

Rashomon in the Middle East

Clashing Narratives, Images, and Frames in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

ARIE M. KACOWICZ

ABSTRACT

This article presents the contending narratives of the failure of the Israeli–Palestinian peace process. The narratives refer to the ‘Oslo’ peace process of 1993–2000, the negotiations at Camp David (July 2000) and Taba (January 2001), and the ongoing asymmetrical war between Israel and the Palestinians since September 2000. They encompass the ‘official’ social reconstructions of how the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the PLO present the facts and interpret the attitudes of both parties. Moreover, those narratives are almost identical in their logic, though diametrically opposed to each other. Each party blames, totally and unconditionally, the failure of the peace process upon the malign intentions of political destruction and annihilation of the other. The rationale for the paper is that narratives, which are ‘stories with a plot’, do matter, since they shape our identity and our norms, which are crucial components of our reconstruction of social reality. In other words, narratives help to recreate self-perpetuating processes of wishful thinking and self-fulfilling prophecies by providing us with a moral and practical justification, *ex post facto*, for our acts.

Keywords: Israeli–Palestinian conflict; narratives and images; Oslo process (1993–2001); second intifada (2001–2004)

Introduction

This article presents the contending narratives of the failure of the Israeli–Palestinian peace process. The narratives refer to the ‘Oslo’ peace process of 1993–2000, the negotiations at Camp David (July 2000) and Taba (January 2001), and the ongoing asymmetrical war between Israel and the Palestinians since September 2000. They encompass the ‘official’ social reconstructions of how the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the PLO present the facts and interpret the attitudes of both parties. Moreover, they are almost identical in their logic, though diametrically opposed to each other. Each party blames totally and



Cooperation and Conflict: Journal of the Nordic International Studies Association
Vol. 40(3): 343–360. Copyright ©2005 NISA www.ps.au.dk/NISA
Sage Publications www.sagepublications.com
0010-8367. DOI: 10.1177/0010836705055069

unconditionally the failure of the peace process upon the malign intentions of political destruction and annihilation of the other.

As Ryunosuke Akutagawa wrote in his fictional tale *Rashomon* (Akutagawa, 1952), the same story can be recreated and reinterpreted by its protagonists from different angles, so we can get different pieces and parcels of an evasive 'truth'. A similar case can be made for the Middle Eastern conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The two sides have reflected and deflected a 'mirror image' upon each other out of the trauma and obfuscation of the escalating violence between the two peoples, terrorism and counter-insurgency, more than 4000 casualties in the past four years (the majority of them innocent civilians), mutual violations of human rights, and a shared sense of sheer *anomie* and political desperation.

In their social (re-)construction of reality, Israelis and Palestinians tend to ignore their mutual interactions and inter-dependence as if they were living in two different worlds without affecting each other. Fear, anger, and frustration have risen on both sides, so each party regards the other as having acted in bad faith (Dowty and Gawerc, 2001; Dowty, 2003: 38). At the cognitive level, in 2005 we are back 20 years in time, to the mid-1980s. For many Israelis, all Palestinians have always been terrorists and want to murder Jews and throw them into the sea (genocidal intentions). For many Palestinians, all Israelis are Zionist expansionists and colonizers, with the clear intention of dispossessing the entire Palestinian people of their land (Haas, 2003). Although the 'silent majority' of both peoples seem to agree on the inevitability of a political solution based on the partition of the land between the two peoples and a two-states framework, and there seems to be more or less of a consensus about the parameters of that solution (i.e. the Clinton Plan of December 2000; the Nusseibeh–Ayalon 'People's Agreement' of August 2002; the 'road map' of October 2002, and the Geneva unofficial peace draft of November 2003), many Israelis and Palestinians still do not know how to move from temporary solutions (like the disengagement plan of the Israeli government) to an agreed final-status resolution of their conflict.

Uses and Abuses of Narrative

The term 'narrative' is borrowed from literature and linguistic studies. We can refer to a narrative as a fundamental way of organizing human experience and explaining human behaviour, and as a tool for constructing models of reality (Herman, 2002). Hence, it is a way of interpretation, an instrument of self-creation, and a repository of practical knowledge. Any narrative has its own structure or order of events. The events are important to a narrative because they are what a narrative is all about. In fact, by constructing and reconstructing narratives we are assigning a theory of causality to make sense of our world. Narratives embody explanations, though they also mobilize the mythology of their times, mixing literary tropes, notions of morality, and causal reasoning in efforts both to justify and to explain events (Bates et al., 1998: 14).

The concept of narrative stands close to ideas that would have been labelled 'beliefs', 'interpretations', 'attitudes', 'rationalization', 'values', 'ideologies', 'behaviour', 'memory' or simply 'content' a generation ago. Thus, there is a close relationship among narratives, images, and frames. In international relations, contending narratives tend to reflect different images and perceptions of the different actors, about themselves and about their environment. Beliefs, values and attitudes – as part of a given narrative – provide signposts for leaders and policy-makers who grope in a maze of uncertainty and tend to interpret incoming information to conform to their pre-existing images, the result being misperceptions (Jervis, 1970: 4–5, 14; Vertzberger, 1990).

In situations of conflict, narratives are polarizing, whereas the antagonist is viewed as maximally violating social norms, while the protagonist seems to conform to them. There is a 'black-and-white' dichotomous view of the conflict, driven by attribution errors and a tendency to persevere in the perception of the enemy images. Narratives in a conflict tend to be sticky, like consistent frames. The frames that the antagonists develop about conflicts are centred around a range of definitions that attempt to answer the question of 'what is going on' (see Aggestam, 1999: 45–8; Heradstveit, 1979: 16, 48; 1974: 10–12; Wolfsfeld, 1993: xii, xviii, xx, xxix; 2001).

A Note on Methodology

The use (and abuse) of narratives can be tackled from a constructivist perspective by assessing that all narratives are relative and that there is not a single and accepted truth. Constructivism challenges the assumptions of rationalism, particularly the notion of an unchanging reality of international politics. The social world is constructed, not given. International politics consists primarily of social facts based on human agreements and inter-subjective knowledge. Hence, from a constructivist perspective we can analyse collective understandings ('narratives') and how political actors attach meaning to and frame the material and social worlds. This approach is particularly useful when we attempt to understand the dynamics of collective understanding about a given conflict, in a fluctuating situation ranging from conflict to cooperation, and in the case of the Israeli–Palestinian case, unfortunately, swinging back to confrontation (see Adler, 2002; Barnett, 2002; Zehfuss, 2002: 3–4, 250; and Aggestam, 1999: 32–5).

In methodological terms, the paper is based on public lectures and addresses of Israeli and Palestinian officials in Israel and in the United States in the period 2000–03, as well as primary sources of official documents from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Negotiations Department of the PLO. One can argue that there exists more than one narrative on either side. In fact, one could see much of the internal bargaining within the two sides as a struggle among different narratives. At the same time as the peace process collapsed in 2000–01, each side's various narratives tended to converge into a single, national, 'official' narrative especially relevant for times of war and crisis, which has become the paramount version of the events. It is symptomatic to point out that only in

June 2004, four years after Camp David, a debate re-emerged among senior members of the Israeli military intelligence community challenging the widespread Israeli official narrative that is depicted in the following pages (Eldar, 2004; Pedatzur, 2004).

The 'Oslo' Peace Process of 1993–2001

After the Persian Gulf War of 1991, a formal Middle Eastern peace process was launched in October 1991 at Madrid on a multilateral platform. After reaching political deadlock in 1992 and the election of the late Ytzhak Rabin as Israeli Prime Minister, secret and informal negotiations took place between Israelis and Palestinians in what is known as the 'Oslo process' or 'Oslo' because of the initial venue of the talks. The talks came to fruition in the summer of 1993, leading to the mutual recognition between the Israeli government and the PLO, an exchange of letters between Israeli Prime Minister Rabin and PLO Chairman Arafat, and the 'Declaration of Principles' of September 1993 by which the two parties committed themselves to implement a gradual process of the granting of political autonomy to the Palestinians, a scheme similar to the one previously signed at Camp David in 1978, and to manage and ultimately resolve their conflict exclusively by peaceful means.

According to this framework for peace (not a final peace treaty), a transitional process of five years would put in place a self-governing PA in the West Bank and Gaza, followed by final status negotiations (no later than three years after the beginning of the Palestinian autonomy) about the 'core' and most difficult issues, including Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees, Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, borders and the final status of the emerging Palestinian political entity.

Following the Declaration of Principles, a series of interim agreements was signed between Israel and the PLO during the period of 1993–99: the March 1994 Cairo Agreement on the implementation of the autonomy in the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area (of the West Bank); the September 1995 Interim Agreement dividing the West Bank into areas under direct Palestinian control (area A), civilian Palestinian control (area B), and Israeli control (area C, including settlements and self-defined 'security zones'); the January 1997 Hebron Protocol dividing the city between Israelis and Palestinians; the October 1998 Wye Memorandum to implement the interim agreement of 1995; and finally the September 1999 Sharm-el-Sheikh Memorandum about the stipulation and timetable of the Final Status Negotiations. The Oslo process concluded in 2000–01 with the failure of the Camp David Summit (July 2000), the eruption of the second intifada in late September 2000 and the failed talks at Taba of January 2001.

The Israeli Narrative of the Oslo Process of 1993–2001

For many Israelis, especially those who supported 'Oslo' until the eruption of the second intifada, the logic behind the peace process was based on the

premise of a gradual devolution of territory, legitimacy, and political authority to the Palestinians in the occupied territories in exchange for security, if not peace. The direction was clear. It assumed that the Palestinian leadership, first and foremost Yasser Arafat, would prepare its people for peace and reconciliation by accepting the logic of partition, a two-state solution, and an exclusively peaceful management of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Although it was not formally stated in the agreements, there was a common expectation among the majority of the Israeli public that a peaceful and stable Palestinian State would eventually emerge in most of the occupied territories, living in good neighbourhood and friendship alongside the State of Israel.

Between 1993 and 1999 many Israelis believed and hoped that peace was within reach, or just beyond reach. According to the official Israeli narrative: ‘After extensive Israeli withdrawals, the PA administered a significant portion of territory and 98% of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza.’ By 1996, the PA controlled about 75–80% of the Gaza Strip and 42% of the West Bank, including 17% under its complete security control in a quasi-sovereign status. For the majority of Israelis, that meant the practical end of the occupation, which was no longer considered as a source for confrontation (Israel, 2002: 5; see also Gold, 2002; Dowty, 2001: 2).

Security was and remains the major concern for Israelis. In its signed agreements, the PLO and the emerging PA committed themselves to stop the violence, arrest terrorists, dismantle the terrorist infrastructures in the territories, collect illegal weapons, and end incitement to violence. Due to the Palestinians’ violations or disregard of many of these obligations, Israelis assessed that ‘the PLO has breached its solemn commitments by continuing the use of violence in pursuit of political objectives’ (Israel, 2002: 7). Hence, when Israel delayed and violated the agreements’ time-tables it justified its own transgressions as an outcome of the recurrent violations by its Palestinian partners. Moreover, Israel did not see a contradiction between the continuing expansion of its settlements in the occupied territories during 1993–2000, and the outcome of the permanent status negotiations to determine their future (Mitchell Report, 2001: 8).

The Palestinian Narrative of the Oslo Process, 1993–2001

From the Palestinian standpoint, the Oslo Accords epitomized the Palestinian recognition of Israeli sovereignty over 78% of the land based on the assumption that the Palestinians would be able to exercise sovereignty over the remaining 22% (PLO, 2001). Hence, for the Palestinian supporters, like their Israeli counterparts, ‘Oslo’ took place as a result of the first intifada, on the premise of gradual territorial devolution in exchange for security for Israel, leading to a viable and independent Palestinian state in the occupied territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, including East Jerusalem, and some legitimate and fair recognition of the right of return for the Palestinian refugees of 1947–49 (PLO, 2001; Arafat, 2002).

As the process evolved over the years, reality and its interpretation turned sour for many Palestinians. The temporary division of the West Bank

into areas A, B and C was regarded by the Palestinians as an 'apartheid system' that caged the Palestinian population into 13 different areas isolated from each other (PLO, 2002; Tarazi, 2002). With the stagnation of the peace process after 1995, the acceleration of confiscation policies, the continuing growth of settlements, the economic deterioration and the high levels of unemployment, the Palestinian support for peace dwindled accordingly. With the doubling of the Israeli settler population between 1993 and 2000, the Palestinians saw the continuing Israeli presence, especially the fragmentation of their territory by Israeli-held roads and checkpoints, as evidence of Israel's intention to perpetuate the occupation of the territories by other means. As a consequence, Palestinians became 'genuinely angry' and regarded settlers and settlements in their midst as 'application of force in the form of Israel's overwhelmingly military superiority which sustains and protects the settlements' (Mitchell, 2001: 8; Dowty, 2001: 2). As a Palestinian official stated: 'The Oslo process has not been about reconciliation. Israel gets rid of the people but holds as much as it can of the territory' (Buttu, 2002).

In juxtaposition to the Israeli accusations of Palestinian violations of the Oslo agreements, the Palestinians point out their own long list of Israeli transgressions: Israel has failed to end its occupation, it continued to build and expand its illegal colonies, it has not withdrawn from Palestinian territories, it has not released political prisoners and it has not allowed for 'safe passage' between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

What Was the Oslo Process About?

The Israeli and Palestinian narratives of 'Oslo' reveal, with the benefit of hindsight, a similar and profound disillusionment with the behaviour of the other party in failing to meet the expectations arising from the peace process. The very gradual and piecemeal characteristics of the process were intended to build trust and confidence, deferring the most difficult issues (Jerusalem, refugees) to the end of the negotiations. In practice, the result was the opposite: confidence undermining, instead of confidence-building. The very formula of peace and security for Israelis, in exchange for territoriality, freedom, and independence for the Palestinians might still be valid as a coherent and rational idea, but never transpired on the ground. Thus, the failure of 'Oslo' can be traced back to the beginning of the period of implementation of the Declaration of Principles Agreement of 1993 (Pundak, 2001: 3). This was due partly to the domestic fundamentalist oppositions within each party, such as the sporadic terrorist acts by Palestinian *Hamas* and *Jihad* that were seriously confronted by the PA only in the spring of 1996, the expansion of the Israeli settlements in the territories, lack of legitimacy (in the Palestinian case, alienation between the leadership and the grassroots; in the Israeli case, increasing de-legitimization of the process), and lack of political stability (of successive Israeli governments). On the Palestinian side, Arafat made clear that he preferred to co-opt, rather than dismantle extremist groups, as he remained ambivalent about the possibility of returning to 'armed struggle' if negotiations fell

short of his stated political goals (Ross, 2002a). On the Israeli side, following the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Rabin in November 1995 a vertiginous succession of Israeli governments (Peres 1995–96, Netanyahu 1996–99, and Barak, 1999–2001) contributed to the further deterioration of the political process.

The End of Negotiations: Camp David 2000 and Taba 2001

The Israeli Narrative of the Camp David and Taba Talks

From the Israeli ‘official’ standpoint, the story of Camp David is simple, if not tragically disappointing: Israel expressed its willingness to make far-reaching unprecedented compromises in order to arrive at a workable enduring agreement. The PA, in turn, chose to break off the negotiations without offering any proposals of its own. Moreover, instead of continuing peaceful negotiations, Arafat and the PA decided to start a war against Israel two months after the end of the summit (Israel, 2002: 4; for an excellent summary of the Israeli position see Pressman, 2003: 5–10; see also Malka, 2004; Kupperwasser, 2004; and Gilad, 2004).

What were the Israeli proposals at Camp David? In an interview conducted by Israeli historian Benny Morris, former Prime Minister Barak refers to the following conditions:

The proposals [of 18 July 2000] included the establishment of a demilitarized Palestinian state on some 92% of the West Bank and 100% of the Gaza Strip with some territorial compensation [1%] for the Palestinians from the pre-1967 Israeli territory; the dismantling of most of the settlements and the concentration of the bulk of the settlers inside the 8% of the West Bank to be annexed by Israel; the establishment of the Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem; in which some Arab neighborhoods would become sovereign Palestinian territory and others would enjoy functional autonomy. (Ehud Barak in Morris, 2002: 42–5)

Moreover, Barak’s proposals included Palestinian ‘custodianship’ over the Temple Mount, and the potential exercise of the right of return of three to four million Palestinian refugees to their own prospective Palestinian state, but not to Israel itself. According to Barak, Arafat said ‘no’ to these unprecedented Israeli offers. In Barak’s account, ‘[Arafat] did not negotiate in good faith, he did not negotiate at all. He just kept saying ‘no’ to every offer, never making any counterproposals of his own’ (Barak in Morris, 2002: 42–5). While Israel was ready to make ‘painful compromises’, Arafat was not prepared to compromise on Jerusalem or on the right of return for Palestinian refugees. In Barak’s own words, ‘Arafat was afraid to make the historic decisions necessary in order to bring about an end to the conflict’ (Barak, 2000; Israel, 2000)

According to this Israeli ‘official’ narrative, the explanation for the apparently irrational behaviour of the Palestinian leadership is straightforward.

Barak offered Arafat a fair and comprehensive settlement at Camp David, but Arafat decided to turn the offer down, 'push the button' and start a war of extermination against Israel. The failure of Camp David can be squarely attributed to the Palestinian denial to make peace, end the conflict, and recognize Israel as a Jewish state. Arafat was not therefore interested in peace but in Israel's own demise through a gradual or phased strategy, or a 'salami tactics' of gradual withdrawals, first from the occupied territories. Next, Israel's evanescence would take place through the inflow of millions of Palestinian refugees. Furthermore, Arafat's bizarre attitude at Camp David was demonstrated by his insistence that there had never been a Jewish Temple in the Temple Mount of Jerusalem, and his equivocal positions regarding the finality of the conflict and the status of the Palestinian refugees. In this sense, 'Barak put the theory of the [Israeli] Left to the test, and it did not work. He put Arafat to the test, and he failed' (Dan Meridor in Bar-Tal, 2002).

After Camp David, the eruption of the second intifada led to intensive diplomatic efforts to put an end to the violence, and to continue the political negotiations. As a result, on 23 December 2000 President Clinton put together a blueprint for a 'package deal' that considerably improved the original Camp David proposals from the Palestinian standpoint. According to the 'Clinton Plan', the Palestinians were now offered 94–95% of the West Bank plus 3% in territorial swaps from Israel proper; Palestinian sovereignty over the Mount Temple; and an elaborate scheme to address the predicament of the Palestinian refugees (Clinton in Lacqueur and Rubin, 2001: 562–4; Ross, 2002a: 19). The Israeli government accepted the Clinton Plan in principle. As for the Palestinians, PM Barak summarized their position (from the Israeli viewpoint) as follows:

Had the Palestinians ... even at that late date, agreed, there would have been a peace settlement. But Arafat dragged his feet for a fortnight and then responded to the Clinton proposal with a 'yes, but' that, with its hundreds of objections, reservations, and qualifications, was tantamount to a resounding 'no'. (Ross, 2002b)

Despite the evident Palestinian ambiguity towards the Clinton Plan, there was still a last-minute round of talks at Taba in late January 2001 between Israelis and Palestinians, without US direct participation, directly based upon the 'parameters' of the Clinton Plan. According to the informal minutes taken by a European observer (Miguel Moratinos, quoted in Eldar, 2002), the parties came very close to reaching an agreement on several issues, including Jerusalem and the future borders of the two states, and even started discussing how to resolve the refugee problem in practical, pragmatic terms. For instance, a prominent member of the Israeli negotiating team, Yossi Beilin, submitted a 'non-paper' recognizing the centrality of the Palestinian refugee issue, but stressing that its solution should be 'implemented in a manner consistent with the existence of the State of Israel as the homeland for the Jewish people, and the establishment of the State of

Palestine as the homeland of the Palestinian people' (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, 2001). The Israeli 'official' position at Taba remained, nevertheless, adamant to the extent that:

Israel will never allow the right of Palestinian refugees to return to inside the State of Israel; PM Barak will not sign any document which transfers sovereignty over the Temple Mount to the Palestinians; and Israel insists that in any settlement, 80% of the Jewish residents of Judea, Samaria and Gaza will be in settlement blocs under Israeli sovereignty. (Israel, 2001)

To summarize the Israeli position, the failure of negotiations at Camp David and Taba, and the Palestinian rejection of the Clinton Plan, demonstrate that what the Palestinians (or at least their leader, Arafat) really wanted was a Palestinian state in all of Palestine instead of Israel. As Barak concluded: 'What we [Israelis] see as self-evident [the need for] two states for two peoples, they reject' (Barak in Morris, 2002). As Gilead Sher, a close aide to PM Barak reflected: 'Barak gave Israel a brave, far-sighted leadership, even though he made mistakes, while Arafat failed as a man and national leader when the moment of crucial decision came about' (Gilead Sher, quoted in Ben, 2002: 82; see also Sher, 2001).

The Palestinian Narrative of the Camp David and Taba Talks

If Israelis considered their proposals at Camp David as unprecedented in their generosity, Arafat and the rest of the Palestinian leadership lambasted the Israeli offers as inadequate, condescending, and alienating. In their view, Barak offered the Palestinians the trappings rather than the reality of sovereignty (Morris, 2001a: 659). It was an unacceptable offer, since the Palestinians wanted a viable state in the remaining 22% of former Palestine (the whole occupied territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip), after having given up their legitimate claims about the 78% of Palestine that today constitutes the State of Israel. Furthermore, the Palestinians demanded independence, not continuing control by Israel. Finally, they wanted to be offered a real choice regarding the refugee question (Tarazi, 2002).

What was so wrong with the Israeli proposals at Camp David? According to the Palestinians, it denied them control over their own borders, while legitimizing and expanding illegal Israeli colonies in Palestinian territory. Moreover, the proposal divided the West Bank and the Gaza Strip into four non-contiguous cantons ('Palestinian Bantustans') surrounded by Israeli territory. In procedural terms, the Israeli proposals were presented (or better, 'delivered') in the form of an ultimatum or take-it-or-leave-it format (PLO, 2001). In sum, the Palestinians interpreted Camp David as 'nothing less than an attempt by Israel to extend the force it exercises on the ground to [the political] negotiations' (Mitchell Report, 2001: 5–6). In their narrative, Israel's offer provided for the annexation of the best Palestinian lands, the perpetuation of Israeli control over East Jerusalem, a continued

military presence in the new Palestinian state, Israeli control over Palestinian natural resources, airspace and borders, and the return of less than 1% of refugees to their homes (Mitchell Report, 2001: 7).

According to this narrative, the Palestinian negotiators at Camp David were those who were ready to compromise even beyond their stated political goals. First, they implicitly accepted the notion of Israeli annexation of West Bank territory in order to accommodate some settlements (and most of the settlers), though they insisted on a 1:1 territorial swap of equal exchanges of land from Israel proper. Second, the Palestinians accepted the principle of Israeli sovereignty over the Wailing Wall, the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, and the Jewish neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem built after 1967. Third, the Palestinians did insist that Israel recognize its responsibility for the refugee problem and its eventual solution, while taking into consideration the 'demographic realities' of their neighbours (euphemism for the Jewish character of Israel) (Agha and Malley, 2002; Arafat, 2002).

From the Palestinian standpoint, the Clinton Plan of December 2000 and the Taba talks moved in the right direction, though serious gaps remained on Jerusalem and especially on the question of the Palestinian refugees. The Palestinians did not reject the Clinton Plan. To the contrary, they were ready to continue the deliberations on the basis of its parameters, as it actually happened at Taba. During those negotiations, in response to the Israeli 'non-paper' presented by Yossi Beilin, the Palestinians still insisted on the inalienable right (and principle) of every Palestinian refugee to choose to return to his or her homeland. Overall, the Palestinian narrative has been articulated in terms of international law and justice, rather than political compromise and changing bargaining positions (Agha and Malley, 2002).

The Present: From Peace Negotiations to War, 2000–05

The Israeli Narrative of the Second Intifada

Building upon PM Barak's reading of the Palestinians' allegedly malign intentions at Camp David, the official Israeli version of the second intifada is fairly straightforward: This was a terrorist war pre-planned and premeditated by Chairman Arafat as a result of a strategic Palestinian decision to use violence – rather than negotiations – as the primary instrument of advancing their political cause. The true roots of the war can be found in the Palestinian rejection at Camp David of the concept of a peacefully negotiated resolution of disputes. Paradoxically, it was the very Oslo peace process, and particularly the Camp David far-reaching offers, that caused the Palestinians to respond with violence, following the 'precedent' of the Israeli unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon triggered by the successful *Hezbollah* guerrilla attacks. Therefore, Palestinian terrorists, starting with Arafat himself, through the PA (a 'terrorist entity') to *Hamas*, *Jihad*, and *Fatah*, did not oppose the occupation of the territories per se but the whole

concept of peace through compromise. Thus, the Palestinians suddenly exploded in September 2000 in an uncaused natural eruption. They had no logical reason for exploding and there was no prior Israeli provocation for their violence. After all, PM Barak made them a generous offer and they betrayed him with an outburst of violence (Krauthammer, 2001: 29; Morris, 2001a: 660; Israel, 2002; Grossman, 2002; Mofaz, 2002).

As for the Palestinian goals and rationale, the Israeli official narrative refers to two different objectives, according to the 'two-stage' or 'phased' Palestinian strategy: First, in the short term, Palestinians want to obtain a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem and the complete fulfilment of the right of return for the Palestinian refugees. Hence, the Palestinian violence, which was planned by the PA leadership, aimed at provoking and incurring as many Palestinian and Israeli casualties as possible, to regain the diplomatic initiative and to improve its bargaining positions. Therefore, the Palestinian leadership has instigated, orchestrated and directed terrorism and violence as strategic tools. The involvement of Palestinian security officers and officials in terrorism has been reported and documented extensively in the past three years. The second intifada is therefore a premeditated war: chapter two of the Palestinian war of independence, leading to a hostile state for which the 1967 borders are only a staging and temporary goal (Marcus in Lacqueur and Rubin, 2001: 566; Yaari, 2002). Second, in the long term, the Palestinians want to eliminate and destroy Israel completely. While Jews have always agreed to some kind of compromise, starting with the initial partition of Palestine of 1922 (leaving aside the British Mandate of today's Jordan), following with the Peel Commission of 1937 through the Partition Plan of 1947 to the Camp David summit of July 2000, the Palestinian Arabs have always refused to accept the Jews in their midst, opting for a zero-sum solution of the conflict. The Palestinians are unwilling to come to terms with Israel's existence in the region. They ultimately want to throw the Jews into the sea (Morris, 2001b). As Barak concludes: 'Arafat believes that Israel has no right to exist, and he seeks its demise' (Barak in Morris, 2002).

As a corollary, the majority of Israelis believed until the death of Arafat in November 2004 that the Palestinians had been completely discredited as potential peace partners, so there was no point in negotiating new agreements with them. The emphasis on the Palestinian discourse about the rights of refugees to return to Israel, and the increasing and escalating recourse to terrorism through suicide bombers against Israeli targets within the State of Israel, especially after February 2001, have reinforced the appeal of this narrative, as epitomized in the resounding victory of PM Sharon and the Likud Party in the February 2003 Israeli elections, and the popular support for the June 2004 Israeli unilateral disengagement plan from the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria (in the West Bank). The election of Abu Mazen on 9 January 2005 to the Presidency of the PA might change the parameters of this narrative, as the new Palestinian leader openly denounces violence and terrorism and supports the re-launching of political negotiations with Israel toward a final peace agreement within the contours of the non-official Geneva Accords of November 2003.

The Palestinian Narrative of the Second Intifada

As can be expected, the Palestinian narrative is diametrically opposed to the Israeli story. According to the PLO, the second intifada started as a popular uprising that resulted from the failure of the seven-year interim period, rather than just the Camp David impasse. The deterioration in Palestinian daily life in the territories, much worsened by the division of the West Bank into 'eight non-contiguous ghettos' that turned Palestinian population centres into 'large open-air prisons', created a sense of frustration, anger and desperation that was doomed to explode (PLO, 2002: 2).

From the Palestinian standpoint, the continuing occupation of the territories has been the root cause of the war, leading to a sense of alienation, frustration, and anger against Israel. The PLO suggests as 'underlying causes' of the war the same arguments that explained the failure of the Oslo process: (1) the doubling in the number of settlers between 1993 and 2000; (2) the restriction of Palestinian freedom of movement through checkpoints and by-pass roads; (3) the confiscation of Palestinian land and demolition of Palestinian homes; (4) the Israeli failure to fulfil its formal obligations, including territorial withdrawals and release of political prisoners. They add to this list the way Barak conducted the talks in 1999–2000 and humiliated their elected President (Arafat), and their absolute lack of trust and confidence about the Israeli ultimate intentions (Barghutti in Lacqueur and Rubin, 2001: 561; Slater, 2001: 191).

In addition to these underlying causes, the Palestinians refer to two immediate catalysts for the explosion of violence: Ariel Sharon's visit to the Mount Temple on 28 September 2000, and the lethal use of force by the Israeli police and army in repressing the initial and spontaneous outburst of violence initiated by unarmed masses of demonstrators in the first week of the intifada (Buttu, 2002; Mitchell Report, 2001: 7; Kurtzner, 2002: 2). Since then, the Palestinians have been engaged in a war of national liberation against Israeli occupation, with the intended goal of reaching sovereignty over the 'Palestinian lands' (the entire West Bank and the Gaza Strip) (Kuttab, 2002: see also Chazan, 2002).

For the Palestinians, the escalation of their liberation war after February 2001 has been directly linked to Israeli PM Sharon's deliberate policy of a systematic destruction of the Oslo agreements, the PA itself, its physical and political infrastructure, the Palestinian security establishment and Chairman Arafat being zeroed as a personal target himself. The Palestinians have repeatedly declared that their intifada is not directed against the state or people of Israel proper, but only against the continued occupation of their lands. And yet the spread of outright Palestinian terrorism into Israel might have changed the moral and practical equation of their plight (Slater, 2001: 191). Similarly to the Israelis, the Palestinians have also reached the conclusion that there is no peace partner in the other side, and that 'The intifada will last as long as the occupation lasts. Israelis never let go of anything without being obliged to do so by force' (Barghutti in Lacqueur and Rubin, 2001: 561). Thus, both Israeli and Palestinian narratives shared a mutual perception of the conflict until November 2004:

There was no way out as long as the current enemy's leader (i.e. Arafat or Sharon) was around. The only available option was to continue to use force and violence (i.e. terrorism and military repression), since the other party only understood the language of force. In this sense, the death of Arafat opened new opportunities, and a potential turning point for the conflict. It remains to be seen whether the election of a new Palestinian leadership and the formation of a national unity government in Israel might facilitate the return to peace negotiations during 2005.

An Assessment of the Second Intifada

In juxtaposition to the characterization of the second intifada as either a Palestinian war of extermination (the Israeli version) or a Palestinian war of national liberation (the Palestinian version), my own interpretation suggests the simultaneity of not just two different wars but *even four*: (a) a Palestinian war to destroy the State of Israel, as epitomized by the suicide bombing attacks of *Hamas* and *Jihad*, and, since 2002, of some elements of the more mainstream *Fatah* faction (such as the *Al-Aqsa Brigades*), directly associated with Arafat and the PA; (b) a Palestinian war to create an independent state alongside Israel, ending the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza after 1967, as illustrated by the guerrilla actions against the Israeli army in the occupied territories; (c) a legitimate and just Israeli war of self-defence against Palestinian terrorism, in order to secure Israel within the pre-1967 borders; and (d) an Israeli expansionist war to keep the settlements and hold onto the 'liberated' (occupied) Biblical territories of 'Greater Israel'. As Michael Walzer argues, throughout the course of the peace process, extremists on both sides kept fighting the illegitimate first and fourth types of war. The eruption of the Palestinian violence in late September 2000 put in motion a process that escalated into these four *simultaneous* and contemporary wars (Walzer, 2002; see also Yeoshua, 2002).

Since the beginning of the war, each side has constantly blamed the other. The Israeli government declared that the Palestinians had initiated their uprising to force the Israelis to give them what they could not get at Camp David through negotiations. Conversely, the Palestinians argued the opposite: that Barak and Sharon conspired together to destroy the peace process once they realized that the Palestinians were not ready to accept the Israeli ultimatum at Camp David. While the Palestinians conclude that Israel has been adamant about keeping its occupation of the territories indefinitely, the Israelis argue that the Palestinians want to destroy Israel. Since the fall of 2000, 'what each society is currently projecting to each other is distorted, and this distortion is exacerbating an already bad situation' (Kurtzner, 2002: 2). Hence, in the past four years Israelis and Palestinians have escalated from a bad situation to a catastrophic one.

In the first few weeks after 29 September 2000, the Palestinian uprising was still not catalogued as a war, but rather as a series of confrontations between largely unarmed Palestinians and armed Israeli security forces that immediately resorted to excessive and deadly use of force, fuelling a further escalation of the violence. At the same time, it is equally true that

Palestinians initiated many of these acts of violence (such as the shootings at the Israeli neighbourhood of Gilo, in southeast Jerusalem), which included members of their security forces. Moreover, since the collapse of Camp David, Arafat had reneged on the promise to prevent and fight terrorism. Long before April 2002 and the destruction of the Palestinian security infrastructure in the West Bank by Israel, Arafat and the PA did not act seriously to repress Palestinian terrorism when they could. Since April 2002, even if they had wanted, it might already be too late (see Cordesman, 2002).

After the initial three months of the confrontation, and especially since the change of government in Israel in February of 2001, Arafat and the PA became increasingly unable (and/or unwilling) to reverse course, partly because of the rising political costs domestically and the progressive degradation of their own internal control as a result of Israel's military actions. By adopting the 'default option', which increased the resort to suicide bombings, the situation on the ground has continued to deteriorate. At the same time, the Israeli government has manoeuvred to postpone the re-initiation of political negotiations 'under fire'. Instead, PM Sharon has preferred his default option, the deliberated dismantling of the political, institutional and security framework of the PA, as established by the Oslo Accords (Sayigh, 2002–03: 7). Recently, Israel has adopted a unilateral scheme by deciding to disengage from the Gaza Strip and Northern Samaria without negotiations. The implementation of that plan remains to be seen.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have traced two contending narratives of the past and present of Israeli–Palestinian relations, with special emphasis upon the last two years of the Oslo peace process (2000–01) and the ongoing war between Israelis and Palestinians since September 2000. I have attempted to identify the biases of both parties, while explaining their rationale and understanding their logical fallacies and mutual misperceptions. The recognition of these narratives as a form of contemporary Middle Eastern *Rashomon* is a crucial precondition to extricate us from the current war and to think about the future in more constructive terms.

It is obvious that there are alternative structural, non-ideational explanations for the failure of the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations, as related to the asymmetrical distribution of power, domestic politics, the (failed) role of the mediator and lack of implementation and mismanagement of the negotiations themselves. At the same time, sticky narratives in situations of conflict carry a long way in explaining the current stalemate. As one of the Israeli participants in the Oslo process suggested: 'The myth that "Barak gave them [the Palestinians] almost everything and Arafat responded with terror" has become one of the deepest pits blocking the road back to negotiations' (Shaul Arieli, quoted in Eldar, 2003).

Thus, the rationale for the paper has been that narratives, which are 'stories with a plot', do matter, since they shape our identity and our norms,

which are crucial components of our reconstruction of social reality. In other words, narratives help to recreate self-perpetuating processes of wishful thinking and self-fulfilling prophecies by providing us with a moral and practical justification, *ex post facto*, for our acts. Hence, narratives, which are particular constructions about the past, provide a link to the present and might affect our future (Barnett, 2002: 65–8).

At the general theoretical level, the use of discourse analysis to assess the social reconstruction and interpretation of facts and events is particularly pertinent to our understanding of the dynamics of clashing narratives in protracted conflicts. The framing and re-framing of events have taken a vicious or pernicious direction. Instead of moving from conflict to cooperation, the collapse of the Israeli–Palestinian process has brought with it a resurgence of the traditional, antagonistic narratives where the parties see themselves locked in a zero-sum situation, reverting to the mutual images and frames they sustained before the launching of the peace process in 1993.

One of the possible explanations for these clashing narratives is the difficulty and confusion in separating the dreams and grand designs of peoples and their national movements from the compromise and pragmatism necessary to address their political realities. There is probably more than a grain of truth in the Israeli assertion that Palestinians still dream of being rid of the Jews and destroying Israel (the old idea of ‘politicide’, which is still a valid programme for some terrorist Palestinian groups with genocidal intentions). Similarly, I venture to argue that many Israeli Jews have a similar dream regarding their Palestinian neighbours; if not killing them, at least ‘voluntarily asking’ them to leave the occupied territories to Sinai, Jordan, or elsewhere. That ‘dream’ is even part of a political platform of an Israeli party that has gained seven seats in the 2003 parliamentary elections and was a member of the ruling coalition until recently. If we do not manage to draw this rational distinction between dreams and realities, then a tragic process of wishful thinking and self-fulfilling prophecies will continue to dominate the common (and tragic) fate of both peoples. As Robert Malley argued pointedly:

[T]he way the two sides choose to view yesterday largely will determine how they choose to behave tomorrow. And if unchallenged, their respective interpretations will gradually harden into divergent versions of reality and unsalable truths. (2001)

In other words, we might conclude prematurely, or in a deterministic and fatalistic way, that the Palestinians are incapable of reaching a peace agreement, and that Israel wants to continue its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza indefinitely. That is not, or at least it should not be, necessarily the case.

Note

This is a revised and updated version of a paper delivered at the Department of Government, Georgetown University, on 8 April 2002. I thank Orly Kacowicz,

Alan Dowty, Galia Press-Bar-Nathan, Yael Krispin, Gerardo Leibner, Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, Gil Friedman and Louis Kriesberg for their comments on previous versions of this paper.

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ARIE M. KACOWICZ, PhD, Princeton University (1992), is a senior lecturer in International Relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. He is the author of *Peaceful Territorial Change* (1994), *Zones of Peace in the Third World* (1998) and *The Impact of Norms in International Society: The Latin American Experience, 1881–2001* (2005), and co-editor of *Stable Peace among Nations* (2000). Address: Department of International Relations, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel.
[email: mskaco@mscc.huji.ac.il]