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National narratives and the Oslo peace process: How peacebuilding paradigms address conflicts over history

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ABSTRACT. National narratives are an essential part of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Little is said, however, on how the Oslo Peace Process sought to address these narratives. Conventional wisdom argues that the peace process initiated in the 1990s largely ignored the matter. This article challenges this view, arguing instead that the peace process was and continues to be actively engaged in solving the narrative wars that divide Israelis and Palestinians. To shed light on these solutions, this article looks beyond the agreements of the Oslo Peace Process and focuses on the peacebuilding paradigms that informed it, more specifically, the national partition and the liberal peace paradigms. These prescribe two solutions to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict over history: narrative partition and evasion. In their implementation, the article concludes, these solutions imposed greater identity costs on the Palestinian narrative than on the Israeli one.

KEYWORDS: Israel, liberal peace, national narratives, Oslo Peace Process, Palestine, partition

Introduction

This article focuses on the effects of the Oslo Peace Process on the Israeli and Palestinian national narratives. It is widely acknowledged that history represents a barrier to long-term peace between Israelis and Palestinians. ‘The two narratives butt up against each other. They view similar events from different angles...the two narratives speak strongly about this grievance or that slight, but from perspectives that are placed orthogonally to each other’ (Rotberg 2006:2). Given the danger these national narratives pose, one would expect that the architects of the Israeli–Palestinian peace process would have paid close attention to them. If they are part of the problem, then they should be part of the solution (Auerbach 2009; Dwyer 1999; Kelman 1997, 1998; Rouhana 2004; Strömbom 2014).¹ Scholars argue, however, that the agreements that make up the Israeli–Palestinian peace process have largely ignored the matter. And indeed, there was no mention of narratives in the 1993 Declaration of Principles (Hill 2008:70; Kelman 1998). Moreover, the Oslo Peace Process took an

incremental approach to peace, so that the thorniest aspect of the conflict – the issue of Palestinian refugees, the status of Jerusalem, and future borders – were pushed till the end of the negotiating process. These final status issues are constitutive of both narratives, and in some cases, they operate as cultural taboos (Ben-Yosef Hirsch 2007; Olick and Levy 1997). Addressing them would impose considerable identity costs that the negotiating parties were not willing to incur at the time they signed the agreement. For the Israeli side, for example, dealing with the issue of Palestinian refugees of 1948 is monetarily as well as symbolically costly, since it requires acknowledging the Israeli responsibility for the forced transfer of the indigenous Palestinian population. This would alter the understanding of their state's founding and shake a core element of their national story. By delaying these final status issues, argues Paul Scham, the Oslo Peace Process delayed dealing with the narratives of both sides (Scham 2006; Scham et al. 2013). And while later agreements such as the Israeli–Palestinian Interim Agreement (Israel–PLO 1996: A. 22, chap. 4) and the Wye River Memorandum (1989: Section A, point 3) acknowledge the problems of 'historical propaganda', they failed to suggest any solution to it and do not represent a significant attempt to tackle the matter of conflicting narratives.²

As a result, scholars and critics have argued that the peace process was mainly concerned with the present and the immediate future, not with the past (Hill 2008; Khalidi 1999; Scham 2006). This has been met with both criticism and praise. 'The absence of an honest effort among Palestinians and Israelis to confront the painful facts of history', argued Rashid Khalidi, 'has seriously hindered reconciliation between Israel and eight Arab countries with which it is at peace or has commercial or diplomatic relations' (1999: 224). The Israeli novelist Amos Oz disagreed: 'at long last', he wrote, 'the Arab-Israeli conflict is not a theological dispute or a racial clash... it is now a dispute over real estate' (Oz 1993: 248). For Oz, reducing of the peace process to an issue of 'real estate' was a step forward, because it emptied the land of its respective narratives (its 'theological' and 'racial' content), and turned it into a commodity that can be negotiated, divided, and exchanged. For Khalidi, however, it was a step backward, because ignoring history meant turning a blind eye to a key aspect of the conflict. Regardless of their disagreement, both assume that the national narratives that divide Palestinians and Israelis did not constitute an important aspect of the peace process.

This article challenges this position. What the above scholars miss is the extent to which the Oslo Peace Process in fact *did* offer 'solutions' to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict over narratives. While these solutions were not directly brought to the negotiating table, they are embedded within the set of beliefs, implicit assumptions, and frameworks of the peace agreement – what I refer to as peacebuilding paradigms. By investigating these paradigms, this article provides an insight into how the Oslo Peace Process sought to address the conflicting Israeli–Palestinian narratives. The article's contribution is twofold. First, it reevaluates the Israeli–Palestinian peace process by emphasizing its effects on the narratives of both parties. While a lot has been written on the negative impact national narratives have on the conflict, little has been said on the

influence the peace process has had on these narratives, an imbalance this article seeks to redress. Secondly, and by focusing on how peacebuilding paradigms affect national narratives, the article provides conceptual tools for thinking about the effects peace processes can have on national narratives. These tools can be applied to other cases where national narratives are sources of division and conflict.

The article is divided into four sections. It begins by identifying the major aspects of the Palestinian and Israeli narratives. It then presents the concept of peacebuilding paradigms that, I argue, allows us to identify attempts to solve the Israeli and Palestinian conflict over narratives. Next, the article examines the national partition paradigm and how it prescribes *partitioning* the narratives of Israelis and Palestinians so that their national stories are no longer mutually exclusive, but rather mirror the partitioning of the territory along the 1967 borders. The final section examines the liberal peace paradigm and shows how it prescribes an *evasion* of the past. The implementation of both solutions, the article concludes, imposed greater identity costs, or burdens on the Palestinian narrative.

Mutually exclusive narratives

Let us begin with a working definition of national narratives. National narratives are stories that nations tell themselves and others about who they are, who they were, and who they want to be (Anderson 2006; Bhabha 1990). They are based on a selection of meaningful events that shape a nation's past, present, and future. Key amongst these events is a nation's founding and the moments leading to it, as well as the setbacks it experiences as it constitutes itself as an independent entity. Unlike most stories, however, national stories have no endings. The nations that constitute today's international system are very much alive, and many view themselves as immortal. Chronological endings are therefore replaced with end goals to be met (Carrol 2007; Smith 2003) such as the preservation of the Jewish people, the independence of the Arab people, socialism, liberty, or democracy. These end goals provide an orientation to the story, a lens through which new events are interpreted.

Within the nation itself, there are many narratives that intersect, complicate, and challenge the national plot. Not everybody shares the same story, especially when one considers the ways in which gender, class, and minorities have been co-opted or excluded by nationalist ideologies (McClintock 1993; Sayigh 2007; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). Given the contestation they face, we should not reify *the* national story or the national stories that are at war. This, however, does not mean that there is no such thing as *a* national narrative. Surely, there is not one written history that everybody adheres to, but there is a 'basic storyline', or a master narrative (Zerubavel 1995: 6) that structures the many artefacts that narrate a nation's story – calendars, monuments, textbooks, and anthems.

Given this definition, what are the Palestinian and Israeli narratives and how are these narratives at war? The Zionist narrative is premised on the religious and ethnic link between the ancient Israelites and the modern Israelis. This continuous link was disrupted when the Jewish people were sent into exile (Scham et al. 2013). Far from their homeland, the fate of the Jewish people was in other nations' hands. This was a dreadful period characterized by discrimination and suffering that spanned centuries. Rather than release them from their suffering, the modern era constitutes its culmination: the pogroms in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century, the Dreyfus affair at the beginning of the twentieth, and finally, the Holocaust. These events all point to one conclusion: the Jewish problem can only be solved when the Jewish nation returns to its ancestral land. The Zionist movement will put an end to the woes of the Jewish diaspora (*Galut*) and redeem its people (*Geula*) by securing it a land and a state (Gur Ze'ev 1998: 163).

The Palestinian master narrative is structured as the opposite of the Zionist one. Rather than ethnic and religious continuity, however, it is a story of continuous *presence* on the land. Palestinians are and have always been the inhabitants of historical Palestine. The Palestinian narrative strongly emphasizes the period starting with the Arab conquest, but it encompasses many other historical layers that include the Canaanites, the Philistines, and even the Israelites (Scham et al. 2013). British imperialism and Zionism disrupted this continuity, first in 1917 with the Balfour Declaration, and then in 1948 with the creation of the state of Israel. The latter is commemorated as the *Nakba* ('the catastrophe' in Arabic) in reference to the forced expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from historical Palestine. And while Palestinian national consciousness predates 1948 (Khalidi 1997), the *Nakba* operates as a founding moment in the Palestinian national story (Abu Lughod and Sa'di 2007), followed by the *Naksa*, 'the setback' of the 1967 war that caused more displacement and the loss of all of historical Palestine. The above summaries are crude simplifications, but they provide an overview the Israeli and Palestinian national storylines that are constitutive of both nationalisms.

While both narratives appear as opposite mirror images, the conflict over narratives that divide Israelis and Palestinians are not symmetrical and should not be examined as such.³ History, as the saying goes, is written by the victor, and since 1948, Israel has been the victor. As a result, it established its narrative at the expense of the Palestinian narrative, by, for example, physically destroying, repopulating, and renaming many Palestinian towns (Benvenisti 2002; Kimmerling 1983: 208; Masalha 2012) or outlawing Palestinian commemorative practices (Swedenburg 2003). This asymmetry is reinforced by the fact that, for decades, the Palestinians lacked the proper institutions (state, museums, and archives) to promote their narrative (Khalidi 1997: 90). This situation changed when Palestinians were given an official right to narrate their story with the Oslo Peace Process. As this article will show, however, this did not address the asymmetry between the two parties.

From peace agreements to peacebuilding paradigms

To examine the ways in which the peace process sought to address conflicts over history, I turn to the peacebuilding paradigms that underlie the Israeli–Palestinian peace process. I define a peacebuilding paradigm as a set of diagnostic and prescriptive tools that allow a community of ‘peacebuilders’ to understand the causes of war and devise solutions to stop these wars from recurring. By cause of war, I mean explanations for why conflict generally occurs, not a *casus belli* – a specific reason that a country uses to justify going to war. Similarly, by solutions to war, I mean long-term solutions that will stop parties from resorting to violence altogether, not peacemaking attempts designed to stop parties from physically attacking one another. Peacebuilding is different from peacemaking because it aims for a lasting peace (Galtung 1969) that is designed to ‘identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse into conflict’ (United Nations 1992: 6).

For Thomas Kuhn, a scientific paradigm brings together a scientific community that is composed of the ‘practitioners of a scientific specialty’ and the ‘producers and validators of scientific knowledge’ (2012: 176–177). A peacebuilding paradigm does the same to a ‘peacebuilding community’ – it brings together a loose collection of political bodies that produce and validate understandings of conflict and peace. This community includes the parties to the conflict, third parties (major powers such as the United States and the European Union), supranational diplomatic bodies (the Middle East Quartet), international organizations, NGOs, researchers, journalists, and members of civil society. Peacebuilding paradigms provide this broad and loose community with model problems and solutions (Kuhn 2012: 37, 176) that disclose *and* foreclose ways to diagnose the conflict and ways to solve it. A peacebuilding paradigm, in other words, pulls or pushes away actors from/towards certain understandings of conflict and peace. In what follows, I will focus on the two paradigms that have informed the Israeli–Palestinian peace process: the national partition and liberal peace paradigms. What are the main features of these paradigms? How were they implemented in the Israeli–Palestinian peace process? How do they diagnose the Israeli–Palestinian narrative wars and what solutions do they prescribe to end them? I will answer these questions by looking at both paradigms separately, keeping in mind that both have informed the peace process simultaneously.⁴

Partitioning narratives

The first paradigm that I want to examine is the national partition paradigm. Partition is premised on the idea that territorial separation guarantees peace. In the context of Israel/Palestine, it is the oldest and most endorsed resolution to the conflict. The British mandatory powers first suggested partition in 1937,

and throughout the rest of the twentieth century, partition consolidated itself as *the* solution to the conflict, albeit with different borders. Today, it is enshrined in UN Resolution 242 issued after the Six Day-War in 1967. The enduringness of partition as a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict could be explained by the long history of partition more generally. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century already, partition was used to allay the European wars of religion by confining Catholics and Protestants to their different territories. The formula was agreed upon at the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 and captured by the motto *Cuius regio, eius religio* – the religion of the prince determines the religion of the realm (Wight 1977: 153). This set the legal basis for states to control all matters within their own territories, a solution that would later be consolidated in 1648 with the treaties of Westphalia (Opello and Roscow 2005:80). In the contemporary era, the principle of partition still prevails, but it no longer applies to religious groups. As nationalism assumed the role of a ‘surrogate religion’ (Smith 1991: 176–177) and national wars progressively replaced holy wars, the motto *Cuius regio, eius religio* was replaced with *Cuius regio, eius natio* – the nationality (rather than the religion) of the rulers determines the nationality of the realm. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, a sovereign territory secured a space for the practice of *one* religious creed. In the nineteenth and the twentieth, it safeguarded the flourishing of *one* national identity.

It should be noted that partition comes in both a positive and a negative form. The positive form is championed by liberal nationalists such as Giuseppe Mazzini and Woodrow Wilson who supported the right of national self-determination as a way of transforming the international system into a harmonious one (Smith 2010: 25). If nations could rid themselves of their imperial occupiers and secure their own political roof, then peace would prevail; every nation would receive its due and live peacefully with its neighbours. This idealized understanding of partition, however, conflicts with its reality. At worst, partition was used as a strategy for colonial powers to ‘unshoulder colonies or divide up spheres of influence’ (Kumar 1997: 24). At best, partition is a peacekeeping mechanism, one that prevents national groups from annihilating one another. In both cases, it does not correspond to the views of liberal nationalists such as Mazzini and Wilson. This is the reason why international relations realist scholars – who are sceptical of peacebuilding altogether – have endorsed partition as a solution to conflicts in the Balkans and other war torn scenarios (Mearsheimer and Van Evera 1995; Kaufmann 1998). In what follows, however, I focus on the positive form of partition as a peacebuilding paradigm, not its negative form as a peacekeeping mechanism.

How did the adoption of the national partition paradigm affect the Israeli–Palestinian narrative wars? I argue that it partitioned their narratives just as it sought to partition their territories. History, in other words, had to be negotiated with the aim of making it coterminous with the borders of the future Israeli and Palestinian states. While this solution was not explicitly agreed to, it follows from the national partition paradigm that informs the Oslo Peace

Process. 'Insofar as Israelis and Palestinians are negotiating on the basis of a "land for peace" formula', Herbert Kelman rightly notes, 'they are accepting territorial limits to their national identities, which have, after all, been historically linked to the whole of the land' (Kelman 2005:6). When Prime Minister Golda Meir famously insisted that 'there was no such thing as Palestinians... They did not exist' (Khalidi 1997:147), she was historically linking Israeli identity to the whole of the land. Meir issued this often quoted statement to justify her refusal to return some of the territory conquered after the 1967 war. Denying Palestinian nationhood is part of larger symbolic strategy to claim the entire territory of historical Palestine, a position that is common amongst the Israeli right. The Israeli left does not share this claim to all of historical Palestine. It 'accepts criticism of post-1967 Israel', although 'it keep[s] the period between 1882-67 off limits' (Pappe 1997, 12). On the Palestinian side, we see the same narrative strategy of denying the other's nationhood and claiming all of the land. The PLO's past (and Hamas' current) charter did not recognize the Jews as a national group, but as a religious one, and called for the destruction of the state of Israel. When Israel and the PLO agreed to partition the land, however, they indirectly agreed to a solution where they would modify their narratives so that the 1967 Green Line would become the limit of their future territory *and* their future history. This, at least, is what *ideally* should have happened, since this is what is prescribed by the national partition paradigm. What happened in reality was a different story.

What did partitioning narratives imply concretely? First, that both parties would acknowledge their respective nationhood. In the exchange of letters that led to the Oslo Agreement, the PLO recognized 'the right of Israel to exist in peace and security' and nullified 'those articles of the Palestinian Covenant which deny Israel's right to exist'. In return, the Israeli government recognized the PLO as 'the representative of the Palestinian people' (Israel and PLO: 1993). This mutual recognition was thin (Strömbom 2014:171) and asymmetrical (Kelman 1998), but it triggered a narrative shift.⁵ The Israeli government now referred to the territory it occupied as the 'West Bank', instead of 'Judea and Samaria', which meant that 'some of the land now settled by Israelis is other-than-Israel' (Michels 1994: 30). Moreover, the PLO was no longer the antagonists in the Israeli narrative, but a protagonist with whom peace could be built. 'You were a terrorist', Shimon Peres told Yassir Arafat in Cairo, 'today you are an ex-terrorist' (Michels 1994: 35). Partition, however, goes beyond mutual acknowledgment. It requires that nations redraw the boundaries of their official narratives. To illustrate this point, I will turn to debates surrounding the first Palestinian textbooks. Textbooks are interesting because nations use them to disseminate their official narrative (Berger 2007; Podeh 2000). Therefore, changes to official narratives will be visible in textbook reforms. Moreover, and as I will show, the controversies surrounding the writing of Palestinian textbooks serve as a good example of what I call *narrative policing*.

The Oslo Accords granted the Palestinian Authority control over the educational system of Palestinians residing within the 1967 territories (Brown 2006: 226). Before 1994, Palestinian schools relied on textbooks that were written, issued, and taught in Jordan and Egypt. Moreover, these textbooks had to meet the approval of the Israeli occupying authorities. The Israeli military governor censored anything that challenged the narrative Israel used to legitimize its occupation (Moughrabi 2001:6; Brown 2006: 227). With the peace agreements, the Palestinians were given the right to write their first 'official' history. This created a dilemma. Should the new textbooks narrate a negotiated history that mirrored the territorial compromise the PLO had struck with the Israelis? Or should the textbooks reproduce the traditional Palestinian narrative that claimed all of historical Palestine? The dilemma is well captured by a survey of Palestinian teachers and professors conducted by the Palestinian curriculum centre. The survey asked the following:

What Palestine do we teach? Is it the historic Palestine with its complete geography, or the Palestine that is likely to emerge on the basis of possible agreements with Israel? How do we view Israel? Is it merely an ordinary neighbour, or is it a state that has arisen on the ruins of most of Palestine? (Moughrabi 2001: 7)

These questions point to two possible narratives. The first is a history of Palestine 'with its complete geography' that places the *Nakba* of 1948 at the heart of the Palestinian experience and depicts Israel as settler-colonial state. The second is a 'partitioned narrative' of Palestine that depicts Israel as 'an ordinary neighbour', de-emphasizes the *Nakba* of 1948, accentuates the war of 1967, and highlights the peace agreements it signed in 1993. The first narrative calls for revenge; the second ends with compromise and a Palestinian state.

The power to decide between the two options did not belong to the history teachers that were being surveyed, nor to the curriculum centre that administered the survey. What was expected of the Palestinians was a partitioned narrative. Evidence of this expectation could be seen in the many reports that were conducted to survey Israeli and Palestinian textbooks during the peace process. In the most recent report entitled *Victims of our Own Narratives*, for example, researchers evaluated the textbooks by verifying whether 'maps acknowledge[d] the existence of the other entity?' For the Israeli textbooks, this meant whether the map indicated that the West Bank and Gaza strip were occupied and were, since 1993, a formally established entity (Palestine/Palestinian Authority). For the Palestinian textbooks, it asked if 'maps acknowledge[d] the existence of the state of Israel?' (Council of Religious Institutions 2013: 42) The focus on maps is key because it is a visual indicator of whether the textbooks meet the new and expected standard of partition. In reality, these standards were not met. The same study indicated that 76 per cent of the maps that figure in Israeli textbooks omit the 1967 border, while in 58 per cent of the maps in the Palestinian textbooks refer to the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea as Palestine (Council of Religious Institutions 2013: 49). The textbooks failed to

make the narrative compromise that was expected of them. This led to severe rows of textbook diplomacy where each side accused the other of not fulfilling its side of the narrative bargain (Moughrabi 2001).

Partition and the policing of Palestinian narrative borders

As shown above, partition means the erection of narrative borders that delimit what is historically *ours* from what is historically *theirs*. Maintaining peace, moreover, requires the policing of these borders, so that 'narrative trespassers' are punished if they cross them in textbooks, songs, or poems. In a report conducted by the Israeli army's West Bank and Gaza Strip Liaison Office, researchers flagged a second grade Palestinian textbook for doing exactly that. In a section entitled a 'trip across the homeland', two families, the families of Kareem and Lilly, travel across 'their homeland' visiting cities such as Ramallah, Jerusalem, Haifa, and Jaffa. The Israeli researchers sanctioned the fictional trip as an act of narrative trespassing, because some of these cities were under Israel sovereignty. Since the PLO had recognized this sovereignty in 1988 and again in 1993, it was expected that cities such as Haifa and Jaffa remain outside the bounds of the official Palestinian national imaginary. But the textbooks, the report argues, do the exact opposite; they 'express a lack of recognition of Israel...according to the 1967 borders' (Harel 2002). Had the textbooks conscribed Kareem and Lilly's fictional excursion to the West Bank and Gaza, they would have respected their narrative borders and thus signalled to Israel and the international community that had accepted the principle of partition.

It could be argued that narrative policing should pose no problem, since Israelis and Palestinians agreed to the principle of partition, which implied that they accepted 'territorial limits' to their respective identities (Kelman 2005:6). The problem, however, is that the narratives were unequally policed. There was a great interest in what Palestinians were taught in their schools, but barely any interest in what Israelis were being taught in theirs. The content of Palestinian textbooks reached the highest echelons of power when President Bill Clinton drew attention to them before leaving office, referring to the 'culture of violence and the culture of incitement that, since Oslo, has gone unchecked' (Moughrabi 2001: 8; Zogby 2011). The criticism that followed the publishing of the Palestinian textbooks should be read as a way of policing Palestinian narrative borders, with Israel, the United States, and pro-Israeli NGOs acting as narrative border police. But while many were outraged at the content Palestinian textbooks, few pointed out that Israel continued to violate the narrative space of Palestinians by censoring textbooks used in private schools in East Jerusalem where it was agreed that Palestinian textbooks would be used (Abukhater 2011) or by omitting the term occupation in their textbooks and referring to the West Bank as Judea and Samaria (Council of Religious Institutions 2013: 49). The uneven policing reflects the

power asymmetries between both parties and the unequal power with which they hold each other accountable.⁶

Narrative policing was not only an external matter, however, but also an internal one. Israelis and Palestinians had to control the borders of their narratives so as to show the international community that they recognized each other as neighbours. The burdens of internal policing, however, were greater for the Palestinian Authority, because it was asked to narrate itself as a sovereign nation, despite the fact that it was still under Israeli occupation. If the Palestinian authority acted like a state, many believed it would be recognized as one. This had strong impact on the way the Palestinians were to narrate their national story. Laleh Khalili has shown how the transformation of the PLO from a liberationist movement into a quasi-state affected its commemorative practices, changing its previous anti-colonial and revolutionary narrative into an internationally accepted discourse on state sovereignty (Khalili 2007). Similarly, Emilio Dabed has argued that the drafting of the Palestinian constitution was used as a legal-symbolic process to conscribe the Palestinian national imaginary to the West Bank and Gaza, thus excluding Palestinians living inside Israel, in refugee camps, and the diaspora (Dabed 2013). With time, however, the tension between cultural autonomy – where the Palestinian authority had to narrate itself as a state – and the lack of political sovereignty created real frustrations. Further complicating the issue, Israel made statehood conditional upon Palestinian behaviour under the newly acquired conditions of cultural autonomy. ‘Change your history’, the Israelis were telling the Palestinians, ‘then we might grant you a state’. The recent iteration of this precondition is seen in the demand made by Israel to recognize it as a Jewish state (Zreik 2011). Concretely, this is a demand that Palestinians publically renounce their right of return, so that the Jewish state maintains its Jewish majority. Symbolically, it is a demand that Palestinians revise their national story so that it recognizes the territory beyond the 1967 Green Line as the birthplace of the Jewish people, rather than a homeland to which Palestinian refugees will one day return.⁷

Narrative partition, therefore, was unevenly enforced on one party and its burdens unequally distributed. It is also more costly for the Palestinian side, because it ignores and even justifies the historical injustice that Palestinians suffered in 1948. In fact, by being asked to narrate a territorialized history delineated to the 1967 borders, Palestinians were being asked to forget the mass expulsion they suffered in 1948. ‘The Palestinian leaderships knows that they have to forget Ramle and Lod and Jaffa [in present-day Israel]’, the Israeli journalist Danny Rubinstein stated, ‘If I was a Palestinian politician I would say that you don’t have to remember. You have to forget’ (Black 2014). Rubinstein’s comment is consistent with the logic of partition, where Palestinians relinquish the history that is on the western side of the 1967 border. But his comment also shows how partition imposes forgetfulness. Palestinian refugees and their descendants should forget about the injustice they incurred in 1948. Indeed, by accepting the idea of a Jewish state,

Palestinians should embrace the Zionist narrative according to which the return of the Jews was a historical necessity. By the same token, they embrace a narrative according to which their presence on the land was historically contingent, and that their exile/expulsion is justified to realize Zionism's historical goal (Khalidi 2011: 79). While partition does impose certain identity costs on the Israeli side, it does not impose similar demands to forget historical injustices suffered by the Jewish people, which is why the burdens of narrative partition are unevenly distributed.

The liberal peace and the evasion of the past

I now want to turn to the liberal peace paradigm and its solution to the Israeli–Palestinian narrative wars. The liberal peace relies on the twin pillars of political and economic liberalism. On one hand, liberalism's *political* institutions – freedom, legal equality of subjects, separation of powers, and representative democracy – create peace by constraining a country's capacity to wage war (Doyle 1986; Russett 1994). On the other hand, liberalism's *economic* institutions – market economy, free trade, and private property – forge relations that make peace preferable to war (Gartzke 2007). Countries with a market economy, it is argued, do not go to war with one another because they have more to gain through trade than through conquest (Angell 1933:106–107). In the last twenty years, the liberal peace has become *the* blueprint for peacebuilding missions around the world (Menocal and Kilpatrick 2005: 768). The paradigm informs the work of international organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (Barnett et al. 2007: 36; Paris 2010: 340). Today, the paradigm is so predominant that many argue there is no realistic alternative to it (Paris 2010: 340).

Both political and economic dimensions of the liberal peace informed plans for a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. American demands for political reform in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Palestinian territories, for example, were driven by the conviction that liberalism's political institutions consolidate peace (Turner 2006). Similarly, the belief in the peaceful effects of free trade provided a common framework for multilateral negotiations between Israel and the rest of the Arab world (Fischer *et al.* 1994). The economic variant of the liberal peace influenced Israeli–Palestinian bilateral negotiations and agreements such as the 1994 Paris protocol. In his book, *A Place Among The Nations*, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu explicitly embraces the idea of a democratic peace (1993: 240) and has mobilized it in his negotiations with the Palestinian Authority (Ish-Shalom 2013). An example of this is his idea of an 'economic peace' (Feldman 2009), an attempt to boost economic cooperation between Israelis and Palestinian so as to improve the living condition of Palestinians, strengthen Palestinian moderates, and further the peace process (Ahren 2008). The idea of an economic peace has led to the creation

of industrial parks and free trade zones such as the Karni complex situated in the Palestinian territories, as well as more planned projects such as the 'Valley of Peace' – a gargantuan industrial, agricultural, and touristic project that revolves around the building of a canal that would link the Dead Sea to the Red Sea. The Palestinian Authority has rejected Netanyahu's economic peace, but scholars argue that it has nonetheless accepted the liberal peace principles that are at its core (Khalidi and Samour 2011: 16).

What solution does the liberal peace prescribe for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict over narratives? Upon first view, the liberal peace seems to ignore the matter altogether. Commenting on Netanyahu's economic peace, Mohamed Sid-Ahmed writes that it 'is ahistorical in that it disassociates the future of the Middle East from its past, that is, from the roots of conflict in the region' (2003: 276). The liberal peace is ahistorical, because it does not focus on national narratives. The liberal peace sees the causes of conflict as structural, not historical. It is not what happened in the past, it is the absence of liberal institutions in the present that cause discord. The real solution therefore lies in institutional reforms at the economic and political level: liberalize and you will liberate yourself from the grudges of the past. The consequences of the liberal emphasis on structural and institutional solutions (rather than historical ones) are visible in the Palestinian case where demands are constantly made about improving state institutions as a condition to further negotiations (Khalidi and Samour 2011; Ish-Shalom 2013: 99). This institutionalization is a necessary step to build the foundations for the liberal peace (Menocal and Kilpatrick 2005: 770).

According to Kuhn, a primary feature of a scientific paradigm is its capacity to determine whether a problem is worthwhile solving or not. 'One of the things a scientific community acquires with a paradigm is a criterion for choosing problems that can be assumed to have solutions...these are the only problems that the community will admit as scientific or encourage its members to undertake' (2012: 37). The same can be said of peacebuilding paradigms. Viewed through the lens of the liberal peace, the issue of conflicting narratives is not a problem 'that can be assumed to have solutions'. On the contrary, the liberal paradigm questions the assumptions that make the issue of conflicting narratives appear like a problem altogether. This sets the liberal peace apart from the national partition paradigm that recognizes the role that national narratives play in conflict and the role they should play in peacebuilding.

This does not mean that the liberal peace *ignores* the issue of national narratives; rather, it means that it *evades* it. 'Evading a problem is not the same thing as avoiding it, i.e. denying the seriousness of its underlying concerns', writes Ian Ward, instead it 'involves re-direction of our approach to these concerns down a more promising path' (2010: 34). The liberal peace does not ignore the conflicts over narratives that divide nations; it evades these wars by redirecting both sides towards a more promising path of liberal reform. Once liberal institutions are set up, it is believed the system will regulate itself and produce an optimal equilibrium at the economic and the political level. With time, the destructive competition over historical narratives will be replaced with

the constructive competition between entrepreneurs. National groups irrationally attached to their past will be transformed into a society of producers and consumers, and the promises of a prosperous future will dampen the grudges of the past. While this is not explicitly said, it is implied in the discourse used to imagine a new Middle East that is based on economic interdependence and free trade. In a promotional video for the Valley of Peace initiative, for example, viewers are offered a utopian vision of a Middle East where borders no longer exist and where the benefits of free trade transform the desert-like geography of the *Arabe* valley into a Dubai-style urban stretch where fast trains, high-rise buildings, botanical gardens, airports, and commercial malls bring together Arabs and Jews into a harmonious community (Gertner Architects' Projects 2009).

Liberal peace and the progressive account of history

The problem with the liberal peace paradigm, however, is that while it presents itself as ahistorical, it is in fact grounded in a progressive conception of history. When Francis Fukuyama famously declared that the end of the Cold War represented the end of History (1989:4), he was alluding to the understanding of history that is oriented towards the universalization of Western liberalism. By virtue of embracing the liberal peace, therefore, a community of peacebuilders also embraces this progressive conception of history. This, in turn, imposes a framework that allows this community to distinguish between progressive and regressive solutions. Solutions consistent with liberal peacebuilding are greeted as progressive and forward looking, because they hasten the march towards a liberal order. Solutions inconsistent with liberal peacebuilding, on the other hand, are rejected as regressive and backwards looking, because they slow down the universal trajectory towards progress. When Palestinian ministers and businessmen support projects like the Valley of Peace, for example, they are applauded as enablers of peace. But when Palestinian diplomats want to address the past head-on through reparations, apologies, or restitution, they are deemed backwards looking. 'From [the] perspective [of the liberal peace]', writes Ilan Pappé, 'a party that is involved in a conflict and is insistent on rectification of past evils can easily be depicted as representing not only intransigence but also backwardness' (Pappé 2005: 127). In a meeting on July 16, 2008, made public in the 'Palestine Papers', U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice accused her Palestinian interlocutors of exactly that.⁸ When the negotiators brought up the issue of reparations for Palestinian refugees, Rice objected that reparations 'are not forward but backward looking' (Al Jazeera 2008). By clinging to the past, Palestinians were halting their march towards a better future.

One may object that Rice's comment is an expression of the triumphalist ethos that characterizes American nationalism. 'Triumphant nationalists', notes Minxin Pei, 'celebrate the positive and have little empathy for the whining of aggrieved nationalists whose formative experience consisted of a succession of national humiliations and defeats' (Pei 2003: 35). Given its forward-looking orientation and its short history, the American worldview is

perhaps incapable of appreciating why parties to a conflict are adamant on the recognition of their historical memories. Former adviser in the State Department, Aaron David Miller, alludes to this problem when discussing his experience as an American diplomat involved in the Arab–Israeli peace process, stating that the United States’ short and triumphalist history made it difficult for American negotiators to understand the ‘ancestral’ hatreds that divide the people of the Middle East (Miller 2008: 31, 57).⁹

But Condoleezza Rice’s comment goes beyond the views of the George W. Bush administration or even the ethos of American nationalism. It points to a set of beliefs and assumptions that underlie the liberal peace. Scholars have noted that the liberal peace relies on a dichotomous ontology that separates peace and war, liberal and non-liberal, developed and underdeveloped, civilized and barbaric (Chandler 2006; Paris 2002; Lidén 2011:73). Here, we see these distinctions at play in liberal evasion that provides a framework that is accepting or rejecting of solutions related to history. This framework imposed greater burdens on the Palestinian side because it characterized solutions to its historical injustice as backward looking (the refugee problem). However, Israel has not been accused of being backward looking when advancing the demand to be recognized as a Jewish state, which is, amongst other things, a demand to acknowledge Israel’s historical relationship to the land.

Conclusion

This article examined how the Oslo Peace Process addressed the Israeli–Palestinian conflicts over narratives. To do so, it looked beyond the agreements themselves and turned to their underlying peacebuilding paradigms: the national partition and the liberal peace paradigms. These, I argued, prescribed two solutions: narrative partition and evasion, respectively. Narrative partition meant that Israel and the Palestinian Authority had to modify their national imaginaries in a way that corresponded to their future borders. The 1967 Green Line would therefore become the limit of their future territory *and* their future history. In practice, however, narrative partition was unevenly enforced on one party and its burdens unequally distributed. Moreover, it entailed more identity costs for the Palestinian side, because it ignored the historical injustice that Palestinians suffered in 1948. The second peacebuilding paradigm, the liberal peace, prescribed evading the issue of narratives altogether and redirecting peace efforts away from issues related to the past. Once liberal institutions are set up and the benefits of free trade begin to accrue, then the problem of conflicting narratives will wither away. Such a solution was presented as ahistorical, but it was in fact very much historical as it relied on a liberal and progressive conception of history. As a result, the liberal peace’s progressive view of history imposed a framework that discriminates between forward-looking and backward-looking solutions. Solutions

consistent with liberal peacebuilding were greeted as progressive and forward looking, such as Netanyahu's 'economic peace'. Solutions inconsistent with liberal peacebuilding, such as demands to redress the historical injustice of the Nakba, were rejected as backwards looking. This imposed greater identity costs on the Palestinian side as only its demands to redress historical injustice were deemed backward looking.

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Endnotes

1 This paper will examine official attempts to deal with the past, bracketing those that emerged from civil society.

2 The closest the peace process got to addressing the Israeli and Palestinian narratives is the Taba Summit in 2001 (Ben-Yosef Hirsch 2007: 241; Botiveau 2006; Strömbom 2014: 182). In section 3.1 of his report on the summit, UN special Representative Miguel Moratinos writes 'the Israeli side put forward a suggested joint narrative for the tragedy of the Palestinian refugees. The Palestinian side discussed the proposed narrative and there was much progress, although no agreement was reached in an attempt to develop a historical narrative in the general text' (2001). The Taba Summit, however, did not lead to any official agreement between the two parties.

3 This article abandons what Jamil Halil and Ilan Pappé call the paradigm of parity that posit that Israelis and Palestinians are symmetrical parties (Halil and Pappé 2010:6). Palestinian scholars have long challenged this paradigm, and since the 1980s, it has also been deconstructed by a wave of Israeli 'new historians' and critical sociologists (Pappé 1997; Ram 1998). Sara Roy rightly observes that applying parity to the Israeli–Palestinian scenario is to impose balance on a situation 'so profoundly unbalanced', that it severs the analysis 'from the local realities it is called upon to examine' (Roy 2007: xv).

4 Paradigms are, by definition, incommensurable to one another (Kuhn 2012: 149). As a result, one may object that two paradigms cannot work simultaneously. It should be noted, however, that in the studies of peacebuilding, this does not constitute a problem. It is, in fact, accepted that there is no 'pure' form of peace, but many 'peaces' or 'hybridities' (Mac Ginty and Sanghera 2012) that result from the application of a policy agenda to different situations.

5 The recognition was thin, because it was only a legal (rather than an identity-based) recognition, and it was asymmetrical because the PLO recognized the state of Israel, while Israelis only recognized Palestinians as representatives of a people.

6 Scholars have argued that the asymmetry of power was inbuilt into the peace accords themselves (Roy 2002; Said 1993; Waage 2005).

7 The demand to recognize Israel as a Jewish state did not appear in the peace treaties with Egypt or Jordan. Moreover, it was absent from the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations until it emerged during the Annapolis conference in 2007 (Zreik 2011). Because it emerged at much latter stage of the peace process, it could be argued that it has an ad hoc addition to the peace process, a political strategy devised by the Israeli right to cater to its constituency and impose more preconditions to delay negotiations with the Palestinians. By turning to partition as a peacebuilding paradigm, however, I am arguing that the demand to acknowledge Israel as a Jewish state is embedded within the logic of partition. It does not necessarily follow from the paradigm, and Palestinian negotiators did not agree to it by virtue of endorsing the idea of partition, but it is still internal to the logic of partition, and not external to it.

8 The Palestine Papers is a collection of approximately 1700 confidential documents about the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations that were leaked by Al Jazeera in January 2011.

9 For a thorough account of how the US national identity shapes the US foreign policy, see Restad (2014)

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