

# The Nakba, The Holocaust and Collective Victimhood

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The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the longest-running and most destructive conflicts of modern times. Despite years of fighting and thousands of civilian deaths, it looks like there is no sight of compromise and reconciliation on the horizon for this conflict. This essay will argue that the failure to accept mutual responsibility and to work for a diplomatic solution that seems to perpetuate this conflict is rooted in the culturally and socially embedded discourses of victimhood that are existent in both countries' narratives regarding the conflict. By adopting a critical constructivist approach, this essay will critically look at discursive strategies employed by Israel and Palestine that are used to constitute mutually exclusive identities of "victim" and "perpetrator" to further their strategic goals in the region. It will first explain the main aspects of critical constructivist approaches and roles of identity, morality and power in the construction of statist discourses to establish a theoretical framework to base the essay on. Then, it will individually look at cases of Israel and Palestine to deconstruct the discourses of victimhood and innocence present in their social and political rhetoric. In the end, it will conclude that a diplomatic solution to the conflict is possible only if both sides of the conflict abandon promoting one-sided victimhood and accept mutual responsibility for the destruction they inflicted.

### Critical Constructivism and Identity

In mainstream theories of international relations, such as realism and liberalism, state identities and insecurities are treated as fixed and given. These theories often disregard the significance of culture, history and their role in constructing identity when making assumptions about state actions. Critical constructivist theories, as opposed to these mainstream paradigms, argue that identities and insecurities of states are culturally and socially produced through representations of danger and security. It is argued, that identities are not exogenous, but rather, contingent and relational, and, "performatively constituted"[1] through discursive practices.

In the creation of state identities, according to Jutta Weldes, statist discourses play an essential role. These discourses are "deployed by states to mobilize state subjects in support of its definition of state interest"[2]. Nationalist narratives constituted by these statist discourses produce "self" and "other" identities that strengthen the sense of collectiveness of the state by putting it against a different, and often antagonistic "other". "Maintenance of one identity, involves the conversion of some differences into otherness, into evil, or one of its numerous surrogates"[3]. The concept of "otherness" through these discourses, often take the shape of moral inferiority. When looking at the mainstream state discourses of the last century, one can observe that the majority of the "self" and "other" identities constituted in regards to security had debates of morality and ethicality at their centre. This is due to the powerful connotations that narratives of good and evil create in the minds of public and political actors. These moral debates often form the basis of statist discourses. David Campbell contends that the notion of "sovereignty exceeds a simple geographical partition, but it results in a conception of divergent moral spaces of inside and outside"[4]. In perpetuation of both internal and external state sovereignty, thereupon, a discourse of morality is often present.

When engaging in these discourses of morality, one ought to consider the power relations surrounding the cultural and political environment of the given society. "Some discourses, particularly statist discourses, are often more powerful than others, because they are located in and partake of institutional power"[5]. In the production of identities, state institutions, and the Gramscian notion of "extended state" that include schools, media, churches and

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other institutions of civil society[6], play a primary role due to their sheer hegemony in that society. A cultural and political investigation into how states employ these discourses of morality to further their conception of national interest should, then, be made to denaturalize and deconstruct the *a priori* assumptions about security and identity and to reveal the power relations sustaining them.

In these investigations, the analyst must take an impartial stance and should strive to scrutinise the discursive realities of both sides of a conflict, as “the constitution of identities is often a reciprocal process. As each subject seeks to perform its identity, it threatens others, whose identities are consolidated in response.”[7] Ergo, this essay, in its deconstruction of Israeli-Palestinian discourses, will take into account both sides of the conflict and the ways in which they endeavour to employ discourses of morality to further their strategic goals.

In the performative constitution of Israeli and Palestinian identities, “discourses of victimhood” are exercised to justify aggression, invasion and sometimes even massacring of civilians. Discourses of victimhood use a rhetoric that establishes clear lines of “good” and “evil” or “victim” and “perpetrator” so as to conceal or manipulate the realities of conflict. Assuming the identity of victim substantiates both the international sympathy and domestic collectivity that a state enjoys which, in turn, reduces the accountability for morally grey actions. Concepts of victimhood and suffering, as they are traditionally interpellated as characteristics of innocent, moral people and societies, are instrumentalised to be used to pursue national interests. Anthropologist Caroline Humphrey argues that “states seek to manipulate the spectacle of the victim’s suffering to publicly project the power of the state for different ends.[8] Self and other identities, through discourses of victimhood, are constituted in such a way that the self is represented as almost incapable of acting in an immoral way whilst the virtues of evil and immorality are given to the “other”. History plays a crucial role in the formation of these discourses of victimhood. These narratives often assume a temporal trajectory, where a state’s past victimhoods are utilised to reinforce the sense of suffering of the state in the present.

Looking at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the past century, one can see the employment of this discursive strategy by both Israel and Palestine where they strive to depict themselves as the historical victims of aggression, whilst advocating an image of evil for the other.

## Discourses of Victimhood in Israel

Memories of World War II and the suffering of millions of European Jews in the hands of the Nazis have been at the core of the performative constitution of Israeli state identity ever since its declaration in 1948. Anthropologist Juliana Ochs confers that “victimhood has long been and still remains a discursive resource for the Israeli state and society, generating national commitment, political empathy and charity”[9] When examining various instances from Israeli history, from Adolf Eichmann’s trial to the intifada, one can see that discourses of victimhood, that were predominantly referring to the Holocaust (Sh’oah), have been frequently employed, for purposes of state-building, justification of aggression and providing *casus belli*.

Ex-Nazi officer Adolf Eichmann’s highly publicised trial was one of the first cases where Israeli state’s discourses of victimhood became an instrument of statecraft. His trial was the first televised trial in the history of television which contributed to the impact it had on the Israeli society. Hannah Arendt, in her controversial account of Eichmann’s trial, likens the trial to a “play in a stage”[10] where, according to her, focus was not on Eichmann’s execution but rather, on “the lessons that then-Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion thought should be taught to Jews and Gentiles, to Israelis and Arabs, in short to the whole world”[11] about the unjust suffering of Jewish masses. Before the trial, Israeli society was relatively disunited, as the Jewish colonists saw the immigrant victims of Holocaust as weak and passive and did not want to be identified with them. With Eichmann’s trial, “Israelis began for the first time to hear, identify with and even adopt the pain of victims and survivors”[12]. After the trial and its nation-wide impact, victimhood became an integral component of the Israeli state and public discourses. Today, one can see the Holocaust being used as a metaphor for Jewish innocence, morality and insecurity in the face of enemies, but also a representation of unity and resilience to the world.

Israel’s decades-long conflict with Palestinians has been regularly marked with comparisons to Holocaust in Jewish public discourses. Disregarding the incommensurability of these two different contexts, Palestinian fighters/terrorists

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were represented as the successors of Nazis by the media and the state. Juliana Ochs contends that “discourses of terror victimhood in Israel extract sacrality from Holocaust discourses”[13]. By employing these narratives, Israeli state and “extended state” produce and advocate “self and other” identities rooted in morality, using universally acknowledged “evilness” of Nazis as a comparison point to the Palestinian intifada. Firstly, the terror created by this narrative entails a stronger sense of collectivity in the society, whilst increasing the trust in state institutions. “The Index of National Resilience in Israel, whose very name seems to forecast its research findings, reports that chronic civilian fear coexists with continued high-level trust in state institutions in Israel.”[14] Secondly, this comparison, or as Ochs calls it, “allusive victimhood” reinforces the “us and them” narratives advocated by the state to develop the concept of “nation under threat”. “In April 2005, during the second intifada, Israeli non-profit organisation ‘Mishpaha Ehat’ ran a pop-up ad on the website of the newspaper Ha’aretz. The ad conjured an ongoing cycle of Jewish suffering by juxtaposing images of Passover, the Holocaust and the current intifada. The ad said ‘In every generation, they rise against us, to annihilate us’” [15] This representation of threat, evoking the right to self-defence, is used to justify pre-emptive and preventative action against Palestinians. Israeli reporter Ari Shavit provides an example to this type of representation in Jewish public discourses, arguing that “Israeli-Palestinian conflict was generated by a Palestinian threat to Israel and not by Israeli occupation, and, furthermore, that Israelis accept occupation because of their fears of threat and not because of any disregard for Palestinian fate.”[16] Shavit’s quote proves the manipulation of debates of morality that is in the heart of this discourse. In his narrative, Palestinians are painted as evil and barbaric aggressors that threaten the security of Israeli civilians whilst Israelis are depicted as the innocent victims who were forced to take action because of the threat, not because “of any disregard for Palestinian fate”. There is a conspicuous distinction of “good” and “evil” in this rhetoric that blatantly reinforces the Israeli case. By spreading fear through Holocaust comparisons, Israeli statist and public discourses aim to consolidate the self and other identities constituted to pursue Israeli objectives regarding Palestine.

Alternatively, besides being used to justify action against Palestinians, discourses of victimhood have been instrumentalised to conceal Israel’s excessive use of violence against Palestinian civilians and the consequent pain they inflict upon them during the conflict. “It’s dehumanising; to protect your victimhood, you must ignore others’ pain”[17] asserts Israeli poet Etgar Keret to criticise this negligence of Palestinian suffering. This duality of “victim” and “enemy”, augmented by analogies of Nazism, facilitates the de-humanisation of Palestinians for Israeli people and, subsequently, the disregard of their suffering. This specific representation of Palestinians alleviates the moral responsibility of killing, by removing the ethical dilemma present at the centre of the conflict. Israeli historian Avi Shlaim emphasises this de-humanisation of Palestinians through allusive victimhood existent in Israeli statist discourses by claiming that “the trauma of the Holocaust produced a passionate desire to procure absolute safety and security for Jewish people, but it also blinded them to the fears and anxieties that his own actions generated among Israel’s Arab neighbours”[18] . By removing the fears and anxieties of these people from public and state discourses, the humanity of the enemy is denied, reinforcing images of barbarism and immorality and further legitimising excessive violence and occupation. This discursive strategy has been used for centuries to justify colonialism and occupation, and one can see it being used, in a similar vein, in Israel, for legitimising, on ethical grounds, their fight against Palestinians and the wider Arab world.

It can be seen that discourses of victimhood and analogies of Holocaust are not just used in regards to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, but also in the wider conflict against Arabic countries. Political sociologist Ronit Lentin argues that, in the broader regional conflict, images of victimhood are established through using ‘few against the many narratives’. This rhetoric builds up a representation of Israeli heroism in which the Israelis are depicted as innocent and outnumbered people who are “forced” to fight against barbaric Arabs who are portrayed as the modern reincarnations of Nazis, vowed to evict Jewish civilians from their hard-won land. “The ethnic cleansing of Palestinians was paradoxically represented by the Zionist narrative as ‘a deceitful act of the natives themselves’, as the Palestinians, according to accepted Zionist discourse, were called upon by their leaders to leave their homes to facilitate the advance of the Arab armies, despite by the appeals by the Jews to stay and live in happy co-existence”[19] In this narrative, Israelis are represented as peaceful and compromising people who are willing to co-exist while Arabs are depicted as bloodthirsty enemies aiming to occupy Israel. This narrative was exaggeratingly used to provide *casus belli* to the invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Dr. Herzl Rosenblum, the editor of Israel’s most popular daily newspaper, Yediot Aharonot, to explain why Israel is going to war with Lebanon in 1982, used a rhetoric which fused images of excess suffering with comparisons of Yaser Arafat to Adolf Hitler to evoke an urgency

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of action. He hyperbolically claimed that;

Arafat, were he stronger, would do us things that Hitler never even dreamed of...Hitler killed us with a measure of restraint...If Arafat were to reach that power, he would not amuse himself with such small things. He will cut off our children's heads with a cry and in broad daylight and will rape our women before tearing them to pieces and will skin us as do hungry leopards in the jungle[20]

His usage of gore imagery and animal symbolism substantiated the Israeli case for preventative action through instilling fear in public masses and likening the enemy to savages that must be annihilated.

Ultimately, one can suggest that "nationalist narratives conceptualised every war and conflict in Israel, from 1948 through the intifada, in terms of the Holocaust, using Hitler's extermination of the Jews as rallying points for military action and as metaphors for opposing states"[21] Statist discourses in Israel, by capitalising on the historical suffering of Jews and its place in Israeli psyche, constitute self and other identities establishing mutually exclusive lines of "victim" and "perpetrator", that are used to justify action against Palestinians, conceal excessive violence, legitimise invasion, garner international support and strengthen national unity.

## Discourses of Victimhood in Palestine

As discussed above, the constitution of identities is often a reciprocal process. When a state seeks to constitute self and other identities with regards to its insecurities and fears, it threatens the security of the "other" who naturally seeks to counter this practice by mimicking and reversing the identities established by its adversary. Looking at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one can witness Palestine employing discourses of victimhood, similar to Israel, when trying to further its strategic goals in the contested region. These narratives of Palestinian victimhood often refer to historical injustices done to Palestinians after WWII, when they were forced out of their lands by Israelis and allegedly massacred. Assuming the identity of the victim, Palestine, ever since 1948, have been repeatedly stressing its victimhood to garner domestic and international support, conceal the actions of Palestinian groups and advocate its case for a return to pre-1967 borders.

Victimhood of Palestinian people is deeply embedded in the cultural discourses of Palestine. In linguistic representations of concepts relating to Israel's occupation, a sense of injustice, victimhood and catastrophe is always present. The day of independence of Israel is called "Yawm al-Nakba" in Palestine which means "The Day of Catastrophe". This contrast of "independence" and "catastrophe" demonstrates how Palestinian narratives strive to stress its victimhood by putting it against the joy of Israeli people. By linguistically implying Israel's prosperity stems from Palestinian victimhood, Palestinian activists have often used this day to mobilise action against Israel. On Nakba Day 2011, Palestinians and protesters from other Arab countries, for instance, marched towards Gaza Strip, West Bank and other Israeli-occupied territories to mark the event.[22] In a similar fashion, on Nakba Day 2012, demonstrators from Palestine poured onto the streets in several towns and cities across the West Bank and Gaza Strip, chanting slogans against Israel and throwing stones at the police."[23] Before starting to use the name "The Day of Catastrophe", the events of 1948, have also been called "al-'ightišāb" (*the rape*) and "lammā sharnā wa-tla'nā" (*when we blackened our faces and left*). Rhetoric similar to this, evoking memories of injustice, suffering and pain, have been constantly used to mobilise Palestinians and other Arabic countries against Israel.

Akin to how Israel employs its victimhood, Palestine have used discourses of victimhood to conceal the destructive actions of internationally recognized terrorist groups in Palestine, particularly Hamas. Narratives of victimhood, as they seek to establish mutually exclusive identities of "victim" and "perpetrator", often lose the ability for self-reflection. In Palestinians narratives, as Palestinians are portrayed as innocent victims of Israeli occupation, they are represented as incapable of being the ones who inflict suffering. Col. Dr. Eran Lerman, who was the Deputy for Foreign Policy and International Affairs in Israeli National Security Council, writes;

There is no room, therein, for the long litany of Palestinian past mistakes and misjudgements. These are deftly expunged from the record. No mention can be made of the recent rise in Palestinian terror activities; no mention of the Palestinian decision to walk away from the framework advanced by US Secretary of State John Kerry; no word

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on Hamas's habitual shelling of Israeli civilian targets [24]

Advocating the innocence and victimhood of Palestine, therefore, results in the negligence of Jewish suffering. This lack of mutual responsibility precludes chances of reconciliation and compromise because it insistently pushes forward an understanding of one-sided victimhood. Denying their own acts of violence and Israeli state's right to exist, Palestinian state discourses represent the conflict as invasion and occupation of Palestine and advocate a one-sided solution that would see Palestine returning back to its pre-conflict borders.

Scrutinising the rhetoric of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas in his speech to UN in 2015 reveals how this representation of victimhood and injustice have been instrumentalised to demand international support and promote Palestinian independence and right to self-determination. Firstly, he starts his speech by stressing the peaceful and productive condition of the Palestinian state before 1948 to reinforce the identities of "good" and "evil". He says;

A historic injustice has been inflicted upon a people and a homeland, a people that had lived peacefully in their land and made genuine intellectual, cultural and humanitarian contributions to mankind. [25]

It can be claimed that, in Abbas' speech, an emphasis on the peacefulness and humanitarianism of pre-occupation Palestine is made to further the understanding of moral superiority of Palestine. Subsequently, images of Israeli destruction and occupation are used to contradict this peaceful imagery to benefit Palestine's representation of injustice. Abbas, in his speech, questions the morality and legitimacy of the democracy in Israel to consolidate these identities of good and evil;

How can a state who claims to be the oasis of democracy and claiming that its courts and security apparatus function according to law accept the existence of the so-called price tag gangs and other terrorist organisations that terrorise our people, their property and holy sites, all under the sight of the Israeli army and police, which do not deter or punish, but rather provide them with protection. [26]

Throughout his speech, whilst condemning the Israeli state terrorism, Abbas makes no mention of activities of Palestinian terrorist groups such as Hamas, who combined with other armed groups in Palestine, have killed and terrorised hundreds of Israeli civilians, firing almost 12000 rockets and mortar shells on Israeli military personnel and civilians since 2000.[27] By denying or ignoring the wrongs and misjudgements of Palestinian people, and over-emphasising the destruction and pain that Israel inflicts upon them, Palestinian narratives strive to establish a dichotomy of identities. This deliberate act of negligence further provides proof of how Palestinian state discourses desire to impose a representation of moral purity to strengthen its performatively constituted identity of victimhood.

At the end of his speech, which has similar rhetoric of suffering and pain and injustice, Mahmoud Abbas calls for international protection for Palestine and withdrawal to 4 June 1967 lines. His speech proves an example to the fact that the past and present victimhoods of Palestinian people that are deeply embedded in Palestinian culture, are frequently instrumentalised to establish mutually exclusive identities of "good" and "evil", "victim" and "perpetrator" and "friend" and "enemy" to garner international support for their actions and to impose a one-sided solution to the conflict.

## Conclusion

A critical constructivist approach to the decades-long conflict reveals the discursive strategies regarding concepts of victimhood and morality that have been employed by both sides of the conflict to pursue their national interests and geopolitical objectives. By deconstructing both narratives, one can see that by performatively constituting and promoting mutually exclusive identities of "good" and "evil" or "victim" and "perpetrator", Israel and Palestine have been seeking to justify aggression, conceal excessive use of violence against one another, strengthen national unity, mobilise domestic support and in some cases, garner international support. Yet, one can observe that despite these strategies, the conflict persists. It can be claimed that if both sides of the conflict insist on promoting irreconcilable identities and solutions, a mutual reconciliation is impossible. There is a crucial need to accept mutual responsibility for the destruction and to promote coexistence despite the culturally embedded antagonism of two sides. As Dr.

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Colonel Lerman perfectly summarises, “the false narratives of one-sided victimhoods are a major hindrance to all efforts in the direction of Israeli-Palestinian conflict”[28]

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