the Jews it is the War of Independence, which represents a dream come true after 2,000 years of oppression and persecutions. Auerbach (2009) and Ross (2007) suggest that conflicting national narratives stir strong emotions and therefore may create barriers for reconciliation. This paper examines this hypothesis in the aim of furthering our understanding of the role of collective memory in reconciliation.

The paper investigates Jewish Israeli stance and emotions towards the Palestinian collective memory of the Nakba based on a survey of attitudes toward possible official Israeli recognition of the memory of the Nakba, and a separate study of the stance of politicians from left and right wing factions on an initiative to incorporate the Palestinian Nakba narrative in school textbooks.[4]

After the introduction, section II describes the essence of the conflicting narratives of the Palestinians and the Jews concerning the 1948 war. It also provides a detailed account of the first initiative to officially acknowledge the Palestinian narrative of the Nakba in school textbooks, and a later opposite initiative to rescind the right of the Palestinian citizens of Israel to commemorate the Nakba as a day of mourning. Section III describes findings of a survey on Israeli Jews attitudes toward the possibility of an official recognition of the Nakba, presents and discusses its results, and their implications. Section IV concludes.

II. The Nakba vs. the Day of Independence: A Psycho-Historical Perspective

The declaration of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948 symbolized a dream come true for the Jews and a national disaster for the Palestinians. The Palestinian and Jewish narratives of the outbreak of violence and war following the United Nations (UN) partition resolution (November 29, 1947) are completely contradictory, and each side holds the other solely responsible for the developments (Rotberg, 2006). For many years, the Nakba narrative was totally silenced by the Israeli establishment and it was not taught at schools, not even in the Arab Israeli school system. Thus, the Nakba remained an unprocessed traumatic and painful memory for the Palestinian citizens of Israel

(Keynan, 2012). With time, new voices in the Israeli public called to acknowledge the Nakba as part of the collective memory of all Israelis, commemorate it as one of the many outcomes of the war, and integrate this narrative in school textbooks. On July 22, 2007, Israeli Minister of Education at the time, Prof. Yuli Tamir, a member of the Labor party and a former Peace Now activist, approved, for the first time in Israel's history, the inclusion of a textbook that includes the Palestinian narrative of the Nakba in the curriculum of Arab-Israeli schools. Accounting for this decision, Tamir stated, "The Arab public deserves to be allowed to express its feelings"(Stern, 2007). The new school textbook presented both Israeli and Palestinian narratives. Alongside its emphasis on the Jewish Israeli narrative of the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the State of Israel (the rejection of the UN partition plan by the Arabs and its acceptance by the Jewish people), the textbook used the word Nakba (Disaster) for the first time to describe the Palestinian tragedy that resulted from their defeat in the war. In other words, Tamir's decision enabled a discussion of the circumstances that led to the Palestinian refugee problem.

Tamir's unprecedented act evoked anger and passionate debate among right-wing MKs, Members of the Israeli Parliament (Knesset), who described her as a "danger to the State of Israel," and a legitimizer of the Palestinians' "vicious accusations against Israel." The Palestinian narrative of the Nakba was dismissed by them as entirely false and as intentionally inflaming hatred with the purpose of reigniting the conflict and destroying Israel.[5] Finally, they demanded Tamir's resignation (Tibon, 2007).Harsh opposition to Tamir's move was not limited to politicians. Conservative intellectuals also expressed their objections, arguing that it would only encourage hatred, and that a state cannot afford to allow calling its establishment a disaster by part of its citizens (Shamir, 2008).

In 2009, the new Israeli Minister of Education Gidon Sa'ar, a member of the right-wing Likud party, decided to revoke Tamir's previous policy. On August 30, 2009, Sa'ar announced the removal of all references to the Nakba from school textbooks. Although he conceded that "Arab Israelis experienced a tragedy in the war," he prohibited the use of the word 'Nakba' in textbooks, arguing that the meaning of the word is too similar to the word Holocaust, and therefore should not be used in the context of the establishment of the Jewish State (Sofer, 2009). The new textbooks omitted the word 'Nakba' yet stated that "because of the war, some Arabs fled or were expelled from their homes and became refugees."[6]

Saar's decision echoed an earlier decision made by the governmental legislation committee in May 2009 to endorse a private bill proposed by MK Alex Miller of the right-wing Israel Beitenu party. The bill aimed to prohibit any reference to the Israeli Day of Independence as a day of mourning, and thus to ban ceremonies commemorating the Nakba. As a result, a heated debate ensued between the bill's advocates and opponents about the need to acknowledge the Nakba narrative. An analysis of both sides' arguments follows.

Those opposing the inclusion of the Nakba narrative stated that the Palestinian narrative of the Nakba is false and a part of a plan to destroy Israel. According to their interpretation, the use of the word Nakba for commemorating the same calendar day (May 14th) on which Israel celebrates its independence, is equivalent to calling the very birth of Israel a catastrophe, and this is wrong and malicious and will only create more hatred. This hawkish view reflects a strong belief in the primacy of the Israeli narrative, a fear that alternative narratives might undermine the legitimacy of the Jewish State, and a conviction that the Palestinian collective memory of 1948 is imagined and a part of a dangerous and malicious plot to morally exclude the Jewish narrative and to bring the State of Israel to ruins. These views reflect common consequences of collective memory (Bar-Tal, 2011, Goldfarb, 2009; Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004; Lederach, 2008), but at the same time, they are also related to the fact that many Israelis perceive any threat to the Jewish sovereignty and/or legitimacy of Israel as strongly related to a danger of a second Holocaust (Shumsky, 2010).

In contrast, those supporting the inclusion of the Nakba narrative argued that the Arab public should be allowed to express its feelings; that it's time to cope with the difficult, long-ignored issues surrounding the establishment of the State of Israel; and that it's time to accept a shared life with the Arab public, which also involves making concessions and reconciling contradicting

positions. These arguments express empathy for the Palestinians' painful collective memory, and awareness of the need to address the past. By acknowledging the Palestinian narrative of the Nakba, supporters are also legitimizing the Palestinian collectivity and its equal right for national existence. Such legitimization has been shown to be a turning point for conflict resolution (Bar-Tal & Salomon, 2006), and therefore imply emotional readiness for a process of reconciliation.

The above analysis suggests a correlation between the attitudes towards acknowledging the Nakba narrative and the aforementioned determinants of a group's readiness towards reconciliation. Specifically, those who are more inclined towards reconciliation are more receptive to the collective narrative of the other side, compared with those who hold more hawkish views.

The debate ended with the Israeli Parliament passing a milder act that banned only the use of public funds to commemorate Israel's Day of Independence as a day of mourning, in what was termed "The Nakba Act."[7] While the Act was controversial on grounds of freedom of speech, it was also controversial on grounds of readiness for reconciliation. It was widely opposed by the left-wing parties that support peace negotiations and believe there is truth in both sides' narratives and that both sides should be allowed to express their own collective memory. The Nakba Act was widely supported by right-wing parties that also oppose peace negotiations with the Palestinians on the grounds that "there is no partner" on the Palestinian side.

Those who oppose any mention of the Nakba in schools and in the public sphere believe that such acknowledgement endangers Israel's very existence. As shown in the next section, this belief has been disseminated in the general public, creating a huge obstacle to any reconciliation process, not only with the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, but also with the Palestinian citizens of Israel.

III. Public opinion survey of Jewish Israelis attitudes and emotions towards the collective memory of the Nakba

Method, participants, and measures

In 2011, together with the Elixir research institute, I conducted a public opinion survey among Jewish Israeli citizens on their views on the acknowledgment of the Nakba by the State of Israel without taking responsibility for its causes or results. The survey was conducted on a representative, random sample of the adult Jewish population in Israel that participates in internet panels. The sample included 508 Jewish adult respondents (48.22% females) between the ages of 18 and 93, who were members of an internet panel. The survey and responses were conducted in Hebrew.

The main variable studied was the extent of support for official recognition of the Nakba. Participants responded to the following question: "What is your opinion on the possibility that Israel would recognize the disaster that the Palestinian experienced as a result of Israel's War of Independence (the Nakba), and would express empathy and condolences (without assuming any responsibility)?" Responses ranged from 1 (such recognition is absolutely forbidden) to 5 (such recognition is essential). In addition, on an open-ended item, participants were requested to provide an explanation for their response. Control variables measured were age, gender, place of residence, political affiliation (left-wing, leftist tendencies, center, rightist tendencies, right-wing), religiosity (secular, traditional, religious, orthodox), average income, marital status, and education.

Results

Of the 480 participants who rated their attitude on recognition of the Nakba, 64.58% rated such recognition as absolutely forbidden, and 5% rated such recognition as essential. Mid-scale ratings (i.e., 2, 3 and 4), reflecting a more moderate stance, were endorsed by 15.21%, 8.96%, and 6.25% of the participants, respectively. The Mean (SD) rating was 1.72 (1.17), indicating that, on average, the prevailing stance towards the recognition of the Nakba is that of disapproval. These 480 respondents significantly differed in their political definition ($F = 72.12$, $p < .01$) with a mean (SD) rating of 3.76 (1.30) among persons who described themselves as left-wingers, as compared to a mean (SD) rating of 1.09 (0.33) among those who described themselves as right-wingers. Significant differences were also found for religiosity ($F = 11.75$, $p < .01$; Mean (SD), secular =

1.94 (1.29), orthodox = 1.00 (0.00)) and place of residence (F = 2.62, p < .05; Mean (SD), Tel Aviv region = 1.85 (1.26), south = 1.48 (0.99). In other words, participants who were left-wingers, secular, or residents of Tel Aviv, were significantly more likely than others to show lesser objection to recognition of the Nakba. No significant differences were found among the respondents in gender, age, income, marital status, or education.

Interpretation of the results

Survey findings show lack of support for the possibility of an official recognition of the Nakba, linked to a propensity to adhere to the Israeli narrative of the 1948 war and to a strong feeling that such acknowledgment may have detrimental, even catastrophic consequences for the State of Israel. The arguments made by survey participants who objected to official recognition of the Nakba reflect fear and a strong need for a self-image of moral superiority, which drives and ensnares Israeli society as it is perceived as existential to Israel's survival (Keynan, 2012). The collective memory of the Nakba touches this vulnerable spot of Jewish Israelis, and the reaction toward it is accordingly strong. Despite the extensive objection to official recognition of the Nakba and to expressions of empathy and sorrow for the Palestinian ordeal, it was interesting to see that the intensity of participants' opposition corresponded to the degree of their support for right-wing ideology: The more right wing a participant, the stronger her objection to official recognition of the Nakba. Since left and right in Israel are mostly characterized by views toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the feasibility of conducting a process of reconciliation and peace and the extent of willingness to make concessions for achieving it, the survey's outcomes support the paper's main argument that attitudes towards collective memory reflect readiness for reconciliation. Indeed, 16% of the participants believed that it was absolutely forbidden to recognize the Nakba, offering the following explanation: "It's their own fault," that is, since the Arabs initiated the war and rejected the UN decision, they should bear the consequences of their decision; 24% claimed that no Nakba ever occurred, and that recognizing this concept is a distortion of history and a great danger to the State of Israel; another 10% claimed that such recognition would lead to the end of the State of Israel, demonstrates weakness and constitutes some kind of admission of non-existing guilt; about 9% claimed that Jewish Israelis have an historical claim to the land of Israel and that any recognition of the Nakba could be considered relinquishment of this historical claim; and 10% responded that the Nakba narrative is not their concern and that the Arabs should "take care of themselves." In other words, the State of Israel should not be the one to embrace and/or reinforce the Palestinian narrative. Of the participants who objected less strongly to official recognition of the Nakba, 27% feebly acknowledged that some damage had been caused to the Palestinian people, yet only partial recognition of such damage is warranted.

On the other hand, support for official recognition of the Nakba, though endorsed by a minority of the survey participants (15%; ratings 4 and 5), was associated with reconciliation-oriented accounts. These accounts highlighted the need for communication with the Palestinians, the need to maintain neighborly relations; a conviction that the Palestinians are part of the Jewish Israeli life and essence that cannot be ignored; and a need to acknowledge Palestinian suffering, especially because of the Jewish experience in the Holocaust, which the respondents interpreted as the need to understand, accept, and express empathy towards the suffering of other people.

IV. Conclusion

This paper examined the effect of attitudes toward collective memory on mental readiness for reconciliation via a psycho-historical study of the actions and expressed views of politicians from opposite ends of the political spectrum and an analysis of findings of a survey conducted among a representative, random sample of the adult Jewish population. The results show a correlation between the extent of support (or the lack thereof) for official recognition of the Palestinian collective memory of the Nakba, depth of fears based on the traumatic Jewish collective memory, the ability to show empathy towards the suffering of the other side, and mental-emotional readiness for reconciliation.

Specifically, I found that an opposition to official recognition of the Nakba was associated with existential fears concerning the future of the State of Israel and adherence to the Israeli narrative of the 1948 war as a symbol of the Jewish Israeli collective identity, while support for such recognition was associated with acceptance of the need for mutual understanding in order to create neighborly relations, and a call for acknowledging Palestinian suffering especially because of the Jewish traumatic experience of the Holocaust, which is seen as a moral guide for the Jewish people to show empathy towards other peoples' pain. The findings show that these views correlate with broader views of Jewish Israelis on the potential for reconciliation with the Palestinians, which in Israel are tightly connected to political identification as left or right wing. Thus, a person's acceptance and acknowledgement of the other side's collective memory may serve as a good predictor of her/his mental readiness for reconciliation.

Is there another way?

The results of this study imply that collective memory, usually abused by politicians to initiate and preserve conflicts, can be used for positive purposes. An inspiring example of such use of collective memory took place in 2012, by Israeli and Jordanian veterans, who held a joint memorial ceremony for the two armies' fallen soldiers at Giv'at HaTahmoshet (Ammunition Hill) in Jerusalem, Israel. At this location, Israeli and Jordanian soldiers had fought against each other and suffered many casualties in a long and bloody battle in the Six Day War, in which the Jordanians were eventually defeated. During the war, Israeli warriors erected a small monument commemorating the bravery of the Jordanian soldiers. In June 2012, the Israeli Economic Cooperation Foundation and the Amman Center for Peace and Development inaugurated a joint memorial in a ceremony attended by ex-warriors of both sides at the same hill on which they had fought against each other 45 years earlier. Testimonies from the inauguration event bring the story of peaceful, even warm, conversations between the veterans, in which the tragedy experienced by both sides was mutually acknowledged with reciprocal empathy, ending with a mutual pledge to keep talking, aiming at reconciliation (David, 2012). Thus, rather than adhering to the conflicting narratives of the conflict, these veterans made a courageous move to acknowledge and respect each other's suffering and loss, and re-framed the painful historical event as an opportunity for reconciliation. This event illustrates how shared pain can change basic interpersonal attitudes of individuals and subsequently change attitudes of entire communities (Kaufman, 2006). This example illustrates that by acknowledging the legitimacy of an alternative, parallel, narrative, and focusing the collective memory of the conflict on shared painful memories rather than conflicting memories, the vicious cycle of victimized groups may be broken.

Notes

[1] The name of this paper was inspired by Goldfarb's (2009) words about Adam Michnick's work of memory: "He reminds his readers of something in the past and proposes it as a guide for future action, thinking between past and future, as Hannah Arendt would put it" (p. 144).

[2] From an interview with the Algerian writer, by Journalist Sefy Handler, Haaretz September 30, 2012.

[3] Bar-Tal defines societal beliefs as society's members shared cognitions on topics and issues that are of special concern to society and contribute to its unique characteristics. They are organized around themes and consist of such contents as collective memories, ideologies, goals, myths, etc. See Daniel Bar-Tal. Shared Belief in Society: Social Psychological Analysis. New-York: Sage, 2000 (online publication 2012).

[4] While I have not studied the Palestinian side, one could hypothesize that the Palestinian side is experiencing similar emotional difficulties, but this question should be explored in a future studies.

[5] Two of many examples are: A. Levin, "Do we look at ourselves in the mirror?" Stage Magazine, February 10, 2007, accessed February 19, 2010. http://stagemag.co.il/forum/viewtopic.php?t=2674&sid=e257c6d48b9ff1624ba53f67df7e9dfd; S. Cohen, "Tamir Approves: Nakba Book for School Programs," including responses. Channel 7, Israel National News, July 22, 2010, accessed February 19, 2010. http://www.inn.co.il/News/News.aspx/164980

[6] This phrasing remained in the new book.

[7] For the full version of the Act see http://oknesset.org/bill/3875/; retrieved: January 9, 2013.

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