**Two competing pasts**

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There is a saying from George Orwell’s dystopian novel 1984, “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” Actually, that is not just a fictional conjecture. All nations seek to control popular perceptions of their past in ways that promote patriotism.

We also know how relatively easy it is to implant false memories, or in this case, historical “memories” that are attuned to a particular ideological point of view. Revolutions have led to the revamping of history books and ideologically-based censorship is not uncommon. Teach such a contrived outlook to two or three generations of school children and you will have helped shape the future behavior by controlling how the past is understood.

This effort is facilitated by the fact that most people are not very interested in having an accurate picture of the past. The present passion for genealogy aside, most people are focused locally, both as to place and time. This is known as “natural localism” and is an orientation that has been with us (and other animals) from time immemorial. For our purposes, this means the past can be a tabula rasa, or blank slate, that people fill in according to (1) what they are taught in school (2) and the usually reinforcing nature of the cultural environment they are raised in.

It is against this background that we can make sense of Israeli perceptions of Palestinians and the fact that “the vast majority of Israelis are convinced of the justice of the war” [in Gaza] – a war which the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has decided “plausibly could constitute genocide.” How have they come to this judgment? Essentially, the Israelis and their Zionist supporters, and this certainly includes US President Joe Biden, have constructed a past qualitatively different from that experienced by the Palestinians.

In brief, here is my sense of these two opposing pasts and how they shape an understanding of the present:

Israel: Many contemporary Israelis take seriously, at least rhetorically, the claim that Israel was originally given to ancient Israelites by God. Of course, this is a matter of faith. It is historically true that there were ancient Israelite tribal lands called Judah and Israel. Both were eventually conquered by the Assyrian or Babylonian empires. The city of Jerusalem did prevail as an ancient Jewish religious center until it was mostly destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. Besides ritual references to Jerusalem and Old Testament stories, little survived of this history over the ensuing centuries. What followed were repeated invasions of this region by various empires, including, up to 1918, the Ottoman Turks.

At the end of the 19th century CE, Jewish populations could be found throughout Europe and the Middle East. Due to the jaundiced mythology of evolving Christianity, Jews in Europe had suffered centuries of religiously inspired segregation and persecution. This eventually led to the conclusion that Jewish integration into Christian society was impossible and, ipso facto, the founding of the Zionist movement seeking the creation of a Jewish state.

In 1917 CE the Zionist movement would make an alliance with imperial Great Britain leading the British to issue the Balfour Declaration, promising the Jews a “national home” in Palestine. At the time this promise was made Palestine had two thousand years of history as a place with a Middle Eastern indigenous culture and population.

Toward the end of World War I Britain conquered Palestine. At this point the British started to facilitate the immigration into the area of tens of thousands of European Jews. As a general rule, you cannot drop a large number of foreigners into a space long dominated by an indigenous people and culture, and not expect there to be trouble.This is especially true in the case of Palestine, since the migrants were aiming to create a state exclusively for themselves. However, the sense of civilizational superiority shared by both the Zionist Jews and their British patrons blinded them to the level of serious resistance that lay ahead.

When it did come, starting in the late 1920s and building through the late 1940s, the Zionists interpreted Palestinian resistance as anti-Semitism and waged what they would term a “war of independence” against the indigenous people and culture they were in the process of colonially replacing. In May of 1948 the State of Israel was proclaimed and all further resistance by the Palestinians was seen as “terrorism.”

This is the history, in much greater detail (my critical remarks aside), that every Israeli/Zionist Jew is taught, that Israeli culture celebrates, and that dominates all organizational Israeli Jewish points of view. To question this historical story is to question Israel’s right to exist.

Finally, in this picture, the Palestinians remain enemies who want to destroy the State of Israel. Beyond their standing as a challenge to both national existence and the fulfillment of national destiny (colonizing all of historical Palestine), their existence has little place in the Israeli mind. Only when the Palestinians act against Israel, as Hamas did on 2024 October 7, are they transformed from unimportant to an “existential threat.”

Palestine: While the possibility that Palestinians are actually victims of decades of Israeli occupation is inconceivable from the Israeli Jewish perspective, it represents undeniable truth for the Palestinians – who recognize themselves as the area’s rightful population and sustainers of the region’s true culture.

For our purposes, modern Palestinian history starts in 1917 with the aforementioned Balfour Declaration. The Balfour Declaration is seen by the Palestinians as a plan concocted to solve a European problem (anti-Semitism) by dumping Europe’s Jews in an Arab territory. However, it is a fact that the Balfour Declaration, while giving the Zionists a near invincible ally, set in motion events that would inevitably lead to the creation of Palestinian nationalism.

Over the next 76 years (and counting) the Palestinians would resist the authority of an expansionist Israeli state. No peace has been achieved between the two people. The Palestinians believe this is because Israel has never been interested in peace. They are only interested in possessing the land.

Because Israel is the stronger power, financed and armed by the U.S., Palestinian resistance against Israeli policies of segregation and displacement never really stood a chance. There were several popular uprisings or intifadas which could not shake Israeli determination to eventually ethnically cleanse the Palestinians. There were also multiple attempts to organize armed resistance. Presently the most notable of these is Hamas.

Israel divided the Palestinians into three politico-geographic zones: (1) The Palestinians who managed to remain in 1948 Israel – now second class, ethnically segregated “citizens.” (2) Non-citizens of the occupied West Bank and (3) Non-citizens of Gaza. Conditions in Gaza have been particularly stark and this small territory quickly took on the reputation of a large outdoor prison. Hamas legally took control of Gaza in 2006. From that point on Israel blockaded Gaza and has purposely engineered its de-development. Under these circumstances, almost all Palestinians see Israel as an enemy seeking their removal from their homeland.

How do their respective understandings of the past, absorbed through generations of educational, cultural and officially sponsored indoctrination, as well as everyday experience, cause the Israelis and Palestinians to see and act toward each other?

The first thing we can observe is that each believes the other wants to destroy them. Given all that has happened, there is some truth to this. However, whether the Palestinian past has led Hamas to want to wipe Israel off the map or not, they simply haven’t got the military capacity to do so. What they do have is a growing capacity to wage a low level war of resistance against an Israeli state that does have the capacity to wipe the Palestinians off the map.

Since the Nakba of 1948, Israel has not acted to physically eliminate large numbers of Palestinians. This was probably for fear of world opinion. At the end of 2023, however, a combination of particularly ruthless Israeli leaders and the Hamas attack of October 7, triggered an Israeli decision to risk a genocidal attack on Gaza. And, lo and behold, the rest of the world’s nation states allowed them to do it. This passive response has affirmed for Israelis that their understanding of the past is shared by most Western states. That international non-state actors (for instance the IJC) point out the horror of Israeli behavior is dismissed as anti-Semitism.

Indeed, Western leaders immediately accepted the Zionist description of Hamas’s act of resistance as ‘an unprovoked terrorist act’. They thereby signaled a willingness to disregard decades of Israeli colonial oppression and expropriation. They swallowed whole the Israeli historical narrative. President Biden, who described the Hamas attack as “pure evil,” is an excellent example of this partisan choice of histories.

Back in Jewish Israel, “the latest Peace Index survey [January 2024] from Tel Aviv University shows that ninety-four percent of Jews, and 82 percent of the total population in Israel, think the Israeli Defense Force has used the right amount of firepower in Gaza (51 percent among Jews), or not enough (43 percent).” In other words, Jewish Israeli understanding of the past does not allow them to recognize that what took place on 7 October 2023 was a reaction to their own country’s behavior. Within the Israeli narrative, Hamas could only have acted out of hateful anti-Semitism, justifying a response of wanton slaughter.

Excerpted: ‘The Manipulated Past’. Courtesy: Counterpunch.org