

# THE VIABILITY OF ISSUE RECONCEPTUALIZATION IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

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## Abstract:

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most notorious intractable conflicts of the century. Historically, two streams of thought have dominated the academic realm of conflict resolution and reconciliation efforts: those which focus on reconciling final status issues, and those which focus on reconceptualizing identity. However, what has been neglected is the relationship between the two, or how identity affects individual's perspectives on final status issues. As such, I propose that through re-conceptualization of issues, perspectives can be altered in such a way so that final status issues are no longer viewed as zero-sum. Such a re-conceptualization subsequently lays the foundations for more effective reconciliation and resolution efforts as both sides can envision potential gains. While this in itself is not an all-encompassing solution due to the dynamism of the conflict, when used in conjunction with other methods it provides yet another opportunity for open discussion and debate concerning resolution and reconciliation.

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**Keywords:** Israeli-Palestine, reconceptualization, psycho-social, reconciliation

## Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most notorious intractable conflicts of the century. Historically, two streams of thought have dominated the academic realm of conflict resolution and reconciliation efforts: those which focus on reconciling final status issues, and those which focus on reconceptualizing identity. However, what has been neglected is the relationship between the two, or how identity affects individual's perspectives on final status issues. As such, I propose that through re-conceptualization of issues, perspectives can be altered in such a way so that final status issues are no longer viewed as zero-sum. Such a re-conceptualization subsequently lays the foundations for more effective reconciliation and resolution efforts as both sides can envision potential gains. While this in itself is not an all-encompassing solution due to the dynamism of the conflict, when used in conjunction with other methods it provides yet another opportunity for open discussion and debate concerning resolution and reconciliation.

## Main Text

Identities are of pivotal importance because they allow individuals to situate themselves within, and understand their relation to, the wider world. Identity is constructed and maintained in two ways: by an individual's interactions with others, and through membership in reference groups. According to Cooley's concept of the 'Looking Glass Self', the bulk of an individual's self-identity is developed based on social interactions.<sup>245</sup> This becomes an important fact to remember when studying intractable conflicts, as negatively-perceived interactions between two opposing groups undoubtedly contribute to the conflict's perpetuation. Secondly, reference groups – groups defined by similar worldviews, characteristics, and/or values – offer individuals the opportunity to ascend past individual self-identity and towards a collective group identity.<sup>246</sup> Reference groups can be formed on virtually any basis – ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, etc. – and thus often intersect and overlap, for so long as two reference groups are not in direct opposition to one another - necessitating oppositional

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<sup>245</sup> Elbedour et al., "Identity Formation in the Shadow of Conflict: Projective Drawings by Palestinian and Israeli Arab Children from the West Bank and Gaza," 219

<sup>246</sup> Shibutani and Rothman, from *Ibid*

definitions - an individual can ascribe to a variety of reference groups.<sup>247</sup> Due to their exclusivity, reference groups inherently create 'in-groups', those who are part of the specific reference group, and 'out-groups', those who are not. In situations of conflict, the out-group is typically vilified and delegitimized.<sup>248</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, membership in a reference group provides an individual with a specific 'collective narrative', i.e. a way to understand the world in a meaningful, organized, and predictable way.<sup>249</sup> Existing outside of a linear time frame, they aim to tie "...at least two real or fictive events or situations in [a] time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other."<sup>250</sup> In simpler terms, collective narratives attempt to identify themes within real-world events which explain and bolster the reference group's understanding of the world. Presented through popular culture (e.g. television), myths, rituals (e.g. holidays), and biased accounts of specific events,<sup>251</sup> collective narratives shun ambiguity, focusing instead on "...enduring beliefs shared by society members..."<sup>252</sup> For example, the 1948 war is understood very differently by the Israelis and the Palestinians. Known as the 'War of Independence' by Israelis, in Israeli school curricula the Arabs are established as the aggressors and there is little (if any) mention of the Palestinian refugees created as a result. Oppositely, the Palestinians understand The Catastrophe (*al-Nakbah*) as the beginning of a war of aggression against their national identity, and focus heavily on the resulting refugee population the conflict created. Here, the Israelis are depicted as the aggressors and accorded full responsibility for creating the refugee problem.<sup>253</sup>

Collective narratives are also dynamic: they do not just re-tell the past, but shape the future by ascribing moral judgments on information/events.<sup>254</sup> By assigning a moral judgment (e.g. truth or lie, good or bad), collective narratives directly shape individual/group perception re: specific situations. With this in mind, astute actors can then use collective narratives to individual/group emotions, persuade public opinion, and thus control real-world reactions. In conflict situations, dominant political actors on either side go to extreme measures to ensure that the dominant narrative bolsters their own position and that alternative/counter-narratives are not given any ground to stand on, lest these counter-narratives create or exacerbate existing internal cleavages. Stagnation, inertia, and/or apathy additionally make the in-group's narrative more susceptible to doubts, which also threaten cohesion.<sup>255</sup> We saw this behaviour in the previous example of the 1948 conflict: Israelis know the conflict as the 'War of Independence', which evokes ideas of an oppressed minority overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles to fight for and win their independence. No mention is made of the adversary's narrative or motivations; they are simply a one-dimensional 'aggressor' against which the justified in-group struggles.

In his 1984 study on Reciprocal Interaction Effects, Kaplowitz demonstrates the interaction between perceptions and reality. He posits that, depending on the capabilities and ideologies of those involved, an actor can strategize a plan which aims to create a specific outcome. In his analysis, Kaplowitz provides five roles which states assume: totalist, long-run totalist, competitive use of force/deterrent-punitive, firm but cooperative, and conciliatory. Each of these roles exhibit specific characteristics; for example, (long-run) totalists believe that only through the annihilation of the out-group can security be ensured.<sup>256</sup> He argues that, if the in-group state knows the roles both itself and

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<sup>247</sup> Elbedour et al. note that "[w]hen two reference groups are in conflict, or competing for the same resource, individuals [define] themselves both in terms of their membership to their own group, as well as in reference to the other group. (220)

<sup>248</sup> Bar-Tal and Salomon, *Narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 8; Aharon Bizman and Michael Hoffman. "Expectations, Emotions, and Preferred Responses regarding the Arab-Israeli Conflict: An Attributional Analysis." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 37, no. 1 (1993): 140

<sup>249</sup> Bar-Tal and Salomon, *Narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 2

<sup>250</sup> Shaul Shenhav, "Political Narratives and Political Reality." *International Politics Science Review* 27, no. 3 (2006): 247

<sup>251</sup> Sucharov notes that events which contribute to collective narratives can be active (current), one step removed (e.g. from a past generation), or ancient. (27)

<sup>252</sup> Bar-Tal and Salomon, *Narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 2

<sup>253</sup> Sucharov, *The International Self: Psychoanalysis and the Search for Israeli-Palestinian Peace*, 3

<sup>254</sup> Shenhav, "Political Narratives and Political Reality," 250

<sup>255</sup> Daniel Bar-Tal et al., "Socio-Psychological Barriers to Peace Making: The Case of the Israeli Jewish Society." *Social Issues and Policy Review* 4, no. 1 (2010): 70-72; Beit-Hallahmi, "Some Psychosocial and Cultural Factors in the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Review of the Literature," 274

<sup>256</sup> Noel Kaplowitz, "Psychopolitical Dimensions of International Relations: The Reciprocal Effects of Conflict Strategies." *International Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (1984): 377

the out-group state ascribe to, as well as the (military/social) capabilities each state have at their disposal, then the in-group can ascertain the tangible costs and benefits, and choose their response accordingly.<sup>257</sup> Let us use the example of a conflict involving a totalist versus a competitive use of force/deterrent-punitive: if the totalist is more powerful, she will attempt to overrun its adversary, whereas if power parity exists, the competitive use of force/deterrent-punitive state will most likely drive the totalist force into latency.<sup>258</sup> Consequently, the totalist will choose whether or not to attempt to overrun her adversary based on her relative strength to her adversary: yes if stronger, no if weaker.

Thus, we can see the fundamental role that collective narratives play in prolonging intractable conflicts. Created and maintained by dominant societal beliefs, collective narratives shape individuals'/groups' perspectives and influence them toward specific responses. In identity-based conflict, this becomes even more problematic, as each group internalizes a conflict ethos<sup>259</sup> - a collective narrative which attributes positive acts to the in-group and negative acts to the out-group - and remains wholeheartedly convinced of the zero-sum nature between the two sides. This zero-sum perspective has inadvertently been ascribed to the final status issues as well, due to the perceived tie between identities and the issues involved.

With this in mind, any hopes of reconciliation between the two sides must include a focus on reconstructing each actor's collective narratives. This can be approached in two ways: A. by delinking the final status issues from identity so that they are perceived as stand-alone events as opposed to a part of a wider narrative; or B. by moving away from the perceived zero-sum status of these issues towards one open to full or partial reconciliation. As touched upon earlier, option A would be extremely hard to implement due to the durability of identities and the difficulty in instigating critical self-analysis on a collective level.<sup>260</sup> Therefore, Option B appears to be the more realistic choice, and as such is the my point of focus.

In order to realize Option B several steps must be taken, the majority of which focus on the re-direction of the conflict ethos towards a peace ethos which, scholars hope, will then create conditions conducive to understanding and reconciliation. For this to occur, the first step must focus on the legitimization of the out-group's collective narrative.<sup>261</sup> In this case, legitimization is not synonymous with internalization: the in-group can objectively understand the motivations and perceptions of the out-group without changing its own collective narrative.<sup>262 263</sup> However, by recognizing that the out-group's narrative is considered legitimate to the out-group and therefore plays a role in the conflict, the in-group can use this newfound understanding of the out-group to formulate a strategic response, as demonstrated by Kaplowitz.<sup>264</sup>

Secondarily, a distinction must be drawn between an ideological victory and an operational victory.<sup>265</sup> Both sides currently believe they would both be better off if the other did not exist; however, this reality is extremely unlikely to happen in the near future. As such, despite the fact that both sides are ideologically unwilling to sacrifice their hardened positions on the final status issues, they must come to terms with the realistic facts that some type of negotiations are necessary. One way this can be accomplished is by subordinating the respective goals of each reference group to one overarching collective narrative of peace. As previously established, collective narratives are created and maintained by the in-group's social conditions and perceived history. As such, peace movements,

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<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*, 398

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid*, 389

<sup>259</sup> Conflict ethos encompass five different roles: the belief in the justness of one's goals; the security dilemma; the promotion of positive collective in-group images; the delegitimization and dehumanization of the out-group; and the promotion of patriotism, social unity, and utopian peace. (Bar-Tal and Salomon, *Narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 10-16)

<sup>260</sup> Bar-Tal, "From Intractable Conflict through Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation: Psychological Analysis," 353

<sup>261</sup> Bar-Tal and Salomon, *Narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 19

<sup>262</sup> Kelman, "The Political Psychology of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: How Can We Overcome the Barriers to a Negotiated Solution?" 362

<sup>263</sup> Examples of this can be found in Rosen (Tigal Rosen, "Transformation of Central and Peripheral Beliefs in the Eyes of the 'Other': Challenges for Peace Education." *Journal of Transformative Education* 7, no. 2 (2009): 140)

<sup>264</sup> Kaplowitz, "Psychopolitical Dimensions of International Relations: The Reciprocal Effects of Conflict Strategies," 375

<sup>265</sup> Kelman, "The Political Psychology of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: How Can We Overcome the Barriers to a Negotiated Solution?" 360

revisionist historians, domestic media, artists, and other actors and/or forms of expression can alter how people perceive their collective narratives.<sup>266</sup> We have also established that individuals can belong to several reference groups (and thus adhere to several collective narratives) so long as they do not oppose each other.

This new subordinate narrative must be explicit in what it will and will not provide; another utopian goal which proves to be unreachable would just add yet another intractable factor into the conflict.<sup>267</sup> In order to realize this, both Israel and Palestine (represented by the P.A.) must also establish and maintain unwavering support for this superordinate collective narrative. This includes, but is not limited to, accepting external support, putting down domestic opponents to peace, and involving social institutions in re-shaping society's goals.<sup>268</sup> It is one thing to preach commitment to peace, but another to actually institutionalize it. Lastly, each group must be willing to look towards the future instead of the past; only by doing so can perceived self-victimization be avoided.<sup>269</sup> Creating a superordinate goal of peace does not necessitate the destruction of other collective narratives, but instead adds an additional tier which takes priority over the intractable positions each side currently hold.<sup>270</sup> Within their smaller collective narratives, each side can internally believe that they alone hold the 'right' to the land/Jerusalem/to return, so long as peace is prioritized as the ultimate goal for both groups. In this way, common ground can be established and held as neither side will risk any action which may jeopardize this superordinate goal.

However, some drawbacks do exist. First, each society must overcome the belief that forgiving is equivalent to forgetting. At this point, the conflict has become so entrenched into the collective narratives of each respective group that it would not be feasible to expect either side to forget the atrocities committed against them, nor for their respective politicians to ask it.<sup>271</sup> So long as neither side is willing to admit their faults – and this will continue to be the case so long as material power disparities exist and national identities are perceived to be at stake – true reconciliation cannot exist. What this at best offers, then, is an extended opportunity for peaceful conditions that will hopefully evolve into conditions suitable for reconciliation, given enough time.

Secondarily, the current material power disparities on the ground make it very difficult for the Palestinians to create and maintain the new superordinate collective narrative of peace. In order for the superordinate narrative to become dominant, both the government and civil society must focus on promoting it and suppressing all attempts to deviate away from it. For the Palestinians, this promotion and suppression becomes increasingly difficult: not only does the P.A.<sup>272</sup> not have a monopoly on the entire Palestinian territory (since Hamas controls the Gaza Strip), but they also do not currently have the physical capacity in the form of police forces to stem radical behaviour.

This leads us to the third and most controversial issue: the 'chicken and egg' argument of what comes first, material peace or narrative reconstruction. As we have witnessed, establishing material peace without first addressing the underlying tensions surrounding identity issues (i.e. mutual recognition and legitimization) is especially difficult to generate. The Oslo Accords, the most recent attempt at just that, was largely stalled by parties who still internalized the divisions between the two sides and refused to accept some type of compromise.<sup>273</sup> Concurrently, narrative reconceptualization and reconstruction cannot occur while power disparities between the two sides remain so stark. Rothman and Olson note that in situations where resource allocation is unequal between sides – an undisputed fact in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – traditional methods are often unsuccessful because they do not deal with the underlying effects of structural inequalities. These structural inequalities are

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<sup>266</sup> Sucharov, *The International Self: Psychoanalysis and the Search for Israeli-Palestinian Peace*, 35

<sup>267</sup> Bar-Tal, "From Intractable Conflict through Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation: Psychological Analysis," 359

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid*, 361

<sup>269</sup> Kelman notes that "[n]o matter how strong interest in negotiation is, no leaders will enter into them under conditions that leave their right to national existence in doubt." (353)

<sup>270</sup> Bar-Tal, "From Intractable Conflict through Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation: Psychological Analysis," 357

<sup>271</sup> Cehajic et al., "Forgive and Forget? Antecedents and Consequences of Intergroup Forgiveness in Bosnia and Herzegovina," 363

<sup>272</sup> Despite all of its shortcomings, scholars predominantly focus on the P.A. because it is the only agency that is widely accepted as legitimate, is not under occupation, and is not beholden to foreign powers. (Kelman, "The Political Psychology of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: How Can We Overcome the Barriers to a Negotiated Solution?" 352)

<sup>273</sup> Ian Lustick, "The Oslo Agreement as an Obstacle to Peace." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 27, no. 1 (1997): 62

conducive to protracted conflicts because they aggravate the security issues of either side, making each side feel more vulnerable. In turn, this vulnerability leads each side to harden their own positions, lest they put themselves further at risk of having their interests ignored. This results in a negative feedback loop, where neither side will compromise their positions in pursuit of the common good, as it means risking their position all-together.<sup>274</sup> Additionally, as mentioned, states who do not hold a monopoly on violence cannot ensure the predominance of the peaceful superordinate identity, which undermines the collective narrative reconstruction.<sup>275</sup> Therefore, we once again are introduced to a seemingly intractable situation where both methods of resolution and reconciliation require the other to be implemented first in order to ensure their success.

### Conclusion

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a complex, multi-faceted issue which concerns a variety of overlapping issues, including those of both material distribution and identity. In this paper, I have attempted to introduce an additional method for creating conditions suitable for establishing resolution and reconciliation: the reconceptualization of final status issues. In my proposal, I have attempted to mesh these two considerations together by asserting that a reconceptualization of final status issues, so that they are not perceived as zero-sum nor associated with national identity security, may provide additional room for common ground to be found.

In closing, I would suggest that both material peace and narrative reconstruction should be pursued simultaneously. This will allow the flexibility necessary for the Palestinians to establish stronger domestic institutions, and for both sides to warm to the idea of compromise for the sake of peace.<sup>276</sup> The reconceptualization of final status issues will assure both sides that their national identities are not in jeopardy, thus prompting them to enter into negotiations and make compromises, as these would no longer be synonymous with the eradication of their identities, thus providing an opportunity for common ground and positive steps forward to be established. While reconceptualization is not an exclusive solution to the peace, it does offer an additional perspective that may be successfully employed alongside other measures.

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<sup>274</sup> Rothman and Olson, "From Interests to Identities: Towards a New Emphasis in Interactive Conflict Resolution," 293

<sup>275</sup> Rowley and Webb, "Israel and Palestine: The Slow Road to Peace or the Fast Track to Mutual Annihilation?" 11

<sup>276</sup> Sucharov notes that the stronger party (namely Israeli) has no real incentive to change the status quo because, aside from a collective narrative of their underpowered neighbours, Israeli citizens are generally not directly affected by the conflict. (2)

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