

Taking back the narrative

May. 30, 2009

GERALD M. STEINBERG , THE JERUSALEM POST

If the proposed law to prohibit commemorations of the Palestinian "Nakba" or catastrophe on Yom Ha'atzmaut is adopted by the Knesset, the High Court is likely to knock it down as a violation of free speech. But the point of this exercise is far more important than the specific mechanism - many Israeli Jews now realize that the narrative war threatens national survival. In response, a full-scale counterattack is necessary to reclaim our history and rights to sovereign equality among the nations.

The narrative war is as old as the attacks by Arab armies and terror attacks. Following the failure of the 1948 invasion to destroy the nascent Jewish state, Arab leaders began a massive effort to rewrite these events. The process was repeated in 1967, when Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's moves to wipe Israel off the map were turned into a "war of occupation." By repeating the myths and slogans enough times, and aided by the use of oil wealth, intimidation and terror, this strategy has gradually succeeded.

The narrative war, which has conquered Europe and is moving to North America, begins with the false history covering the Mandate period, from the Balfour Declaration through the 1947 UN partition plan. This version portrays Israel as a Jewish "colonization project" forced on the Arabs by European anti-Semitism and guilt after the Holocaust, as well as Jewish power and manipulation (as reflected in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion). The violent Arab rejection of the original "two states for two peoples" proposal, and the continued refusal to accept a Jewish state, regardless of borders, has been removed from these histories.

In the narrative, the Palestinians are always innocent victims - by definition - and Israel is painted as the powerful and manipulative aggressor. Refugees from wars initiated by the Arabs became the object of international sympathy, provided by an international support system with massive budgets that reinforce the narrative. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which is "commemorating 60 years" of existence, insures that the hatred is perpetuated.

In contrast, the almost equal number of Jewish refugees who fled Arab attacks has disappeared from the history books - Jewish refugees are inconsistent with the narrative.

THIS SIMPLEMENTED DICHOTOMY - Palestinian victims and Jewish aggressors - works well with Western (particularly but not only European) academics, intellectuals, journalists, diplomats, NGO human rights campaigners and political leaders - particularly from the liberal end of the spectrum. And European governments, including the carefully hidden mechanisms of the European Commission, fund the narrative wars through anti-Israel NGOs that receive money under the misleading headlines of "human rights" and "peace partnerships." On the basis of

these images, whenever Israel responds to attacks, the flood of condemnations follow - including false claims of "war crimes," "collective punishment" and "humanitarian crisis."

In Jerusalem, the narrative war has adopted the Arab version, which eliminates 3,000 years of Jewish history as well as the occupation and systematic desecration of the 1948-1967 period. The EU gives large sums to organizations like Ir Amim and B'Tselem that produce their tendentious reports which are copied and published by the European Commission in order to further demonize Israel. This is the political equivalent of a Ponzi scheme - money is provided to generate anti-Israel reports that justify providing more money, without any external checks or accountability.

The narrative war is also behind the boycott campaigns directed at Israeli universities, Amnesty International's immoral campaign to prevent Israel from obtaining weapons for self-defense and the "lawfare" cases which exploit the legal systems in Spain, Britain and elsewhere to reinforce the images of Palestinian victimization and Israeli war crimes.

ISRAELI ARAB LEADERS (or Israeli Palestinians, as many prefer to be called) are an essential part of the narrative wars aimed at destroying the legitimacy of Jewish national sovereignty. On this front, the main weapons include civil rights rhetoric and images of Afro-Americans, as well as black South Africans who were subjected to the cruelties of apartheid. But the analogies to these situations are completely backward - in reality, it is the Palestinians who deny and seek to destroy Jewish self determination. NGOs funded by Europe as well as well-intentioned but poorly informed donors to the New Israel Fund are particularly active in this front of the demonization against Israel.

After years of ignoring or downplaying the impact of the attacks in the narrative war, the Jewish majority has finally recognized the dangers. While Israelis are also aware of mistakes made on our side, the demonization has also reduced the willingness to sympathize with the Arab victims.

The proposed "Nakba" law is one aspect of the counterattack, and is likely to be followed by additional legislation, as well as confrontations with the European government funders, and the UN officials and others that lead the assault. This will be a long struggle, and a carefully constructed and realistic strategy will be necessary. Like the battles with Arab armies and Palestinian terrorists, victory in the narrative war is as important for the survival of Jewish sovereign equality.

The writer chairs the Political Science Department at Bar-Ilan University and is executive director of NGO Monitor.