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Freezing Palestinian myths

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Palestinian myths of victimization have been the major obstacle to peace for more 60 years, but they're largely ignored by journalists, diplomats and would-be peace activists.

Instead, the spotlight has been misplaced exclusively on Jewish settlements and the "occupation" that resulted from the 1967 war. The first two years of the Obama administration's peace efforts were entirely wasted because of the illusion that settlements are the cause of the conflict.

In order to break the long stalemate and end decades of failure, the myths of Arab victimization must be exposed – in place of a "settlement freeze," we need a "victimization freeze." False histories that blame Zionism (or European antisemitism) only serve to make peace based on mutual acceptance even more unlikely.

To move forward, Palestinians and their supporters need to be brought back to reality. In place of the myths, they will have to acknowledge that their "suffering" and the refugee problem were the result of the unanimous Arab rejection of the UN Resolution 181 – the November 1947 version of the two-state solution. This was followed by military invasions that killed one per cent of the Jewish population. The Arab defeat on the battlefield was followed by the entirely fictitious claim to a "right of return" as refugees from illegal wars for which the Arabs themselves were responsible.

This is difficult to capture in an emotional photo, dramatic headline, television documentary or YouTube video. Israeli settlements, scenes of the occupation and the inevitable images of Palestinian suffering are easy to portray and manipulate in order to evoke immediate and unquestioned sympathy with the perpetual victim. And while the number of Jews expelled from Arab countries in this period is roughly equal to the displaced Palestinians, the Jewish refugees were absorbed into the Israeli population.

Indeed, the Palestinian refugee industry is thriving, reinforcing the wall it has created to block any peace agreement based on a two-state framework that ends the conflict. UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) provides hundreds of millions of dollars every year, and many officials are totally devoted to this anti-peace mythology, and to perpetuating the false refugee claims. When one UNRWA employee, Andrew Whitley, dared to question the myth, he was immediately attacked and forced by UNRWA's victimization police to recant his honest assessment. Expect him to be looking for alternative employment soon.

In addition, a vast network of non-governmental organizations using the language of human rights and humanitarian aid promote Palestinian refugee myths. Powerful groups such as BADIL ("The Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights") get hundreds of thousands of dollars every year from a number of European governments to fuel the conflict in this way. For many years, allies in the International Development Research Centre funnelled Canadian taxpayer funds to BADIL.

In parallel, young Jews, many of whom have joined groups such as J-street and the misnamed "Jewish Voices for Peace," as well as some Israelis, have been exposed incessantly to these images and myths, and adopted the false narrative. Exploiting this situation, Palestinian officials such as Saeb Erekat – described by diplomats and journalists as a "moderate" because he looks and sounds reasonable – continue to weave false tales to sell to naive audiences.

Another myth, promoted during the failed Oslo peace negotiations, was that the Palestinian leadership was "holding the refugee card" in order to play it at the last minute. According to this script, former Palestinian

Gerald
Steinberg



Authority president Yasser Arafat would suddenly reverse decades of Palestinian theology, and tell his people that the “right of return” was exchanged as part of a comprehensive peace. Like other parts of the Oslo process, this was based entirely on wishful thinking.

An alternative scenario that has survived Oslo and Arafat depicts the Palestinian leadership as knowing they’re not going to return en masse and turn the Jewish state into another Muslim stronghold. All that they want, we are told, is a symbolic recognition of the “injustice” and their “suffering” resulting from the creation of the State of Israel. But this is simply another version of the victimization myth, which, if accepted, would be used to justify more terrorism and delegitimization of Israel.

Until these dimensions are addressed, peace efforts will be stillborn. In this framework, a freeze on refugee myths and false narratives is long overdue.

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