

The War of Concepts: How Did Zionism Confront the Nakba Narrative in the United States?

Language stands as an impregnable barrier against forgetting; whoever possesses language possesses the power to write history and shape the world's memory. Throughout his history of struggle, the Palestinian has shown remarkable skill in adapting language and creating terms most capable of carrying his concerns and expressing his anguish, then passing them on to his children generation after generation.

He loaded them with whatever meanings and aims he wished until terms such as the Nakba, the Naksa, and the right of return came to transcend their few letters, encapsulating long decades of suffering, struggle, and the redrawing of modern history.

The Zionist movement understood the danger inherent in the term and its symbolism; it persistently sought to erase it, diminish its significance, and surround it with barriers of doubt and mockery, all the way to accusation and legal and customary persecution.

So how did the Zionist movement in the United States try to erase the term Nakba? What were the main tools it used to do so? What impact did these erasure efforts leave behind? What alternatives were proposed in place of the term? And what is the most effective way to preserve the memory of the Nakba and return to it as the most accurate framework for the conflict? This article attempts to answer these questions and others.

Portraying the Nakba as a Distortion of Historical Facts

The Zionist narrative in the United States has consistently ignored the accurate description of the displacement of 750,000 Palestinians and the seizure of their property as ethnic cleansing involving forced expulsion, representing the true, enduring, and recurring root of the Palestinian tragedy, one that has continued to reproduce itself through new policies and tools for more than 78 years.

The Zionist movement led a campaign hostile to Nakba narratives, to the point of considering this narrative a major obstacle to the peace process in the Middle East and an obsession with an exaggerated historical victimhood. In a article by Sol Stern, the American academic and journalist, in City Journal under the title "The Nakba Obsession: The Palestinian National Narrative as the Main Obstacle to Peace in the Middle East," the writer argues that the "specter of myth," by which he means the Nakba, is being exploited by the global left to portray Palestinians as the latest victims of Western racism and colonialism.

Stern believes the Nakba narrative rests on a fundamental distortion of historical facts; according to his claim, he restores the historical account to its proper place by situating it within the broader movement of modern history and the voluntary population displacements generated by World War II in response to field conditions accompanying the birth of a new world in which the victors imposed their terms across the globe, not in Israel alone.

He also points to the role of the Arabs who, according to him, ignited the war with Jewish communities and were then inclined toward criminal Nazism, as well as the “cowardly flight” of Palestinians from their positions despite their numerical and military superiority, in contrast to the Jews’ “legendary steadfastness.” Stern says the scales of history tipped for those who “deserved” it for the first time in two thousand years, fully in line with European and American faith in the newborn state as a free, prosperous democracy in the Western mold.

He also points an accusing finger, based on the detailed historical background in the article, at the contemporary left, which in his view uses Israel as a scapegoat for its agendas and hollow accusations that the West is racist and criminal.

By contrast, Ilan Pappé points to the term “Nakba denial” as a key determinant of the contemporary Zionist narrative. This systematic denial, which according to Pappé has become a central pillar of the Israeli imagination, worked to direct blame toward Arab forces that allegedly asked Palestinians to evacuate temporarily, thereby lifting responsibility from Zionist forces and absolving them of the war crimes and crimes against humanity they committed in 1948.

Pappé is not alone in pointing to the term “Nakba denial.” The term has become a stark example of historical denial, which usually focuses on Holocaust denial, the Armenian massacres, and other major historical events, while excluding the Nakba from such examples, especially in the West.

Steve Niva, editor of Middle East Report, was among the first to use the term conceptually in 1998. The concept of “Nakba denial” is not limited to denying the atrocities that accompanied it, but extends to denying Palestinian identity, Palestinian existence, and the Palestinian right to self-determination, all of which, according to this view, are foundational pillars of the contemporary Zionist narrative.

Nur Masalha, the Palestinian academic and historian, also points to the Israeli academic establishment’s systematic adoption of the term “Nakba denial,” excluding the Palestinian from the Israeli national narrative that shapes collective memory internally while simultaneously exporting Israeli legitimacy and narrative abroad.

The Israeli establishment did not stop at ignoring the Nakba and proceeding from

a narrative of the “legitimate right” to defend existence and security; it also persistently worked to dismantle the Palestinian narrative associated with it abroad. In a study by Shmuel Trigano, the prominent Jewish thinker and academic, titled “Deconstructing the Three Stages of the Nakba Myth: The Leading Palestinian Delusion,” the author seeks to refute the Palestinian narrative in its entirety: from questioning Palestinian existence itself and its claim to the land, to assigning responsibility for the atrocities of 1948 to what he describes as “Arab gangs” and the “racist Palestinian mentality that hates Jews,” and finally to portraying Palestinian victimhood as a tool of contemporary political blackmail adopted, in his view, by anti-Western actors who manipulate history and distort memory to serve their political agendas.

Obscuring the Perpetrator and Treating the Tragedy as a Passive Event

In his article “Permission to Narrate,” Edward Said points to the Zionist movement’s establishment in the West of what he calls a “disciplinary communications apparatus” built on two pillars: overlooking all facts and descriptions that might cast Israel in a negative light, and punishing anyone who tells the truth in this regard. According to Said, the Palestinian has suffered from the “overwhelming power of ideological consensus,” which became especially evident in the United States after the events of September 11 and the accompanying reinforcement of Israel’s strategic goals and simplification of concepts related to resistance and struggle as terrorism, in contrast to the Western camp that includes Israel as an enlightened and civilized axis.

Major American media agencies fall under the umbrella of this apparatus. These outlets have engaged in systematic denial and disregard of the Nakba, a pivotal event in Palestinian history. Media coverage of Israeli crimes lacks not only accurate description but also the historical framing that would put matters in their proper context and attribute actions to their perpetrators.

This trend has helped entrench the organizational structures of Israeli settler colonialism and confer legitimacy on its practices, or at the very least market acceptable justifications for policies that most blatantly violate legal rules and humanitarian principles.

Greg Shupak notes, in a study published in the eighth issue of *Journal of Palestine Studies* in 2022 under the title “Erasing the Nakba: Upholding Apartheid,” that major American newspapers such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* published some 80,583 articles between 2000 and 2021 containing derivatives related to Israel and Palestine, while only 478 of them, or 0.6 percent, contained the word “Nakba.”

The term was often presented in a distorted manner that supported the Israeli narrative more than it condemned it. Shupak shows that the American media trend reflects a state of collective denial of the atrocities that accompanied the Nakba and constitutes an act of racial domination that not only fails to prepare the American public to understand the current reality in Palestine, but also helps mobilize and rally its support in Israel's favor.

Shupak points out that American media agencies adopted several recurring approaches in their coverage of the Nakba. The first approach embraces a policy of separating the establishment of the State of Israel from the occurrence of the Nakba, presenting the two events as coincidental and simultaneous, without linking them through a direct causal relationship.

The second approach relies on what is known as "Cava Lingua," whereby the writer may mention the term Nakba in a state of ambiguity and indifference without providing sufficient explanation of its symbolism, substance, and the racist terror carried out by Israeli forces between 1947 and 1948.

The third approach resorts to obscuring the perpetrator when speaking of the horror and magnitude of the Nakba, so that actions appear in the passive voice and in generalized terms, without identifying the real actor behind those crimes.

Shupak shows that these outlets also focused on the Israeli narrative of statehood and used euphemistic language that minimized the number of Palestinian victims and cast doubt on the scale of the catastrophe that befell them, in addition to questioning its real causes by accusing Palestinians or Arabs of bringing it about.

Focusing on the Counter-Narrative and Celebrating the Birth of the Hebrew State

The Zionist movement advances an alternative narrative to the Nakba, one centered on the birth of the Hebrew state through celebration of what it calls the "War of Liberation," in which Arabs are portrayed as "barbaric invaders" who were confronted and defeated in 1948, rather than as the people of the land who were forcibly expelled from their homes. In doing so, the movement employed a religious narrative that views the land of Palestine as a divine promise three thousand years old that, after the "War of Liberation," returned to its original inhabitants, in a triumph of divine promise and historical inevitability.

The danger of this narrative lies not only in its reliance on religious text to justify one of the greatest violations of contemporary international and humanitarian law. The Zionist movement did not stop there, but also resorted to contemporary diplomatic framing through legal and political tools such as UN Partition Resolution 181, the claim that the Arabs rejected this binding international resolution, and reliance on the Balfour Declaration and Palestine's legal status

under the Mandate.

The prevailing Zionist narrative to this day has portrayed the “War of Liberation” as a brave Jewish repulsion of a “sinful Arab aggression,” within the framework of a “civil war” between the country’s Jewish and Arab inhabitants, driven, according to this narrative, by Arab ambitions and their desire to annihilate what remained of the world’s Jews fleeing European persecution.

Yet the real danger of this narrative lies in its concealment behind the historical victimhood suffered by Europe’s Jews in the Nazi Holocaust, so that the newborn Hebrew state appears, according to Zionist theorists, as a safe haven and a logical expression of historical and human justice in response to one of the most horrific atrocities of the twentieth century. The Zionist machine has never ceased inflating the Holocaust and surrounding it with an aura of historical, legal, and political sanctity until it has become a pretext that cannot be questioned, tried, or stripped of its legitimacy.



Israeli right-wing activists protest near the annual Nakba commemoration ceremony at Tel Aviv University, May 14, 2018. (Yossi Zeliger/Flash90)

Although commemorating the Nakba is not, in itself, prohibited in the United States, as it falls under constitutionally protected political expression under the First Amendment, treating the Nakba as an ongoing framework of violations that accumulate historically and culminate in one point, the establishment of the

State of Israel, thereby condemning that point and stripping it of legitimacy, has continued to face immense legal and political challenges in the United States.

The Zionist narrative and its tools did not stop at literary and theoretical contestation that challenges the Palestinian narrative with the Israeli one, but went beyond it, using the movement's resources and influence to legally pursue anyone who dares adopt and defend the Palestinian narrative, under the claim of denying the "right of Jews to collective self-determination," which is regarded as the "foundational legal" dimension of the State of Israel.

The alleged dimension of the "right to collective self-determination" constitutes one of the most prominent axes of antisemitism according to the expanded definition of the Holocaust remembrance body, whose adoption has become an authentic expression of support for Israel in the United States and a form of justice for Jews in light of historical Nazi victimization. At the same time, this concept has become a guillotine for Palestinian rights in the United States, turning into a ready-made accusation capable of ruining an activist's life there, ending their educational and professional path, and turning their life upside down.

Palestinian activists and supporters of Palestinian self-determination have become aware of this delicate paradox, which threatens to confine their struggle to historical and heritage commemorations without extending into American political and cultural reality. Palestinian American Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib has introduced bills aimed at preserving the memory of the Nakba as an ongoing and comprehensive framework for Israeli violations in the occupied Palestinian territories from 1948 to the present day.

These bills included calls for education and awareness-raising about the events of the Nakba and the documented atrocities that accompanied it, in addition to providing a legitimate framework to protect the political, cultural, and legal mobilization tools that arise from it, such as funding UNRWA and protecting rights-based and student activism demanding an end to those violations and accountability for them.

Building an Alternative Narrative and Marketing It Internationally

Major American and international human rights organizations have undertaken the creation of a new framing structure for Israel's practices, replacing the Nakba framework and confining it to a historical crime that happened and ended, to be replaced by the framework of "apartheid," which does not point to the root cause but deals with it as a *fait accompli* whose effects must be addressed. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and B'Tselem were among the leading organizations to propose this alternative framework and promote it

internationally.

Yet the alternative narrative based on the claim of “apartheid” lacked the unifying umbrella for Palestinians provided by the term Nakba, which deals with an extremely complex legal matrix encompassing all Palestinians: refugees in the diaspora, the internally displaced within the Green Line, Palestinians under military occupation and savage settlement expansion in the West Bank, and Palestinians in Gaza subjected to siege and genocide. The sidelining of the term Nakba has contributed to fragmenting the Palestinian cause and treating Palestinians as scattered communities, each governed by a different geopolitical reality and different constraints, requiring varied and independent policies and strategies.

Despite the global celebration of reports by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and B’Tselem on Israel’s practice of apartheid, and the alignment of Arab forces and some Palestinian forces with this narrative as one that is, to some extent, acceptable in the West and capable, even partially, of producing an international solution to Israeli arrogance and intransigence, many saw this framework as insufficient, and perhaps even misleading and distracting from the actual framework of Palestinian rights embodied in the Nakba.

Policies based on greater equality between Palestinians and Israelis, while acceptable to proponents of the apartheid framework, are merely treatment for one symptom of the disease, not a radical cure for a brutal replacement settler-colonial system.

In his article published in the Columbia Law Review, issue four of volume 124, Harvard doctoral student Rabea Eghbariah argues, under the title “Toward Nakba as a Legal Concept,” that current international law lacks a framing term capable of diagnosing the Palestinian condition accurately and comprehensively. Terms such as occupation, apartheid, and even genocide have failed to provide a unifying legal umbrella for Palestinian rights, limiting their treatment to certain aspects based on abstraction and unfair analogy.

Eghbariah argues that no framing term other than the Nakba is capable of encompassing the complex and recurring development of the Israeli repressive structure that has extended from and been generated by that pivotal historical event. Any other framing term would diminish Palestinian rights and even criminalize the comprehensive Palestinian narrative that reflects the total experience of Israeli settler colonialism in historic Palestine.

He believes that, despite the partial usefulness of terms such as apartheid, occupation, and genocide, the term Nakba alone is capable of encompassing them all, building on them, and moving beyond them toward the extended



dimensions of Israel's varied practices against Palestinians wherever they may be.

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