

BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

The Israeli Palestinian Conflict, 1948 – One Reality, Shared Memories¹

1948 is a key date within the Israeli Palestinian conflict. It is the origin of two different perceptions of one and the same event: Nakba for some, independence for others.

In order to shed light on these contrasting views on 1948, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung organised a book presentation with the co-authors of “Zoom In”, Menachem Klein and Mahmoud Yazbak, and the co-authors of “Two sides of the coin”, Motti Golani and Adel Manna.

In “Zoom In”, Israeli and Palestinian authors collectively explore these contrasting perspectives on memory and remembrance through an innovative approach. Palestinian and Israeli university students were presented with a catalogue of period photographs from 1948 and then asked to provide their personal impressions.

“Two Sides of the Coin: Independence and Nakba 1948”, written by two prominent historians, Adel Manna and Motti Golani, takes the reader on a journey to the War of 1948, by offering contemporary multi-perspective narratives on the war. One of the most important questions asked in this conflict over the story is: what happened in 1948? Golani and Manna have treated with gracefulness and depth this highly complex and divisive question, their approach contributes significantly to a mutual understanding between Israelis and Palestinians on their common history.

The project, in which leading Israeli and Palestinian scholars co-authored two pioneering volumes on 1948, has been put in place by the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR).

1948 is not only the year of the Arab-Israeli War but also a key date within the enduring Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is the origin of two different perceptions of one and the same event. However, ‘1948’ should not be simply reduced to the birth year of a seemingly hopeless conflict. It can furthermore serve to build a new perception of common history and a step towards better understanding both sides of the conflict.

In “Zoom In” and “Two sides of the Coin” the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR)² presents a new approach to the history of the Israeli-Palestinian

¹ **Guest Speakers** were: **Catherine Cissé van den Muijsenbergh**, Executive Director of the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR); **Menachem Klein**, senior lecturer at the Department of Political Science at Bar Ilan University, member of the Geneva Initiative, co-author of *Zoom In*; **Motti Golani**, professor at the Land of Israel Studies at Haifa University, co-author of *Two sides of the coin*; **Adel Manna**, director of the Academic Institute for Arab Teacher Training at Beit Berl College, Senior Research fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, coauthor of *Two sides of the coin*; **Mahmoud Yazbak**, professor of Palestinian History, head of the department of Middle Eastern History at the University of Haifa, former Chair of Adalah, co-author of *Zoom In*; **Ihab Saloul**, EUME Fellow (Berlin), lecturer in comparative literature and media at Maastricht University of Amsterdam. The event was held under Chatham House Rule. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinion of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

² The **IHJR** is a non-profit, educational organisation seated in The Hague. Its mission is to bring respected scholars and public opinion leaders from opposing sides of a conflict to work together in order to create and disseminate shared narratives that provide reliable facts and commentary as a basis for public debate and discussion.

conflict by bringing together historians and scholars from both the Israeli and Palestinian sides in order to present their narratives.

In order to find out about why Israeli-Palestinian relations have hit rock bottom, one has to analyse the common history of this region. But which common history? In fact, both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides have been good at preaching their own narrative while denying the other one's view respectively on the region's development after 1948.

A nation can never disconnect itself from its past as it would be impossible to develop qualities or beliefs without any impact of past events.

As a result, 1948 is not just important in terms of the history of the conflict but still has an effect on the Palestinian and Israeli identity and hence also relations between both communities today. The conflict has never been only about territory, but also entered the sphere of narratives, the mutual understanding of identity and dialogue.

When considering ways of facilitating dialogue between Arabs and Israelis one cannot ignore the importance of the narratives on the common history of each group since they have an identity-forming quality.

Given this fact, it is no wonder that the dialogue between both parties is getting more and more difficult. So the first step towards a better communication and mitigation of the conflict may consist in a way to improve the understanding of the common history after 1948. However, this is not about starting a project which again ends up in some kind of "peace process industry". Beyond that, knowledge and acknowledgement should be promoted on both sides in order to facilitate the continued discussion based on mutual listening.

In this context, "Remembrances" illustrates very well to which extent the narratives of the Palestinian and Israeli population respectively influence the way of thinking of one's nation and that of the "other ones". By presenting both Israeli and Palestinian reactions towards photos of the Israeli-Palestinian War in 1948 the authors demonstrate how the narratives of each community still affect the perception of the young Israeli-Palestinian generation regarding common history.

So again this shows the impossibility to leave the events of 1948 behind even when it comes to today's relations between Israeli and Palestinian communities. Still an event of unparalleled impact within Israeli-Palestinian relations, the war of 1948 marks the origins of the Middle East conflict and the still prevailing narratives of both Palestinian and Israeli community. What for the Jewish side is a formative event because of their gain of independence, at the same time represents "Nakba" for the Palestinian side, which is the Arab word for "catastrophe". Apart from these contradicting perceptions on both sides, you can also distinguish differences between the narratives of both communities due to the different sources from which they usually arise. In the Jewish-dominated Israeli state Palestinian people are not allowed to have an official narrative of Israeli-Palestinian history like Jewish people do. Accordingly, they are dependent on stories from family members or relatives in order to attain more information on their history. Thus, this makes it much more difficult to distinguish between only one Israeli and one Palestinian narrative. One can say that there are different sets of narratives within the Palestinian community, which may give the impression that these are more fluid.

In contrast, Jewish people in Israel have a more solid narrative since their educational system prescribes a unique narrative that corresponds to the government's position on the the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This being the case, could an approach to bringing both parties of the conflict to a combined agreement on their perception of common history be a solution within Israeli-Palestinian relations?

As the title suggests, *Two Sides of a Coin* takes into account both the Israeli and the Palestinian perception of the conflict. But in doing so, it refuses to defend a common Israeli-Palestinian account of history as these are often contradicting each other, since accordingly it is impossible to combine 'Nakba' and independence in just one single and mutually acceptable narrative. So instead of sticking to a way of bringing together the differing accounts, the book presents both of them. However, the interlinking here can be found in the way it is presented. Even if sometimes contradicting each other, both mainstream narratives on the War of 1948 are integrated in just one combined text. Finally, by giving both narratives the same importance, it refuses to claim a shared narrative but goes further to reach a shared space for both parties' narratives. If there is a constant denial of the other one's perception of history, there is not and there cannot be any space left for dialogue and understanding. And, at this point one stumbles across a fundamental cause for the miserable state of Israeli-Palestinian relations, which finds expression in the fact that both sides refuse to listen to each other, let alone argue and negate the accounts. Their dialogue is more or less dead as each side is locked in its own narratives and beliefs.

This is precisely the reason why only in appreciating both narratives to equal parts one can create a shared place where both sides listen to each other. As mutual acknowledgement is an imperative for entering into dialogue, both parties' recognition of the other one's perspective is essential for any improvement of relations between Israelis and Palestinians.

This is how "a tool for mobilising people to continue the conflict" can be transformed into "a tool for facilitating empathetic identification of common ground for continued discussion based on mutual listening".