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Teaching the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Rachel S. Harris, Jacob Lassner, Caitlin Carenen, Janice W. Fernheimer, Marty Shichtman, Ashley Passmore



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THINKING DIFFERENTLY AND
CREATING NEW PARADIGMS

Teaching Israel/Palestine without Repeating History

Teaching Israel/Palestine Studies

LIORA R. HALPERIN

The university promises to be a space where all students, from whatever standpoint, revisit comfortable or axiomatic assumptions. When we teach history, we are asking students to probe assumptions about the past, to understand the evolution of a present situation from multiple perspectives, and to gain the tools to understand (and participate in, if they wish) a conversation about the appropriate future directions for Israel and Palestine. How can we create an institutional foundation for this kind of thinking, this kind of conversation, this kind of learning?

I would suggest that the way we frame this project is important—indeed, thinking critically about why and how we use the terms we do is part of the conversation itself, part of recognizing and owning the fact that we are charting a course between multiple, often competing visions. Therefore, though multiple framings may be appropriate even within a single class, I want to use this essay to argue for the importance of framing what I am teaching as the history of “Israel/Palestine,” not the history of Israel alone, Israel and the Arab world, or Israel and the Middle East.

For me, the study of Israel/Palestine is not about establishing two entities and presenting a history that is parallel. I want to emphasize that these histories are not parallel, whether in the features of their stories or in the power relations between them at different phases and their relations with other global actors. For me it is important not to suggest that students must understand them as equal and to encourage everyone to get beyond the “both sides” framing. What they are—and this is the inarguable—is interwoven, historically, symbolically, and logistically.

With the theme of interwovenness in mind, I want to argue that Israel/Palestine framing (Palestine/Israel would be equally fitting) is appropriate for five main reasons and to direct these remarks in particular to the Israel studies field, where courses are often offered with a primary or sole focus on Israel.

1. *History.* The study of the State of Israel, like the study of the Middle East as a whole, requires the study of pre-1948 Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine. I would

argue that calling this “pre-State Israel” is highly anachronistic. Palestine before 1948 has its own history and politics that needs to be studied in its own right, without projecting later events back onto the past. Moreover, during the period before 1948, both Jews and Arabs (and everyone else) referred to this land as Palestine. Israel is wrapped up with its own Palestinian past, the geographic, legal, and political conditions that preceded the state of Israel. Decisions, infrastructure, and laws from before 1948 still have meaningful presence and effects today.

2. *Overlapping symbolism.* The bit of land that most Israelis consider Israel from a national/cultural (if not political) standpoint and most Palestinians consider Palestine is the same piece of land, mostly defined according to the British Mandatory borders.¹ These imaginings are common even among those who accept limits on sovereignty in the present or the conceivable future or who would agree that, at present, “Israel” or “Palestine” does not constitute the whole land for political purposes. For all attempts to divide the land and despite the pre-1967 borders, few people have taken on the Green Line or the divisions between areas A, B, and C as part of collective memory. While on more official maps, actual political lines are often (though not always) visible, more symbolic maps, intended to play on emotions, almost never show lines. Such maps are politically misleading, but they point honestly to the fact that political realities do not reflect collective, emotive imaginings.

3. *Interconnection.* Some people contrast Israel “inside the Green Line” with Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza or, more accurately, the areas under partial Palestinian control in areas A and B). Sometimes these entities are depicted as clearly delineated and nonoverlapping. These delineated zones, based on the 1949 cease-fire lines (or pre-1967 borders), were the basis for Palestinian self-determination in the 1993 Oslo Accords. When Mahmoud Abbas has gone to the UN in recent years to receive forms of recognition for a Palestinian state, he is imagining that this state is the West Bank and Gaza. Many of those who are committed to an eventual two-state solution understand that the land will be formally divided, with an international border between the two.

However, in the current reality, neither the West Bank nor Gaza is a freestanding entity. This means that to move between parts of Palestine (in this sense), one needs to move through Israel, with the attendant Israeli military presence, and to move people or goods into or out of Gaza, one in most cases needs to interact with Israelis. These territories are also linked to Israel by a shared currency, shared water resources, and other infrastructure linkages. Tel Aviv beaches get polluted when Gaza’s sewage-treatment plants are damaged and not fixed. This means that for the purposes of studying “Palestine,” one necessarily has to study how it has been shaped and limited and constrained by Israel; it also means that for the purposes of studying “Israel,” one has to be aware of the ways that Israel is intertwined with Palestine. Even were Palestine to become a separate state, Israel and Palestine will nonetheless always be linked.

4. *Shared global context.* Israeli and Palestinian histories have been historically subject to larger regional and global pressures. The breakup of empires, the evolution of nationalism, the shifting balance of powers in the region and globally, changes to world commodity markets, the emergence of new technologies of communication, transportation, and warfare: all have affected both Israelis and Palestinians, though they have had differential effects. The tiny territory of Israel/Palestine has never existed as an isolated unit; indeed, it has been buffeted and meaningfully shaped by patterns and trends much larger than itself, global trends with local implications. When we study the differential effects of such trends, we understand the separate paths of Israeli and Palestinian development, but we also can speak relationally, understanding how peoples and territories are linked for reasons that transcend local politics, policies, ideologies, and desires.

5. *Connection of Israel and Palestine for scholars and for researchers.* Though one may make pretensions to study Israel without Palestine or Palestine without Israel, on the basis of one's topic of interest, the practice of scholarship requires facing both Israel and Palestine. Scholars of Palestine often must make their way through contemporary Israel, its politics and bureaucratic structures, in order to access archival records. Scholars often must know both Arabic and Hebrew. A scholar of Israelis will confront the population of Palestinians in Israel, the legacies from the Ottomans and British, or the reshaping of the geography of the state that was enabled by and occurred in the wake of Israel's destruction of Palestinian villages in 1948. Scholars face the fact that Israeli politics have long been shaped by Palestinian politics. All scholars of this land are necessarily wrapped up in the politics and pressures that derive from the occupation, whatever their take on its future. Though the range of questions, the historical comparisons, and sources in question will be different, these fields are necessarily part of the same broader conversation. Israel studies cannot ignore Palestine studies, and Palestine studies cannot ignore Israel studies—indeed, such scholars are part of some of the same larger conversations and often benefit from creating partnerships and acknowledging their interlinking research agendas.

Bringing Israel/Palestine Studies to the Classroom

How can these principles be put into practice in the classroom? How do we encompass these various pieces of history without speaking about a simple binary of “the Israeli narrative” and “the Palestinian narrative”?

I bring three larger principles with me into my teaching in a large U.S. public university setting, mainly in classes of twenty to forty students who are taking my courses either to fulfill distribution requirements or as part of history, international studies,

Jewish studies, or other humanities or social sciences major. In some cases, the students have some Jewish studies or Middle Eastern studies background, but in many cases, they are encountering the study of Israel/Palestine for the first time in my courses.

1. There are not two sides: each of the normally recognized sides has numerous internal divisions and splits, along class or religious lines, as well as with regard to the ideological understanding of the national project, its purpose and its importance. When we encompass both Palestinian and Israeli perspectives, understanding the multiplicity of sides (or sides within sides) is key.
2. Positions need to be taken on their own terms, ideally through reading primary sources and trying to understand the motivations of the writers. It does not matter whether we personally agree with what we are reading—we need to read what we read in context, in light of questions about contingency, causality, influence, and change over time.
3. It is important that students feel that they can form their own conclusions and pursue whatever politics they want to pursue outside of class but that everyone from any position benefits from returning to the history and reading sources, understanding that no position comes out of nowhere.

Let me give the example of two assignments that I have done that aim to move in the direction of these goals. The first is an exercise that asks students to reconstruct a scholarly debate between contemporary academics, and the second involves the creation of a time line that reflects the historical consciousness of historical actors in the past. These assignments ask students to understand the multiple perspectives that have shaped both the history of the region and its modern interpretations; to explore the historical places, moments, and events that appear, with key variations, across narrative divides; and to understand Israel/Palestine through several different analytical frameworks, frameworks that often lead to highly divergent conclusions.

Debate Assignment

The essence of moving between discussions of “Israel” and “Palestine” is by cutting between views that suggest that only one of these categories is primary and the other is secondary. One could attempt to simply present a “balanced” perspective, which lays out two stories side by side, but such approaches imply a level of parallelism and equality that does not reflect reality.

In the past, I have chosen to work with three survey histories. The first is by a writer who focuses on Israel, situating it within the history of Zionism and broader

Jewish history, and follows primarily the Jewish story through its history. The second is by a writer who focuses on Palestine, situating this land and its population primarily within a history of trends and developments in the Middle East. The third is a globally focused history that places developments in Israel/Palestine within broader geopolitical processes. The specific titles can change as new books become available.

At the beginning of the semester, we consider the starting premises of each book: Where does each book begin geographically? When does it begin? Who are the most important actors? Is it a history that focuses on ideas? On economic conditions? On global politics? Already we see that answers to these questions determine what material is considered at length and what is relegated to the sidelines. As the semester goes on, we read about major historical moments, for example, early Zionist settlement, World War I, and the Balfour Declaration; the Arab Revolt of 1936–39; and the United Nations partition plan from each textbook. What is different? Where do the authors agree on facts but present them differently? Where do they use different words to describe the same thing? Are they disagreeing about what happened? About how to describe what happened? Or about what is most important? Students find that for the most part, these three internationally regarded scholars agree on the facts, but their choice of emphasis or their choice of descriptions give very different ideas of what happened and why and what conclusions we are asked to draw.

For one of the central assignments of the semester, students have to imagine that the three scholars have been invited to campus for a panel discussion about what is the right way to teach the history of Palestine/Israel: the students are asked to write the transcript of the conversation that they believe would ensue at this event. Students need to correctly capture the respective positions of the three scholars, root their statements in historical specifics (because of course the scholars themselves would do so), and make clear their differences from one another. They can stage arguments that they think would occur and have scholars make the most compelling argument they can. They are to serve as the moderator of this discussion, which means they get to pose tough questions of individuals, direct the conversation, and challenge those whose answers they think are insufficient. Students are incredibly creative with this assignment.

Time Line Assignment

If the dialogue assignment is about understanding scholars' approaches and understanding that differences in scholarly opinion are about differences in emphasis as well as differences in interpretation, the time line assignment helps students get into the mind-set of historical actors themselves. By the end of the semester, students should

be aware that many events happened, many things occurred, but should also be aware that different people historically would have placed emphasis on different events or would have incorporated the same events in different ways into their telling of the past.

In this assignment, students have to choose a perspective, describe that perspective, and then make a time line of the most important events in history for that person's narrative of the past. A written assignment asks students to defend their choices of what they included and also to consider what events they left off the time line and why. This assignment helps students move beyond the more simplistic idea of an "Israeli perspective" or a "Palestinian perspective" and consider how events have different meanings or are more or less important for people depending on their different backgrounds, location, education, class level, or type and degree of political affiliation.

These two assignments share a focus on perspective. In a land where different perspectives seem to yield realities that have nothing to do with one another, in which individuals and groups seem to be living in alternate realities, these assignments take seriously some of these perspectives and help us discuss what approach to the past they yield. They also have the effect of helping students realize that actors, however much they may disagree or hate one another, are not living in separate realities: they are living in joint realities with shared events that, however, had and have very different meanings for different populations.

Conclusion

"Israel/Palestine studies" is an inherently unstable term. It has a slash in the middle, which can mean "and," "or," "in relationship with," or "in conflict with." It is all these things at the same time. The very instability of the framing, the fact that it sounds odd and makes us ask, "What's Israel/Palestine?" opens a series of conversations. These conversations are not prologue; they constitute the essence of seriously considering our object of study. What is the relationship between past realities and present ones? How do perception, symbolism, narrative, and dreams about a place intersect with (or contradict) political realities? How do groups that are deeply separate, in some cases deeply unequal, interact, share resources, or move within space? How does the process of answering these questions force us, as students and teachers, to cross boundaries ourselves, contend with boundaries that cannot be crossed, and gain the resources to make conclusions? How do we set up exercises that let us understand competing perspectives even if we hate and disagree with those perspectives? How do we recognize that while there are things that are simply untrue, there are many more things that are true for some people but not others, that are true if one makes certain starting assumptions or that fit within one analytical perspective and not another.

We live in an environment in which the stakes are not theoretical or academic; they are real, they affect real people. Some of our students are making choices daily about which group of people most needs their sympathy, money, or energies and making decisions about who should be condemned, pressured, criticized, and how. As students navigate their own approach to these questions, they benefit from their professors acknowledging the intersecting nature of these stories. The more our universities can be places in which we ask about these intersections, the more informed we can be as viewers of news, intelligent commentators, and people making change on the ground.

Notes

1. Israelis normally include the Golan Heights in their mental map of Israel, while Palestinians, using the British Mandate borders that did not include the Golan Heights, do not.