Memory and Violence in Israel/Palestine

K. M. Fierke
University of St. Andrews

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Abstract

A review of:

Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix, edited by Robert I. Rotberg. Indiana University Press, 2006.

and

Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa, edited by Ussama Makdisi and Paul A. Silverstein. Indiana University Press, 2006.

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Memory and Violence in Israel/Palestine*

By K.M. Fierke

Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix, edited by Robert I. Rotberg. Indiana University Press, 2006.

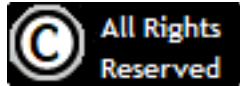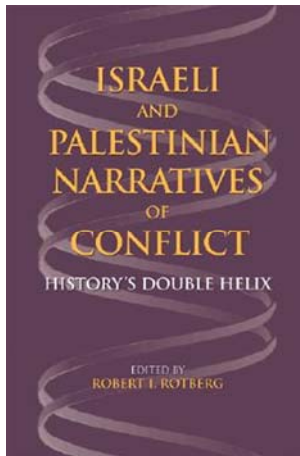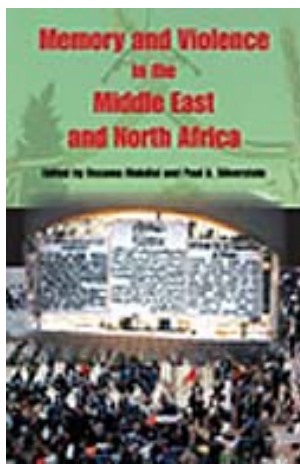**Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa,** edited by Ussama Makdisi and Paul A. Silverstein. Indiana University Press, 2006.

In 2008, Israel will turn sixty. Landmark birthdays often give rise to reflection on the past. In this case, questions about memory, and whose memory to privilege or commemorate, may have consequences for the future of the region. For the Israelis, the object of memory, and the vehicle of its birth, was the 1948 "War of Independence," where like David and Goliath, a numerically smaller but technologically and culturally superior power, faced down a larger but inferior one. Following just a few years after the Holocaust in Europe, Israel's military victory offered, in the words of Nahum Goldman, an American Zionist leader, "a glorious contrast to the centuries of persecution and humiliation, of adaptation and compromise" (Shlaim 2000: 40). For Palestinians, and Arabs more generally, the Israeli narrative is not merely offensive but a source of humiliation itself, given the "ethnic cleansing" of Palestinians that occurred during *al Nakba* (the Catastrophe), with the dispossession of over 750,000 indigenous inhabitants of Palestine and their descendents. For Palestinians, the failure of the Israeli state to acknowledge 1948 as an ethnic cleansing continues to underpin the conflict (Masalha 2005: 4).

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Revisionist historians have, since the 1980s, demystified the Zionist account of events in 1948, which had become hegemonic (Sa'di in Sa'di and Abu Lughod 2007: 303). At the same time, the "ethnic cleansing" of *al Nakba* has become increasingly difficult to ignore. Yet the two mutually exclusive stories of the Israelis and Palestinians remain irreconcilable. Much like the duck/rabbit picture (Wittgenstein 1958), the two narratives are closely entangled. Nonetheless, it is difficult to view both at the same time or, more accurately, to acknowledge the complexity of the whole, rather than the outlines of one to the exclusion of the other. The Double Helix, which is the central metaphor of Rotberg's (2006) collection, captures a similar idea. The intertwining of each side's account of the past provides fuel and direction to the on-going tit-for-tat battles between them. Like theories, narratives of memory can provide a comprehensive explanatory schema, which contributes to the formation of identity, assigns meaning to events, justifies the acts of in-groups toward enemies, and thereby shapes the political process (Bar-Tal and Salomon in Rotberg 2006). For both Arabs and Israelis, 1948 is the point of reference for other events, past and future.

The two edited collections by Rotberg (2006) and by Makdisi and Silverstein (2006) struggle with a range of questions about memory and violence in the Middle East and North Africa, that is, about history, how it is remembered and re-remembered, how it is recorded in narrative and how meaning is given to action or inaction in the present. They remind us that "reality" is not self evident, that actors remember from a position in time and social space and that, more often than not, the past is remembered through the prism of present suffering or power. As Avishai Margalit (2003: 14) notes, "Memory… is *knowledge from the past*. It is not necessarily *knowledge of the past*." The meaning constituted in collective memory, rather than its historical accuracy, is central to how a people understand who they are and how they go on. In this respect, memory is inseparable from identity, a theme that will be elaborated in section one. In section two, I explore the element of traumatic memory in the experience of both Israelis and the Palestinians. Section three examines the relationship between traumatic memory and violence, as a point of departure for thinking about alternative approaches to the conflict.

Memory and Identity

Questions of historical memory have played a key role in the rise of identity politics, particularly in fuelling civil and ethnic conflicts across the world (Bell 2006: 1). Before examining the specific problem of memory and violence in the Middle East and North Africa, it is useful to highlight a few points from the vast literature about the relationship between memory and identity, that is, the relationship between how the past is remembered and the formation of the individual or collective sense of self.

First, identity and memory are mutually constituted. Allan Young (1995: 221) refers to memory as "the proof as well as the record of the self's existence, and the struggle over memory as the struggle over the self's most valued possessions." Without a memory of the past, it is impossible to say who or what one is. However, the issue, particularly in politics, is rarely one of either individual or collective memory but rather the relationship between them. Identity at either level relates to social categories, whether religious, national, ethnic or gender, and memory, whether of the individual or collective, relates to a social context and historical experience. As one of the early memory theorists, Maurice Halbwachs (1992[1914]: 40) claimed: "One may say that the individual

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remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories."

Second, memory is not like a camera that captures or reflects reality "as it is." It is rather a product of the stories people tell about themselves and others and therefore involves an active process of giving meaning to the past. These stories, like narrative more generally, are populated by others who exist within a moral order of right and wrong; emotions are attached to these stories, none of which are exclusively about the past but have implications for action in the present and future as well. In this respect, what matter are the ways in which actors produce the past through a dynamic engagement with the present (Collins 2004: 22). Memory is a performance and this production always takes place within a social world, and an already existing discursive universe, which necessarily shapes, limits and renders possible particular formulations as legitimate, to the exclusion of others.

Third, memory can become habitual, providing support to a given identity and becoming woven into the practices of a culture; but, as it is malleable, they may also be contested and subject to change. Václav Havel (1990: 43) provides an example of how memory can become habitual:

Twenty or thirty years ago, in the army, we had a lot of obscure adventures, and years later we tell them at parties, and suddenly we realize that those two very difficult years of our lives have become lumped together into a few episodes that have lodged in our memory in a standardized form, and are always told in a standardized way, in the same words.

Memory is not only a recounting of what was said, but what was done by and to us and our response. It thus recounts actions and interactions with others which, if repeated over time, and magnified through the media, can become habitual. For instance, a traumatic memory of humiliation, when experienced repeatedly, may become habitual, thereby structuring the practices underpinning identity and relationships to others, such that the previous life is mirrored in the present, as it is habitually acted out (Fierke 2006). Thus, it is not only that specific events become lodged in narratives of the past; emotions and practices relating to loss, mourning or the inability to mourn, and trauma may structure practices in the present.

While collective memory can become bound up in the habits of a culture, it can also be the object of contestation. As the Makdisi and Silverstein (2006) volume shows, collective memory and commemoration have played a legitimating role in official political practices related to nation and empire building. More recently, it has also become a vehicle for victims of collective violence to articulate their experience of suffering, often in relation to the latter. Both resistance and reconciliation are attempts to bring to life alternative stories that have been buried, either by repressive politics or an unwillingness to acknowledge the past (Makdisi and Silverstein 2006). While the two can sometimes come together (e.g. the eventual mobilization of the Holocaust in Israeli discourse [Zertal 2005]), they can also represent distinct positions of political power and resistance to it. The enhanced voice of victims over the last few decades and their resistance, have highlighted the relationship between traumatic memory and the forging of collective identity in war. The paradox of the Middle East is that the traumatic experience of the Holocaust gave impetus to the

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construction of Israel, which is the background against which the on-going trauma of the Palestinians, the collective identity emerging from this, and the violent conflict between Israel and Palestine and the larger Arab world, was constructed. The question remains how these two mutually exclusive stories might be re-narrated toward a more peaceful construction of memory and identity for both.

Identity and Memory in the Middle East

It is often assumed that narratives of identity are exclusionary, or defined in opposition to an enemy other (Smith 1995; Bar On in Rotberg 2006; Campbell 1998). Yet Zionist or Israeli narratives of identity have neither been constant over time nor have they always been defined by a relationship to an Arab other. Some early Zionist writings identified a shared Semitic background of Arabs and Jews and sought to understand and acknowledge the local population. But for the most part Arabs were largely absent from Zionist discourse, and therefore invisible, as captured in the claim that Palestine was "a land without people for a people without land." Porat (Rotberg 2006: 47) argues that the "real" others for Zionism were the diasporic Jews and everything they represented. The construction of Israeli identity *vis-à-vis* the Palestinians and Arabs, with the latter as enemy "others," emerged in the 1930s with the increasing immigration of Jews to the region and the increasing resistance of the Arabs. Formerly romanticized images, such as the "noble savage," or the brave free Bedouin, were replaced by those of "an underdeveloped society, refusing to benefit from Jewish innovations and the cruel killers of women and children" (Porat in Rotberg 2006: 56). Hitler's Holocaust, in which millions of Jews were exterminated, gave impetus, in the aftermath of World War II, to the consolidation of the Israeli state. With the formation of Israel in 1948 came a further solidification of the Arab enemy other, although the mobilization of the memory of the Holocaust in narratives of Israeli nationhood, and the construction of a link between the Arab enemies of Israel and the Nazis, did not emerge until the 1960s, in the aftermath of the Eichmann Trial (Zertal 2005: 100). This represented a shift from an opposition revolving around the absence or presence of a Jewish homeland, history and identity, to an opposition based on the denial of the existence, suffering, and history of the other.

If the construction of the Israeli state facilitated the construction of a coherent national narrative, it also corresponded with an attempt to eliminate the identity, memory and thus history of the Palestinians. The societal fragmentation of the Palestinians, which accompanied the expulsion, combined with several factors that hindered the reconstruction of collective memory. First, the establishment of the Israeli state in two-thirds of what had been Palestine, ruptured Palestinian collective life, producing three distinct populations: the Palestinians inside Israel, those in the West Bank and Gaza, and the refugees (Said 1979: 116-118); these populations represented three distinct sites of collective experience and memory work. To this must be added the Palestinians in the larger Diaspora to the Gulf countries, Europe, North and South America and elsewhere. Second, Arab historians have often been unable to disentangle themselves, in their writing, from dominant Israeli narratives (Jawad in Rotberg 2006: 78-79; McDougall in Makdisi and Silverstein 2006). The widespread destruction of Palestinian archives in the various wars and the restrictions on access to those that remain, as well censorship and the closure of many Palestinian universities, reinforced this tendency. The renaming of towns, streets, mountains and landscapes has further contributed to a forgetting of the Palestinian presence (Pappe in Rotberg 2006: 121). That the Israeli project followed

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on the earlier imperial project of Britain only reinforced the difficulty of constructing a narrative history in the face of powers that inhibit the possibility of speaking or writing freely or deny access to those historical reference points, which make the construction of alternative accounts possible. In the absence of Palestinian documentary records, oral history and interviews have been an important source for constructing the collective memory of the Palestinians. Rather than the choice of a methodology, the use of oral history represents a decision as to whether to record any history at all (Masalha 2005: 5, 6).

Despite the contrast in relative coherence, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been sustained by two competing yet intertwined narratives, characterized by different markers of identity, different names for the major confrontations, and a different temporal sequencing of events. The juxtaposition of the two reveals the extent to which "reality" is not a self-evident observable phenomenon and a single truth, but rather is constructed on a selection of detail from a complex background and an interpretation of facts which, particularly in the case of conflict, is, at one and the same time, colored by collective position and constitutive of collective identity and power.

Traumatic Memory

Allan Megill (1998: 40, 42) notes that in moments of crisis, people often hark back to the past with amplified intensity, thereby valorizing memory. At the same time, a "traumatic" crisis may involve a shattering of meaning and feelings of safety in the world, and an inability to speak of the traumatic event. Constructing a historical narrative, which distinguishes past from present, is highly problematic in the context of war or its traumatic aftermath. Saree Makdisi (in Makdisi and Silverstein 2006) points to this difficulty in Lebanon, where there is still no official history, and especially of the war of 1982, the memories of which remain raw and undigested. Jean Makdisi's account of the war, Beirut Fragments (1999), captures the fragmentation of a shattered city, of a lost past and the fragments which constitute the book itself. This fragmentation is an expression of both the trauma of war and the difficulty of constructing a coherent narrative of it.

Both Israeli and Palestinian memories have been shaped by a traumatic past, of vulnerability and weakness as part of a Diaspora. In both the Israeli and Palestinian cases, the trauma of the Holocaust and *al Nakba*, respectively, remained largely unspeakable for several decades but with time became woven in political discourse, collective memory and practice (Zertal 2005, Jayyusi in Sa'di and Abu Lughod 2007: 109). Given a history of Diaspora and homelessness, it should come as no surprise that both Israeli and Palestinian narratives have revolved around a metaphor of returning home, of a return to safety and meaning. In constructing the Israeli state, Jews returned home after a long period of exile. The new home was built on, among others, archaeological findings and a history that designates an ancient sovereign Jewish presence in Palestine, interrupted by an exile, but one which largely disappears in the contemporary narrative of returning home. The Israeli policy of "retroactive transfer," which was systematized, bureaucratized and legalized in the 1950s, and which underpins the contemporary state, is one of the return of Jews and the non-return of Arabs (Piterberg in Makdisi and Silverberg 2006: 182). Within this narrative, Palestinian resistance is a form of terrorism that presents an existential threat to Israel. The returning home narrative of the Palestinians, by contrast, expresses the on-going rage and humiliation of exile and presents

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Palestinian and Arab resistance as a justifiable reaction to the taking over of their homeland (Pappe in Rotberg 2006:123-4). Indeed, for the Palestinians the trauma is not over but continues. As Sa'di and Abu Lughod (2007: 10) state, "For Palestinians, still living their dispossession, still struggling or hoping for return, many under military occupation, many still immersed in matters of survival, the past is neither distant or over." The cost of an exiled Jewry returning home, particularly after the horrific experience of Hitler's Holocaust, is that they occupied the homes or built on the ruins of another people who had to be exiled and forgotten in the process and who, in their resistance, also fight for the right to return home. Home becomes an exclusive place in Israeli discourse, which cannot accommodate partnership with the Palestinians, in contrast to a much older and largely forgotten narrative in which Jews and Arabs populated the same land.

The common metaphor of home reveals that on some level, whether Jewish, Arab or Palestinian, these are all narratives of exiled refugees who have experienced the trauma of war, genocide and/or displacement. The traumatic dimension of the memories and the violent relationships they constitute are therefore not surprising. Whether relating to child abuse in the family or ethnic cleansing by the state, trauma arises from a loss of feelings of safety and protection in the "home," often corresponding with experiences of betrayal and humiliation by those who it was assumed would provide protection (Edkins 2003). This raises a question about the relationship between traumatic memory and violence which is a central theme of the edited collection by Makdisi and Silverstein (2006), which looks more broadly at the Middle East and North Africa and complex processes related to colonization and decolonization, sectarianism and secularization, state-building and communal loss. The book argues that violence has been the basis for the constitution of collective narratives of origin, loss and recovery, as well as the precondition for any further reconciliation. These narratives, which are at the heart of the political, are continuously contested and reworked.

Memory and Violence

Both Jews and Palestinians have experienced the trauma and loss of identity and safety that comes with being cast out of the "home." The objective articulated in both narratives is or has been to return home. Home is linked to sovereignty, which facilitates a re-narration of identity in terms of a strong and invulnerable collective self in contrast to the weak and vulnerable victim of the Diaspora. Both sides would claim that sovereignty is deserved given their exceptional circumstances. The Holocaust is widely acknowledged to be without precedent in terms of the scope and the systematicity with which the Nazis attempted to eliminate the Jewish people. As Palestinian author Salman Abu Sitta (1998: 5) notes, the *Nakba*, is also without precedent:

> *The Palestinian Nakba is unsurpassed in history. For a country to be occupied by a foreign minority, emptied almost entirely of its people, its physical and cultural landmarks obliterated, its destruction hailed as a miraculous act of God and a victory for freedom and civilized values, all done according to a premeditated plan, meticulously executed, financially and politically supported from abroad, and still maintained today, is no doubt unique.*

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Given these exceptional histories, and the attachment of "home" to a piece of land—and the same piece of land—a violent outcome is not surprising. Despite the uniqueness of each side's traumatic experience, they are both expressions of the classic problem of international relations, that is, how to provide protection to people in a condition of anarchy. The sovereign state has historically been the answer, but this answer, defined as it is by a competitive environment of military power, has more often brought war than peace. Highlighting the centrality of traumatic memory in the reproduction of conflict opens up a space for approaching this seemingly irresolvable problem from a different angle, highlighting the sense of betrayal and humiliation which often propels violence. While the first denotes a loss of trust, given a failure of others to protect (Edkins in Bell 2006), the latter refers to a lowering of self respect, often in response to the humiliating acts of others, and the public exposure of these (Saurette 2005). Both denote a loss and thus something to be recovered. In this respect, trauma results less in a desire for revenge, although this is often an element of protracted conflict, than a desire for a restoration of feelings of safety and of dignity, respectively. For Jews, following the Holocaust, this restoration was linked to the creation of Israel, although its sovereign existence remains embattled. For the Palestinians, collective memory of life prior to *al Nakba* combines with the meaning of the loss and the continuing absence of dignity and safety, given the daily diet of humiliation suffered within Israel and the occupied territories and the feelings of having been betrayed by the international community or governments in the region. As Shibley Telhami (2002) notes, hopelessness and humiliation are the source of terrorism in the Middle East. Any viable solution will necessarily take account of the fundamental threat to existential identity and memory that underpins the conflict for both sides and spurs the violence between them. The voicelessness of the Palestinians, and failure of the international community to acknowledge their plight after sixty years has been constitutive of their violent resistance as well as providing a justification for Islamic terrorism more broadly.

Beyond Violence

If violence is constituted on painful collective memories, which remain meaningful in the present, what does this then suggest about the way out of conflict? The first and most obvious point is that policies and practices that reinforce feelings of humiliation and betrayal are likely to exacerbate conflict rather than provide a path out of it. The second is the importance of thinking about what kind of approach would instead reinforce feelings of safety and dignity. This requires some attention to cultural differences in meaning as well as a clear recognition of the centrality in international law of dignity and the prohibition on degrading and humiliating treatment. The third is to think about strategies of re-narration on both sides, recognizing the necessity of dialogue and giving a voice to all who have suffered.

But the difficulty of such a dialogue, particularly in a situation of asymmetry, cannot be ignored. Narratives of violence are often characterized less by the on-going experience of fragmentation, as in Lebanon, than the imposition of a dominant narrative that denies the atrocities of war or the experience of expelled populations (see Cohen 2000). For many years the Algerian War (and the French defeat in 1962) did not officially exist in France, and the truth about the repressive acts

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committed by the French was concealed (Stora in Makdisi and Silverstein 2006). Acts of denial may also reflect an inability to empathize with victims whose experience of suffering may mirror the past suffering of the perpetrator. Piterberg (Makdisi and Silverstein 2006), who analyzes the expulsion of Yemeni Jews from the agricultural cooperative at Kineret, points to the conspicuous absence in the accounts of Zionist historians of any memory of the Jews, who six decades earlier were indiscriminately exterminated, because their point of departure was an image of Israel as victorious sovereign. In this respect, state narratives may incorporate not only amnesia of alternative histories, but also a "forgetting" of traumatic memories that would call into question practices of exclusion and expulsion, or give rise to identification or feelings of compassion for its victims.

Conclusion

Reading the essays in these two books, one is left with a question of whether the nation, and subsequently the state, are possible without the suppression of alternative narratives that might call a hegemonic historical memory into question. Is amnesia, or a partial amnesia, the condition of possibility of the state? Both imperialism and the nation-state are conditions for the overwriting of alternative possibilities. Resistance and war, by contrast, represent the confrontation of conflicting narratives. Dialogue suggests some potential for reconciliation, which moves beyond violence.

There have been two general paths to reconciliation after violent conflict. The one, mirroring the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, involves the declassification of government documents and the creation of a formal committee of inquiry where both perpetrators and victims can present their accounts of the past. Such forums allow alternative voices to be heard and facilitate the construction of a coherent narrative of the past, which may make it possible to move toward an alternative future. The second approach is one of general amnesty, which is referred to by Makdisi and Silverstein (2006) as a politics of amnesia, which acknowledges the past by ignoring it and by looking forward rather than backward, fearing that any acknowledgement of the past will re-ignite tensions and lead to a return to violence. Neither book provides an easy answer to the question of how or whether conflicting narratives can be reconciled, bridged or reshaped so that they peacefully co-exist, particularly under the hegemony of a state-sponsored regime. Their main contribution is to see the tension as historically produced and contingent, revealing the dynamic interplay between narratives of hegemony and resistance. The key issue is what and who is acknowledged or denied, and how stories are told and re-told, reified and contested, a problem which is at the heart of violence in the Middle East and North Africa.

These books demonstrate that memory, like narrative, is selective. This is less a question of memory or forgetting than what is remembered and what is forgotten. The relationship between memory and forgetting is at the heart of political struggle, hegemony and resistance. These narratives must be examined in context and in their multiplicity. In this respect, our language, far from mirroring the world, is like the ancient city of the Middle East, "a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses" (Wittgenstein 1958: par. 18).

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K.M. Fierke is professor of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews. She has written extensively on topics related to constructivism and international security as well as the politics of trauma and memory, including "Whereof We can Speak, Thereof We must not be Silent: Trauma, Political Solipsism and War," Review of International Studies (2004); "Bewitched by the Past: Social Memory, Trauma and International Relations," in Duncan Bell, ed., Memory, Trauma and World Politics. Basingstoke: Palgrave (2006); "Therapeutic Interventions," in: K.M. Fierke, Diplomatic Interventions: Conflict and Change in a Globalizing World. Basingstoke: Palgrave (2005); and "Trauma," in K.M. Fierke, Critical Approaches to International Security. Oxford: Polity Press (2007).

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