From Taboo to the Negotiable: The Israeli New Historians and the Changing Representation of the Palestinian Refugee Problem

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In the last round of the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks at the Taba Conference (January 2001), Israeli negotiators went where no Israeli officials went before: they considered the right of return of Palestinian refugees, and a quasi-statement that acknowledges the Palestinian tragedy and Israel's share of historical responsibility. This paper argues that at least in part this shift in the negotiations' framework can be traced back to the public debate instigated by the work of Israeli New Historians. The so-called Israeli New Historians have been prominent in addressing the origins and dynamics of the Arab-Israeli conflict, including painting an unflattering picture of the role of the *Yishuv* (pre-state Jewish Palestine) and later Israel in creating the Palestinian refugee problem. In this paper, I demonstrate how the work of the Israeli New Historians resonated among the Israeli public and political elite, and how it constituted a shift in the representation of the origins of the Palestinians refugee problem. In this sense, the New Historians' works broke a long-standing *taboo* in Israeli politics, i.e., avoiding any position and discussion in Israeli morality as well as practical responsibility for the exodus of approximately 700,000 Palestinians during the 1948 War. I maintain that the breaking of this taboo made it possible to subject the issue of the Palestinian refugees to a political debate. While this does not imply that a new Israeli consensus has emerged, it does suggest that the framework for negotiations opened up, allowing the consideration of new negotiable tradeoffs, namely the tradeoff between the symbolic act of an Israeli acknowledgment (or even apology) and a Palestinian concession on their actual right of return.

n the last round of the formal Israeli-Palestinian peace talks at Taba, Egypt (January 2001), Israeli negotiators went where no Israeli officials had gone before: they negotiated over numbers related to the return of some Palestinian refugees into Israel, and considered acknowledging the Palestinian tragedy and Israel's share of responsibility for the exodus of approximately 700,000 Palestinians during the 1948 War. What explains this significant departure from years of avoiding any serious discussion on the refugee problem and from the traditional Israeli historical narrative of the causes behind the refugee problem? This paper argues that for many years Israelis held to a one-sided historical narrative of the circumstances leading to the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, and that any other counter-narratives were taboo. The breaking of this taboo by a group of young Israeli historians and the wide public debate they provoked changed the representation of the refugee problem and helped to redefine the framework and the political strategies for the negotiations.

For more than a decade, Israel has witnessed a burst of highly publicized critical historical scholarship that exposes new historical data and reinterprets the old in a way that challenges the national historical narrative that has dominated Israel since its inception. The so-called Israeli New Historians have been prominently addressing the origins and dynamics of the Arab-Israeli conflict, including painting an unflattering picture of the role of the *Yishuv* (pre-state Jewish Palestine) and later Israel in creating the Palestinian refugee problem.

The possibility that a critical revision of the Israeli historical narrative would foster reconciliation and peace with the Palestinians was alluded to in this scholarship from its beginning. "The new history is one of the signs of a

maturing Israel . . . It may also in some obscure way serve the purpose of peace and reconciliation between the warring tribes of that land."[1] Nevertheless, the nature of this assumed relationship was not systematically evaluated. In order to address this gap, this article demonstrates and evaluates the process in which the revision of the historical narrative has influenced the framework for the permanent status peace negotiations.

In the Israeli traditional narrative, Israel had no active responsibly for creating the Palestinian refugee problem during the 1948 War. Rather, it was the Arabs, by launching the war and by encouraging the Palestinians to leave, who were responsible for creating and maintaining the refugee problem. Since the Palestinians left voluntarily or as a result of the war, Israel has no practical or moral responsibility to allow their return. I demonstrate that this narrative prevailed in the official statements of Israeli politicians from 1948 until the late 1990s, and that any counter-narratives were tabooed. I explain the endurance of this narrative by demonstrating how it was supported by the Israeli national ethos.

Next, I present and analyze the content and context of the historians' debate in Israel. I review the main findings and arguments of the New Historians and demonstrate that they significantly challenged the Israeli traditional narrative. I examine the media coverage that the New Historians received, and I find that the public debate they provoked went far beyond the university halls to include reactions from columnists and journalists, public figures, politicians, and many ordinary citizens.

In order to evaluate the effects of the New Historians and the debate they provoked, I compare the representation of the Palestinian refugee problem in Israeli public and political settings before and following the debate. I then analyze whether the identified changes can be attributed to the New Historians. The evidence I present includes primary sources such as transcripts of television documentaries, Israeli textbooks, and interviews with Israeli politicians and negotiators who participated in informal and official talks with the Palestinians.

In Israeli TV documentary and history textbooks from the late 1990s we find significant changes in the representation of the refugee problem. Instead of the version that depicted the Arabs as responsible for the flight of the Palestinians, we find a more complex version. This version presents cases in which Israeli forces expelled Palestinians with the knowledge and authorization of the Israeli leadership. For the first time, the new textbooks include photos of the refugees and the term "El Nakabe" (the Palestinian name for the 1948 War—the catastrophe) also appears for the first time. A review of the academic sources that were used in the TV documentary and in the new textbooks reveals that these significant changes in the representation of the refugee problem can be directly linked to the New Historians.

The official Israeli position to the negotiation over the refugee problem also changed. The most significant change was the offer to include in the final agreement a mutually accepted narrative of the 1948 events. While there was no evidence that the New Historians changed the positions of the Israeli negotiators, it is clear that the negotiators read the theses of the New Historians, and that they were very attentive to the public debate the New Historians provoked and to change in the representation of the refugee problem in Israel. This change legitimized new strategies and negotiable tradeoffs, making it possible for Israeli negotiators to use the changes in the narrative and an Israeli acknowledgment as assets in the negotiations.

This study and its findings are important for two main reasons. First, the intensified violence in the Middle East and the halt in the peace negotiations make it crucial that we better understand the conditions and the contributing factors that may bring the two sides closer to a compromise, principally because the refugee issue is one of the major sticking points.[2] Second, Israel is not unique in debating historical revisions and their impact on national identity and politics. While many highlight the role of historical revisions in addressing the emotive aspects of the conflict and in promoting trust, the process described here draws attention to the more instrumental role of revised historical narratives during peace negations.

The Origins of the Refugee Problem—A Taboo

According to Olick and Levy, historical events may operate as *taboo*. A taboo is an object, condition, behavior, topic, or idea that society designates as dangerous or wrong. Taboos are avoided and are beyond societal debate. In a specific society taboos "help set terms of discourse and boundaries of identity."[3] Demonstrating the operation of a taboo is a challenging task since it requires identifying the "dog that does not bark." That is, the need to show that the idea of responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem remained "sub-rationally unthinkable" and did not come off as a conceivable or a coherent option.[4] To cope with this challenge I present two supporting logics. First, during the years that have elapsed since 1948, Israelis repressed or deferred any discussion over the Israeli share in the creation and resolution of the refugee problem from various political initiatives. Second, the Israeli version is rooted in the broader mythic structure of the Israeli national narrative. This mythic structure, deemed necessary for nation-building, reinforced the interpretation that Israel had no active role in creating the Palestinian refugee problem and has no practical or moral responsibility.

During the 1948 War approximately 700,000 Palestinians left Palestine/Israel. The majority of the refugees and their descendents remain refugees and live in refugee camps

in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.[5] As early as June 16, 1948 (six months after the war began and a month after the declaration of independence), the Israeli government had its first official discussion on the refugee issue. According to the transcripts of this meeting, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Moshe Sharet said:

> [The refugees] are not coming back, and this is our policy that they don't come back. Then this should affect on how we negotiate and how we present it to the outside world. We do not need to encourage people to return. They need to get used to the idea that this is a lost cause, and that this change is a change that does not reverse.[6]

The international position on the refugees became public by December 1948 in the UNGA resolution 194. The resolution recognized the claim of the Palestinian refugees to return to their homes inside Israel or to receive compensation if they chose not to return. Israel rejected the UN resolution and officially refused the refugees' return. The issue became the focus of several rounds of talks during the summer of 1949 (the Lausanne Conference) mediated by the UN Palestinian Conciliation Committee (PCC). As a result of extensive pressure from the United States the Israeli government consented, "as a gesture of good will," to absorb 100,000 refugees conditioned upon a comprehensive peace agreement that would include the resettlement of the remaining refugees in Arab countries.[7] The Arab leaderships refused and the proposal fell. The Palestinian refugees remained mainly under the care of the UN. There, the Israeli ambassador to the UN, Abba Eban, articulated the official Israeli view on the issue of responsibility:

> Let there be no mistake. If there had been no war against Israel, with it consequent harvest of bloodshed, misery, panic and flight, there would be no problem of Arab refugees today. Once you determine the responsibility for that war, you have determined the responsibility for the refugees problem . . . Caught up in the havoc and tension of war; demoralized by the flight of their leaders; urged on by irresponsible promises that they would return to inherit the spoils of Israel's destruction—hundred of thousands of Arabs sought the shelter of Arab lands.[8]

Eban also outlined the key arguments that have framed the Israeli position ever since. One, the repatriation of the refugees is an existential threat to the security of Israel, and therefore "beyond prudence or reason." Two, the refugee status quo is being artificially maintained and solutions are blocked due to the political motivations of Arab leaders. Finally, Eban noted that given the "kinship of language, religions, social background and national sentiment existing between the Arab refugees and their Arab host countries" it is an astonishing paradox that the that the refugees were not absorbed into their countries of refuge; after all, Israel with its limited land and resources managed to successfully absorb 450,000 Jewish refugees from Arab countries.[9]

While in the first two decades after the war the refugee problem received some international attention, the situation changed in the 1967 War. In this war Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza along with a large Palestinian population. These became the focus of Palestinian and Arab struggle, and Israel was rarely required to present its position on the refugees. The issue regained attention during the Madrid process in 1991. The official Israeli version remained intact. In a speech at the Madrid Conference, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir recited this version:

> Arab hostility has also brought tragic human suffering to the Arab people . . . hundreds of thousands of Arabs who lived in Mandatory Palestine were encouraged by their own leaders to flee from their home. . . . Unlike the Jewish refugees who came to Israel from Arab countries, most Arab refugees were neither welcomed nor integrated by their hosts. . . Their plight has been used as a political weapon against Israel.[10]

In the Madrid Process, a Refugees Working Group was set as part of the multilateral track aimed to exchange information and build mutual confidence among the parties. By 1996 the group had met eight times and achieved very little. In the meantime the focus had shifted to the bilateral Oslo process. According to Shlomo Gazit, both in the multilateral track of the Madrid process and in the Oslo process, Israel gave lower priority to the refugee issue and "did its best to avoid discussion."[11] The Declaration of Principles (September 1993) included only a modest and vague reference to the refugee problem, which was set "to be negotiated during the permanent status talks."[12] When the permanent status talks first begun in Taba in May 1996, the refugee issue was omitted from the Israeli agenda presented by the director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry.[13]

The nature of the official Israeli account of the origins of the refugee problem is an indication for the "avoidance practice" that characterizes a taboo. When possible, Israelis avoided or deferred the issue. When compelled to address it, Israelis have held to the position that the creation of the refugee problem is the sole responsibility of the Arabs. As early as the 1950s, reliable sources outside and within Israel presented information and evidence describing the active role of Israeli forces in the expulsion of Palestinians during the 1948 War.[14] Throughout the years, Israelis denied or avoided this information. There were also ample Arab and Palestinian sources that presented personal testimonies of the 1948 events. These were widely ignored and dismissed as "Arab propaganda." This approach corresponded well with the Israeli position that the Arabs are using and maintaining the refugee problem for political causes.

A taboo is avoided since it is designated as dangerous and threatening. Indeed, the repatriation of hundred of thousands of Palestinians poses a real threat to Israel. In the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, the Palestinians could be a "fifth column" that would fight Israeli from within.

Even if this scenario does not occur, the return of a large number of Palestinians would significantly change the demographic balance in a way that threatens the Jewish nature of the State of Israel. These threats explain why the official Israeli position traditionally avoided political discussion about the "right of return." In itself, however, it does not fully explain the across-the-board denial of being part of the creation of the refugee problem. To further explain the operation of this taboo, I turn now to the broader context of the Israeli national ethos.

It is common wisdom in the study of nationalism that the modern nation-state draws on a mythical heroic past as a way to consolidate and legitimize its existence and as a key vehicle for national mobilization.[15] The Israeli national historical narrative is rooted in the goals of the Zionist movement. Facing rising anti-Semitism in Europe in the late nineteenth century, the Zionist movement aimed to provide a national solution for the Jews. A crucial aspect of the mobilization to this goal focused on linking the Jewish national revival to the historic nation in "Eretz Israel" ("Land of Israel"—Ottoman Palestine at the time).[16] In the imagery of Zionist writers, the country destined for the Jewish national home was portrayed as an empty land waiting for its people to return after 2,000 years in exile— "land with no people for people with no land." When the indigenous Arab population was mentioned, it was typically with reference to its backwardness and the conception that the Arabs could only benefit from the progressive Zionist project, and without any reference to the Arabs collective distinctiveness, thereby constituting the long-standing Israeli view that the Arabs who lived in Palestine were part of a greater Arab nation and not a distinct national group with national aspiration or legitimate claims— "there is no Palestinian People."[17]

The reality of conflict in Palestine was apparent from the early waves of Zionist immigration (Aliya). Since the Jews were the minority in the land, it invoked the biblical image of David and Goliath. This became even more real when in May 1948 the whole Arab world declared animosity against the newly established state of Israel. The notion "few against many" along with the perception of "nation under siege" became consecutive and entrenched elements in Israeli reality and in the reality of the Israeli-Arab conflict, often called upon for the mobilization for and legitimization of state actions. Inseparable was the traumatic experience of the Holocaust, which further reinforced these notions and added to their influence.[18]

Another, and equally strong ethos, was the notion that "there is nobody to talk with." Traced to Arab refusal to accept the UN resolution for the partition of Palestine (1947), this notion reaffirmed itself with the hard-line Arab position in the Rhodes armistice talks (1949), and prevailed in Israeli public opinion.[19] For Israelis it fixed the dichotomy of Israel as a status quo, peace-seeking nation

that is prepared to make "painful" compromises in opposition to its hostile and uncompromising neighbors.

The Israeli national ethos and the Israeli account of the origins of the refugee problem mutually reinforce each other. The image of the empty land, though dated in the earlier *Yishuv* period, help to obscure questions about the empty and razed villages and about the fate of their inhabitants. The notion that there is no Palestinian People supports the reasoning that for national homogeneity to prevail, the refugees should be resettled among their Arab kin. The notions of the few against the many and a nation under siege reinforce the perception and the real threat from the potential flow of Palestinian refugees back into Israel. Finally, the idea that there is nobody to talk with captures the Arab hostility towards compromising solutions, and therefore resonates with the position that the Arabs have been sustaining the refugee problem in order to achieve more extensive political goals, including goal of eliminating the State of Israel.

The young State of Israel had to meet real and difficult challenges. It was situated in a hostile neighboring environment, in which its very existence and legitimacy were and are constantly contested. Israel needed to build state-institutions and to overcome the political and ideological cleavages that characterized the pre-state society. At the same time, the state absorbed large numbers of immigrants, mainly Jewish refugees from Arab states and Holocaust survivors. Apart from being Jewish, these immigrants had very little cultural, historical, or ideological affiliation. Therefore, the national ethos was central for the process of consolidating a collective Israeli identity and for the social and political mobilization needed to meet with these challenges.

In sum, it is not surprising that the core tenets of the Israeli national narrative, including the account of the refugee problem, proved to be durable and generally uncontestable. Grounded in the reality of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, this narrative became the frame of reference and was reproduced in politics, culture, and education. Consequently, the Israeli narrative of the origins of the refugee problem was entrenched so that all other sources of information or interpretations were ignored or avoided—taboo.

The New Historians Debate

In a 1988 article in the Jewish journal *Tikkun* Benny Morris, an Israeli historian, coined the term "New Historians," arguing that while "old" or "official" Israeli historians "offered simplistic and consciously pro-Israeli interpretation of the past" the New Historians "are looking afresh at the Israeli historical experience, and their conclusions, by and large, are at odds with those of the old historians."[20] Morris was referring to a group of young Israeli scholars born after 1948 who for the most part gained their higher

academic degrees in universities outside Israel. Unlike the "old" historians, these young scholars did not participate and witness the 1948 events first-hand and were able to acquire the distance necessary for historical objectivity. Moreover, the "30-years rule" of governmental archival law allowed this group of scholars to rely on recently declassified Israeli, American, British, and United Nations documents previously not available for historical study.[21] The result was historical research and conclusions that critically address and challenge the core tenets of the Zionist and Israeli historical narrative and ethos.

The first studies that critically challenged Zionist and early Israeli history adopted the theoretical framework of the Colonization approach. The main argument of this approach is that the Zionist immigration to and settlement in Palestine since the end of the nineteenth century was not solely a case of national liberation movement returning to its ancient homeland, but a case of settler-colonial society. Accordingly, Palestine was no empty land and Zionism was no progressive movement, but rather an exploitative force, part of the general phenomena of Western colonialism. Through this prism, scholars explained the roots and dynamic of the Israeli-Palestinian (Jewish-Arab) conflict in terms of the inevitable clash between the indigenous population and their colonizers.[22]

More specifically, other tenets of Israeli national narrative have been challenged in the New Historians' studies that focused on the early years of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Tom Segev, whose book *Palestine under the British* became a national and international best-seller, studied the British Mandate period and offered a rich description that counters the notion of no Palestine collective identity distinct from that of Arabs in neighboring countries. According to Segev, as early as the 1920s the reality in Palestine was that of two competing national movements, formulating their identity vis-à-vis each other and moving steadily towards conflict.[23] A second challenge to the Israeli narrative has been to the notion of the few against the many as formulated during the 1948 War. As the argument goes, while the Jewish forces were indeed outnumbered by Arabs, the latter were by far less engaged in actual military preparedness; therefore, they presented inferior operational capabilities during battles.[24]

The most significant challenge for our context is that of the origins of the refugee problem. While the new studies partially accepted that some Palestinians fled in order to avoid the consequences of the war, Benny Morris and others argue that there is no significant evidence that the majority of Arabs left because of orders or requests by their leaders inside or outside Palestine. Initially, Jewish leaders were surprised by the Palestinian flight; starting in February 1948, however, an understanding had developed among the Jewish political leadership "of exploiting the military situation in order to evacuate the Arabs."[25] Accordingly, a combination of strategies, including psy-chological warfare and intimidation, economic pressure, and actual forced transfer, were used to evict the Palestinians, and to prevent those aiming to return from doing so.[26]

Two arguments were particularly forceful. First, while the Dir Yassin massacre was widely known, the new studies argued that it was not a single event, as it was portrayed in Israeli history. These studies documented other places in which the Jewish and Israeli forces killed unarmed civilians.[27] Second, regarding how premeditated was the expulsion of the Palestinians, some of the new studies remain inconclusive; however, they present evidence that the idea of population transfer—voluntary or forced—was present in the internal debates of the Zionist leadership as early as the mid-1930s, and has appealed to few. The New Historians also argued that following the 1948 War, Israeli leaders demonstrated little if any tendency to compromise, thereby rejecting, or at least not trying to take advantage of some real opportunities for diplomacy and reconciliation with the Arab states. In the works of the New Historians, the foreign policy of Israel in its early years was not that of a status quo state but rather activist and even expansionist.[28]

When the first studies of the New Historians appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they were met by the criticism of the "old" historians. The professional critique focused on the accuracy of the data and falsified some of the historical evidence, charging the New Historians with sloppy archival work and fundamental omissions.[29] More sympathetic critics tackled the conclusions of the New Historians. These critics argued that the New Historians isolated events and processes; thus, their conclusions are detached from the experience and distress of the Jewish people at large and ignore the international and local exigencies and the existential motives of the Zionist leadership that forced them to make difficult choices.[30]

From its initial stages, the debate was emotionally heated, infused with charges of deliberate biases, with tendentious readings, as well as with derogatory personal comments.[31] This forceful reaction is best explained as a response to New Historians' violation of Israeli taboo that was maintained by the "old-guard" historians. As was mentioned earlier, a taboo sets the boundaries of discourse. By challenging the core tenets of the Zionist and Israeli historical narrative and ethos, the New Historians transgressed these boundaries. This violation carries with it sanctions. Benny Morris, for example, says that Israeli universities ostracized him, and that after eight years of a job-search he managed to get a position only in one of the lesser prestigious universities in Israel. Ilan Pappe, who was refused a position in The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, also reports a similar experience.[32]

The broader significance of the debate also became evident and soon non-academic commentators stepped in. Most notable was a 1994 piece by the well-known Israeli

author Aharon Megged, who called into question the "suicidal impulse" of the New Historians. Megged referred to "a wave which slowly-slowly distracts our immune system and weakens us," and charged the New Historians with providing ammunition to the enemies of Israel, and with delegitimizing the Zionist project in a way that may endanger the very existence of the Jewish state.[33]

Numerous op-eds, articles, and book reviews were published, both in Israel and abroad, debating the revelations of the New Historians, and more commonly the promises or the perils of these revelations to contemporary Israeli society and politics. The two large universities in Israel, Tel Aviv University and The Hebrew University, both organized conferences devoted to the work of the New Historians and to the analysis of the debate they provoked. These conferences were open to the public and received vast public attendance and attention. Both the New Historians and their critics were interviewed in several Israeli radio and TV talk shows. The debate also surfaced in a request from the College for National Security (the MBL—the Academy for High Military Officers) to present and debate the works of the New Historians in their curriculum.[34]

It is clear that the debate went beyond the halls of history departments and gained widespread publicity. For example, the Letters to the Editor section of the Israeli daily *Haaretz* published, on average, two to four comments from Israeli readers to each of the 42 op-eds, articles, and book reviews on the New Historians that the paper published between 1994 and 2000. Not only the Israeli public, but also Israeli politicians did not remain oblivious to the debate. Amnon Rubinstein, Member of Knesset (MK) from the Liberal-Left Party MERETZ and a former Minister of Education, and Yael Dayan, MK from the Labor Party, sat on public round tables with representatives of the New Historians and their critics in one case and with Palestinians and other scholars in another case. On both occasions, the MKs shared the concern of the critics that the theses of the New Historians, particularly on the causes for the refugee problem, are potentially harmful for the future of Israel.[35]

What explains the wide attention to the work of the Israeli New Historians? The work of Morris and other New Historians on the origins of the refugee problem is wider in volume and scope, and may be more focused than earlier accounts. Still, it is not the information presented by the New Historians that explains the scope or the political significance of the debate. As was mentioned earlier, different accounts on the 1948 War were long available outside and within Israel but were largely ignored. In order to understand the vast attention the New Historians received and their political relevance, we must explain the context in which the debate took place.

Since the mid-1980s the Israeli society and political system became increasingly polarized. At the same time,

Israelis' sense of confidence in the secure existence of the State of Israel increased. The Madrid and Oslo Processes and the optimism they generated among Israelis in the Center and the Left of the political system further enhanced this sense of confidence. Combined, the political polarization and the increased confidence created the incentives and atmosphere for self-evaluation and criticism.[36] This trend, which is first and foremost an academic stance shared by intellectuals from the Left, was termed Post-Zionism.[37]

The work of post-Zionist scholars calls to the "normalization" of the Israeli society. Accordingly, post-Zionism focuses its critique on the irreconcilable tension between the ethnic-religious Jewish identity of Israel and democratic values.[38] One argument is that, while legitimate for its time, Zionism ended its role with the establishment of the State of Israel. In practice, the post-Zionist agenda calls for Israel to become a "state of all its citizens." They voice criticism against the "second class citizens" status of the Palestinian-Israeli citizens (who are approximately twenty percent of Israel's population), and argue that the segregation of and discrimination against this group is primarily due to the definition of Israel as a Jewish state.[39]

Some of the Israeli New Historians share the post-Zionist political goals and state upfront that this agenda motivates their historical research. For example, Ilan Pappe is a self-proclaimed post-Zionist. Benny Morris, on the other hand, forcefully resists attaching any notion of "Post-" to his name or work. He insists that he is a Zionist, and that his work has "no political purpose whatsoever."[40] Regardless of the way the New Historians viewed themselves or their work, proponents and opponents of the New Historians made the association between the New Historians and post-Zionism. For both, the New Historians' detailed and careful documentation gives the factual professional substance, which supports the post-Zionist arguments. Post-Zionism presents a radical agenda, which is far from the Israeli consensus and as such, attracted a lot of criticism and therefore great attention. Since the New Historians were viewed in the public and the media as part of post-Zionism, their works were debated mostly in this context. This explains, as we saw above, some of the forceful reactions and the wide coverage and attention their theses received in Israeli academia, media, and politics. These reactions to the work of the New Historians did not focus merely on historical data and research, but on the political struggle over Israeli national identity.

The Changing Representation of the Refugee Problem

Did the historiographical debate over the origins of the refugee problem generate wide resonance in Israeli public settings? Indications for change that is beyond the narrow cycle of the academic elite should be visible in the representation of historical events in national commemorative

sites and in history education. Commemorative activity, such as anniversary celebrations and national holiday ceremonies, is a social setting that embodies the historical memory of a nation and reflects any changes that may come about.[41] As for history education, it is a tool in the process of "nation-building" that plays the role of strengthening the citizens' allegiance to the state. History textbooks reflect the "zeitgeist" of a period and changes in it. Moreover, both these settings not only indicate change in representation of the past, but are also mechanisms of change due to their socializing role in constituting the nation's image and tradition, and hence identity.[42]

In 1998 Israel celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. As part of the extensive celebrations, the Israeli National Broadcasting Authority (a national public authority under the Ministry of Communication) produced and broadcasted the documentary series *T'Kuma* (Revival). In its twenty-one segments, each narrated and directed by different experts, the series described and reviewed key events and developments in Israel's 50 years of history. The series' weekly broadcasting and reruns got very high ratings, and its videocassettes and accompanying book sold very well.[43]

The second segment, "Silver Plate: Overcoming the Arab armies and the Armistice 1948–1949," deals partly with the creation of the refugee problem. This segment presents the argument that the Jewish forces had the operational upper hand. It also deals with the question of massacres by the Jewish forces and does not even mention the Israeli traditional explanation (i.e., that the Palestinians received an Arab order to leave):

> In general, the commanders on the ground acted forcefully; actions ranged from threats to physical expulsion, and the leadership did not protest. When the Arabs "disappeared" no one asked unwanted question. Their disappearance was embarrassing morally, but useful pragmatically. . . . The fear expressed by those who fled is often presented as an irrational action: the Arabs allegedly bought into their own propaganda of horror and left their homes. However, the Arab horror was not groundless. In April 8 . . . EZEL and LEHI fighters took over the village of Dir Yassin and massacred more than 200 of its residents. . . [The massacre] became quickly known among the Arabs and led to a mass flight. This massacre was not the only reason, and was not the last one.[44]

To better understand the transformation in the representation of the origins of the refugee problem it is useful to compare it to a previous production of the Israeli National Broadcasting Authority—the 1981 documentary series *Amud Ha-Esh* (Pillar of Fire). This series ended where *T'Kuma* began, that is, in the 1948 War. Then, the flight of the Palestinians received some attention, too. While the text briefly presented both the Arab and Israeli conflicting views and mentions the Dir Yassin massacre, it attributes much of the responsibility for the Arab flight to Arab radio broadcasting that used the Dir-Yassin massacre as propaganda: "as the fighting escalated in the Spring of 1948, the Arab flight increased. Many Arabs fled their villages even before they witnessed any shooting."[45]

I turn now to changes in the representation of the refugee problem in public schools textbooks. For the last few years Israeli history textbooks have been going through a "quiet revolution" aiming at a new curriculum that will teach history from a universal (as opposed to national) perspective.[46] This revolution included the revision of the history curriculum on the Zionist movement and the establishment of the State of Israel. These subjects are being taught in Israel in the ninth grade and again in the eleventh or twelfth grade, when students are preparing for the nation-wide matriculation exam in history. In order to grasp the changes it is useful to compare the representation of the origins of the refugee problem in the old textbooks to current ones.[47]

The most extensive study of Israeli history and civic textbooks found that "the representation of the Arab-Israeli conflict in textbooks was, in general, simplistic and one-sided and included mistakes, evasions and sometimes fabrications."[48] More specifically, on the refugees:

> The textbooks reflected the traditional view of the State of Israel, which combined the following arguments: the Arabs fled from fear of war; they fled following the encouragement of the Arab and Palestinian leadership and with the intention to return home along with the wining armies; they left following their leadership who fled first . . . Other than the negative influence of the Dir-Yassin massacre which was conducted by marginal Jewish groups, Israel had no part in "encouraging" the flight.[49]

These conclusions are consistent with the following examples from the mid-1980s textbooks. In the section titled *Flight and Refugees* that appears in the ninth-grade book published in 1984, the students read:

> Along with taking control over the large Arab concentrations in the Lydda–Ramle area ("operation Dani") the flight of the Arab residents repeated itself. The horror stories that were spread among the Arab population about "Zionist brutality" and the expectation that the "occupied lands" would be librated by the Arab militaries caused the flight of numerous Arabs. This is how the cities Lydda and Ramle, among others, were emptied of the majority of their residents, and the refugee problem was created.[50]

The textbook for upper-level grades, published in 1985, is more detailed. While the book presents the role of the IDF in evacuating the Arab population and in preventing their return, the causes for the Arabs' flight are presented in the following way:

> Already at the beginning of the fighting, in December 1947, Arab families, mainly the city and rich families, begun abandoning their residence in the mixed areas. . . In addition to the scare of the Arab population that was caused by the military defeats, there were also the rumors about acts of brutality by the defense forces. The affair of Dir Yassin—the village in which 250 residents were killed, half of them women and children, while it was conquered by Etzel and Lehi forces—made publicity that was blown out of proportion by the Arab media in the country and in neighboring states. A mass flight began.[51]

In this textbook, most of the space is dedicated to the argument that the Arab leadership propagated the flight. It quotes a history book that argues that the Arab Higher Committee made a conscious decision to create the refugees as a way to shake the Arab countries to make them realize that they can no longer avoid or evade forceful actions. The textbook also quotes an Arab author, a former resident of Jaffa: "Every Jaffa citizen knew that the seven Arab militaries will not spill their blood for Palestine. Therefore they all left as one. . . It is only we the Arabs that are responsible for our fate. It is we that should be condemned for what happened." One paragraph later, the text concludes: "The leaders of the Arab countries used the Palestinian refugees problem as a tool for their political needs."[52]

The new history textbooks that were published in 1999 and are taught today are markedly different. The ninth-grade textbooks present the argument that the victory of the Jewish forces in the 1948 War was in large part due to organizational and logistical superiority and less the result of mythical determination. The books describe the flight of the Palestinian refugees as resulting in part from active expulsions by Jewish forces. They also include photographs of the refugees never included before in textbooks.[53] For example, in the section titled "Arabs get pulled out of their homes and become refugees," the students read:

> As a result of the war, half of the Arabs—some 600,000 Arabs—who lived in Mandatory Eretz Israel became refugees. For most, their pulling out from their homes was a direct result of the war and not the outcome of early planning by either the Jews or the Arabs.
>
> The exit of the Arabs from Eretz Israel began a short time after the November 29th decision. The first to leave from the cities were the members of the wealthy families. This has weakened the staying power of those who remained. As the military actions, in which Hagana and later Zahal [the IDF] won the upper hand increased, the exit of the Arabs from cities and villages also increased due to fear and concern from the fighting forces. The state and military leadership had no plan to expel the Arabs from the Jewish state. In places where there were good ties between Jews and Arabs, there was a direct order not to expel the residents. . ... The expulsion of the residents of Lydda and Ramle, on the other hand, did get the authorization of the political leadership. The Arab leadership contributed to the Arabs' flight. It had no clear policy, and it did not give the Arab population any direct instruction for action. . . Due to the military defeat and the Arab refugee problem, the Arabs call the 1948 War—which we call War of Independence—El Nakabe, which means in Arabic: the catastrophe.[54]

The upper-grades edition of the new textbook also includes the description of a meeting between Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and his operations officer Yitzhak Rabin. The meeting took place before the battle over Lydda and Ramle in the summer of 1948. The text says that when Alon (Rabin's deputy) asked what to do with the population, Ben-Gurion replied with a hand gesture that was meant to say "expel them."[55]

The differences between the textbooks of the 1980s and current ones are clear. The new textbooks present a more complex version of the circumstances leading to the displacement of the Palestinians during the 1948 War. The new textbooks continue to reject the thesis that there was a premeditated plan to expel the Arab population. They note that some Arabs left out of fear and as a result of the fighting. At the same time, they present cases of active expulsion by the IDF, and they do not assign sole responsibility to the Arab leadership. We no longer find the argument that "Zionist brutality" was a rumor which was "blown out of proportion" by Arab propaganda. One could argue that the description of the 1948 events in the new textbooks is still softened. For example, the textbooks do not discuss the overall scope of the active expulsion and they do not present any of the evidence that suggest that the "transfer" might have been premeditated or at least desired by the Israeli leadership. We must keep in mind that in the work of Morris and other New Historians some evidence and interpretations, such as the above mentioned, were weaker and more contested. Textbooks, in general, are cautious and avoid presenting contested evidence and arguments. Therefore, the omission of some of the evidence and interpretations is not surprising and it does not undermine the significance of the changes. In fact, the omission of some arguments indicates the credibility of the arguments that were included.

Another significant difference is in the choice of words and terms that are being used. The word "abandoned" is replaced by "pulled out" and the word "expulsion" as well as the term "El Nakabe" appear for the first time in the new textbooks. Moreover, in the 1999 books the Israeli students are asked to explain the point of view that led the Palestinians to give the 1948 War the name El Nakabe.[56] This is a significant addition to the textbooks since it demands the Israeli students not only to learn the facts, but also to place themselves in the position of the Palestinians. The teacher and the students are encouraged to engage in a discussion that is not one-sided and that raises questions on the catastrophic consequences that the 1948 War had for the Palestinians.

Can we attribute the changes in the presentation of the refugee issue in the Israeli public media and state education to the work of the New Historians? A review of the academic sources that were used in the TV documentary and in the new textbooks indicates that the New Historians were indeed influential. Benny Morris, for example, was one of the historical consultants to the anniversary TV documentary about the 1948 War. In the textbooks we find references to and excerpts of recent studies that rely on and cite the academic works of the New Historians, and even an excerpt of Benny Morris's own article on the refugee issue.

For changes in textbooks to take a wider and deeper effect, it is likely that we need to wait at least a generation.

Nevertheless, Israeli public opinion on the question of refugees is revealing in this context. A 1999 public opinion study finds that one-third of the Israeli Jewish public departs from the Israeli conventional position. When asked "What caused the 1948 Palestinian refugee problem in the first instance," 31 percent responded, "Mainly, Jewish forces expelled the refugees." While 29.9 percent believe that the refugees left voluntarily, only 17.3 percent believe that "mainly, the refugees were told to leave by Arab leaders." When the question was framed in terms of responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem (Israel or the Arabs) the percentages are smaller: 4.8 percent of the Israeli Jews respond it was "Only Israel" and 7 percent "Mostly Israel." Nevertheless, 35 percent attribute the same degree of responsibility to Israel and to the Arabs, which makes a total of 47 percent of the Israeli Jewish population who acknowledge some degree of Israeli responsibility.[57]

A comparison with earlier polls would have been appropriate here. However, a review of previous Israeli public opinion polls on the Israeli-Palestine conflict reveals that the 1999 poll was the first time that these questions about the creation and the responsibility for the refugee problem were even asked. This finding is equally significant. Up until recently, for pollsters as well as for the public, no questions were raised at all about the causes or responsibility for the refugee problem. This is precisely the power of taboos, which place issues beyond the range of what is even considered. Only when a taboo is broken, questions are no longer "sub-rationally unthinkable" and enter into the range of opinions that are debated politically or measured in polls.

From Taboo to the Negotiable

Since the beginning of the Oslo process, the peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians progressed in various channels. In addition to the direct talks between high-level politicians there were more frequent and informal track-two talks. In both these settings, this section will identify the Israeli position with regard to the origins and the solutions for the Palestinian refugee problem. It will assess the degree and type of changes in the Israeli position, and whether these changes were related to the process identified thus far.

Track-two or back-channel meetings are an informal setting that brings together politicians, academics and other public figures to discuss specific aspects of the conflict, which are often neglected or harder to discuss in formal negotiations. Frequently, these "thought experiments" lead to working papers that are later delivered to official negotiators.[58] One example of track-two process is the work the IPCRI—Joint Palestinian-Israeli Public Policy Think-Tank—that has been operating in Jerusalem since 1988. One of their projects focused on the concept of "Promot-ing a Culture for Peace" in which they analyzed the mutual negation of identity as a core aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this context the consequences of the 1948 War and the refugee problem were discussed as a focal point for creating this mutual perception. In their analysis, participants from both sides stressed the need to understand the others' grievances and to take responsibility for past wrongdoings. The works of the Israeli New Historians came up in the discussions in two ways: as an example for the right and responsible role that academics should play in promoting peace and as expert-historians whose work ought to be the factual benchmark for the future peace agreement.[59]

Another example for track-two meetings was the Refugees Working Group, a project of the Program in International Conflict Analysis and Resolution, at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University. The Working Group met every six months between 1994–1999 to develop a framework for the permanent status agreement. Prof. Herbert Kelman, who co-chaired the project, observes, "during the workshop there were several references to the studies of Benny Morris and other Israeli historians. It was mostly by the Palestinians. By and large the Israelis wanted to stay away from history."[60] Nevertheless, the group discussed in considerable detail the divergent historical narratives of the two sides.[61]

MK Yossi Katz, the only politician in this working group, notes:

> During the war some left because of the Arab leadership, some fled and some were even expelled. I think that Israel can't accept any moral responsibility, but we do need to acknowledge that the establishment of the State of Israel caused suffering, and therefore we are part of it, like the Arabs. . . I don't think we can get to an agreement about the causes, but I think it is enough that we will acknowledge the misery and wrongdoing. . . We can't agree on more than that. We do need to be a part of the efforts to rehabilitate the refugees. . . The Palestinians must understand that we [the Jews] have nowhere else. It may well be that we did injustice, but we have no other place. I am a Zionist.[62]

Katz's statement seems to be inconsistent. He accepts that Israel expelled Palestinians, unjustly caused affliction, and should be part of the rehabilitation and at the same time, he rejects Israeli moral responsibility. However, this position is consistent from an Israeli point of view. Israelis fear that an acknowledgment of practical and moral responsibility for the refugees would entail the influx of numerous Palestinians into Israel and that would create a major demographic threat for Israel as a Jewish state. This explains why Katz stresses that he is a Zionist, that is, he believes that Israel must remain a Jewish state with a Jewish majority. Katz's way to resolve the tension between the potential demographic threat and Israel's past wrongdoings is to acknowledge the facts yet to avoid responsibility.

When asked more specifically if his views were at all influenced by the studies of the Israeli New Historians,

Katz said that he read the recent research on 1948. It did not change his views, but it supported and strengthened what he already knew and thought. According to Katz, the significance of the New Historians is not so much the new information they presented, but primarily the public debate they provoked.

> We all know exactly what we learned throughout the years in our history books, and from this point of view the Israeli historians contributed. They provoked a public debate. I do not agree with all they say. I don't think it is all true or accurate, but they broke a taboo and created an argument and this is good in itself.[63]

These examples from track-two settings indicate that earlier than the official permanent status talks there were discussions that signified and addressed the historical and symbolic aspect of the refugee problem in a new way. In November 1999, Katz presented the framework that was developed in the working group in the Israeli Knesset. The proposal did not receive a serious discussion and Katz received an official letter of rebuke from the secretary of his party. This is an indication that for many in the Israeli political system, violating the taboo is still considered a transgression that deserves to be sanctioned. Nevertheless, this was the first time that a proposal, which included a recommendation for a limited Palestinian return and for an acknowledgment of partial Israeli responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem, was ever presented in the Knesset.

Turning now to the official talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians, there has been much speculations as to what offers were on the table in the permanent status meeting, and why they have failed.[64] While various sources differ in their details they appear to converge on the view that the issue of the refugees was one of the major sticking points and that it received ample attention. In Stockholm, May 2000, both sides—Shlomo Ben-Ami and Gilad Sher representing Israel and Ahmed Qurei (Abu-Ala) and Hasan Asfoor representing the Palestinian Authority—discussed the refugee problem at length and reportedly agreed on the need to set up an apparatus that will settle the claims made by refugees. More significant is that the negotiators paid particular attention and stated the importance of resolving the gap in the historical portrayal of the origins of the refugee problem. While not officially available, it has been reported that the negotiators drafted a mutual and somewhat vague-enough statement that corresponds with both the Israeli and the Palestinian national historical narratives.[65]

In the Camp David talks, July 2000, the parties engaged both in formal and hypothetical bargaining (the latter is a negotiation strategy practiced in the Camp David talks that does not aim at any formal outcome and allows the participants to bargain over the options that even they consider unfeasible). The parties negotiated over concrete numbers of refugees that will be granted return into Isra-

el.[66] Also, the acceptance of Israeli historical responsibility and the offer of an official apology were evidently also negotiated, though the Israeli Prime minister, Ehud Barak, rejected them both.

Gilad Sher, the Bureau Chief and Policy Coordinator for the Former Prime Minister of Israel Ehud Barak, and a Senior Negotiator to the Peace Talks with the Palestiniansin 1999–2001, mention that before and during the negotiations he read the works of Benny Morris. He thinks that the Israeli society, with its many cleavages, is not strong enough to deal with the potential backlash that will arise from assigning Israel the responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem. He notes, however,

> on the Palestinian side it has great importance. The establishment of Israel for them is expulsion, flight and eviction. . . For us it is a heroic ethos and for them an ethos of humiliation and shame, from both individual and national point of view. Therefore, it is very significant for them to get the acknowledgment that the other side says: "I did it." Therefore the solution is in the vagueness—to acknowledge tragedy and suffering but not responsibility. During the negotiations it appeared that all the participants thought of it as a sufficient solution.[67]

Sher's call for "vagueness" echoes Katz's earlier concerns about the implications of an Israeli acknowledgment of responsibility. Nearly all Israelis feel threatened by the Palestinian demand for a "right of return." Therefore, it is likely that there will be opposition to an Israeli acknowledgment of responsibility on the ground that it would only strengthen the Palestinian demands. The most severe opposition is likely to come from individuals and groups from the Israeli Right, who oppose the political negotiations with the Palestinian altogether. Another source of domestic opposition is likely to be the generation of Israelis that participated in the 1948 War. For them, the 1948 War was an imposed war of existence, of "either us or them," in which they lost many close friends. An Israeli acknowledgment of responsibility could be perceived as a devaluation of their sacrifices, or even as a direct accusation. Therefore, Sher's concern from a potential backlash within the Israeli society is not without grounds. At the same time, Sher and other high-level negotiators are aware that leaving the narrative outside the negotiations would ignore the Palestinians' need for closure and for the alleviation of their humiliation and shame. To reduce the tension between the Palestinian and the Israeli needs, Sher opts for a pragmatic solution, which implies a vague narrative and only partial Israeli acknowledgment.

The next round of talks was held in Taba, Egypt (January, 2001). As the content of the talks became public in the months that followed, it was clear that the parties moved closer than ever on several issues, including the refugees.[68] The French paper *Le Monde* published a Palestinian proposal on the refugee issue along with a "non-paper," which was allegedly written as an Israeli private response to the Palestinian proposal. Though far from an

official apology or an acknowledgment for responsibility, this paper presents a framework never before presented in the context of the negotiations:

> For all those parties directly or indirectly responsible for the creation of the status of Palestinian refugees, as well as those for whom a just and stable peace in the region is an imperative, it is incumbent to take upon themselves responsibility to assist in resolving the Palestinian refugee problem of 1948.[69]

This non-paper includes expressions of sorrow for the tragedy and states that "the State of Israel notes its moral commitment to the swift resolution of the plight of the refugees population to the Sabra and Shatila camps [in Lebanon]," as well as "the international community and the State of Israel shall be the principle contributor to the International Fund [for the Rehabilitation Assistance and Compensation Programs]."[70]

Two additional sources support the idea that the Israeli negotiators were ready to accept the idea of Israeli acknowledgment and incorporated it into the official negotiations framework. The first is the document prepared by the EU envoy to the talks, Miguel Moratinos. According to this document it was agreed that the basis for a just solution is UNGA Resolution 194. Furthermore,

> the Israeli side offered to present a mutual narrative on the tragedy of the Palestinian Refugees. The Palestinian side discussed the suggested narrative and considerable progress was achieved though there was no agreement.[71]

The second source is the so-called Clinton Plan, in which former U.S. President Bill Clinton outlined the parameters for the final status agreement, based on his close involvement in the negotiations process:

> I believe that Israel is prepared to acknowledge the moral and material suffering caused to the Palestinian people as a result of the 1948 war and the need to assist the international community in addressing the problem.[72]

Daniel Levy, a member of the Israeli Delegation to Taba and an advisor to Yossi Beilin who headed the team negotiating the refugee issue, offers interesting insights about the significance that the Israeli team attached to the debate over the events of 1948 and the origins of the refugee problem. According to Levy, resolving this debate has relatively minor implications for the practical solutions; however, it is important for paving the way for an agreement during the negotiations and later for the public legitimization of the agreement, once it is reached:

> A different approach of the Israelis to their history is important for the Palestinians as a way to promote acceptance for the practical solution. Mainly since the solution is not likely to include an actual return into Israel. It is also a relatively important element vis-à-vis the Israeli public. . . . If we ask the Israeli taxpayer to pay for X years X amount of money [to cover Israeli compensations to the refugees], the public must be convinced that paying those compensations is justified. With the old narrative—

that the Arabs fled out of their free will—it will be hard to convince the Israelis that the Palestinians deserve anything.[73]

Levy further describes how the Israeli team came to realize that incorporating changes in the Israeli historical narrative into the negotiations is important:

> Our feeling that the narrative could be an important factor came from years of back channel talks we did with the Palestinians and from our impressions from material that we read. The feeling was that in practice there was a Palestinian willingness to relinquish demands for actual return and what is needed are creative formulas.[74]

According to Levy the historical work of the New Historians was part of the material they read in preparation for the negotiation. He also mentioned that in Taba, both Yossi Beilin and Nabil Shaat (the head of the Palestinian team) cited the work of the Israeli New Historians in their opening remarks: "Beilin spoke of the classic Israeli narrative and presented the question marks that were raised in light of the studies of the New Historians. He accepted parts of what was written in these studies."[75] Another participant in the talks, Gidi Grinstein, the Secretary of the Israeli Delegation to the Permanent Status Negotiation, evaluates the input of the New Historians:

> It did not change grounds but for some, including me, it gave the documentary evidence for views that we had for long. Anyone who thinks seriously about 1948 does not think that 700,000 people just left everything voluntarily; it just doesn't make any sense. The New Historians gave the historical validation and the recorded evidence that support this thinking.[76]

The course and content of the official permanent status talks provide clear evidence of change. The Israeli approach to the negotiation over the refugee problem included Israeli recognition of the Palestinian tragedy and a partial acknowledgment of Israeli responsibility for the displacement of Palestinians during the 1948 War, partial return of refugees into Israel, contribution to a compensation fund, and a recognition that the lost property of the Palestinian refugees cannot simply be traded off with the property of Jewish refugees from Arab countries. Moreover, it is clear that Israeli negotiators realized that the conflicting historical narratives of the origins of the refugee problem promote a zero-sum perception. Israeli negotiators, even those who downgrade the importance of history, shared the opinion that a change in the Israeli narrative has great emotional and psychological significance to the Palestinians. There was not sufficient evidence that linked this view to the New Historians or to the debate they provoked. It is more plausible that Israeli negotiators came to appreciate the emotional and psychological significance of the changes in the narrative from years of interaction with the Palestinian negotiators.

Yet it is clear that Israeli negotiators read and were familiar with the studies of the Israeli New Historians about the 1948 War. None of the Israeli interviewees reported

that reading the studies of the New Historians caused them to change their political position. We cannot, therefore, conclude from the evidence that the studies of the New Historians on the origins of the refugee problem had a direct effect on the positions of the Israeli side. However, there are three significant ways in which the New Historians and the debate they provoked influenced and shaped the content and course of the permanent status negotiations.

First, all the interviewees reported that the studies of the New Historians substantiated and validated the previous knowledge they had of the 1948 events, and reaffirmed existing positions. The significance of the New Historians, therefore, was not so much that they revealed new information, but that they gave professional credibility and weight to previously held positions. As was mentioned above, earlier sources about the active role of Israel in the creation of the refugee problem were either dismissed as Arab propaganda or suppressed. This time, the information was meticulous and came from a respected and credible Israeli source. As a result, the account of the New Historians on the 1948 War became the factual benchmark that framed the negotiations over the refugee problem, and over the narrative in particular.

Second, during the negotiations, it was mostly the Palestinians who raised the historical causes of the refugee problem, and who cited from the work of Israeli New Historians. The Palestinian use of the studies of the New Historians is significant since it pressed the Israeli negotiators to take into account counter narratives that came from within their own society. This somewhat limited the ability of Israeli negotiators to oppose concessions by referring to the old narrative as the unequivocal view of the Israeli public.

Third, it was clear that the Israeli negotiators were aware of the publicity that the New Historians received within Israel, and some noted the significance of the changes in the Israeli history textbooks and other public settings. The changes in the representation of the refugee problem are significant since they indicated to the negotiators that at least parts of the Israeli public know and may even accept that Israel had an active role in the creation of the refugee problem. As a result, the negotiators are less constrained by the old, one-sided Israeli historical account of the 1948 War. This allows them to incorporate the new narrative, including the presentation of the role of Israel in the expulsion of the refugees, into the negotiations over a compromised solution.

Indeed, the most significant change in the Israeli approach is the incorporation of the symbolic dimension (i.e., the formulation of mutually accepted historical narrative and Israeli acknowledgment) into the negotiations over the material solutions (e.g., compensation and resettlement) to the refugee problem. Israeli negotiators realized that some form of Israeli historical acknowledgment is a requisite for achieving political solution. Moreover, Israeli negotiators view a solution that includes the symbolic dimension of a mutually accepted historical narrative as a way to justify further compromises by both the Palestinian and the Israeli publics. Israeli negotiators use the studies of the New Historians in order to present a "creative" tradeoff. Since Israel cannot accommodate the Palestinian principle demand for the "right-of-return" into Israel, the Israeli negotiators offer instead an official acknowledgment. The New Historians did not constitute this approach; however, the changes that they constituted in the Israeli public made the changes in the official narrative legitimate, and hence, made this pragmatic approach feasible.

Conclusions

Do intellectual controversies over historical narratives have an impact on international affairs? Does the critical examination of national historical narratives promote peace and reconciliation? The Israeli case suggests that the answers to these questions are yes. The Israeli New Historians and the debate they provoked constituted significant change in the Israeli account of the circumstances leading to the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem. This change entered the framework that was negotiated in the permanent status talks making it possible for the two sides to be closer then ever to a political compromise on the issue of the Palestinian refugees.

The studies of the Israeli New Historians challenged the core tenets of the Israeli national ethos and became a focal point in the political debate over Israeli identity. The greatest challenge was the findings and the conclusions of the New Historians on the 1948 War and Israel's active, and possibly premeditated, role in creating the Palestinian refugee problem. This narrative was in sharp contrast with the longstanding, official, and widespread Israeli denial of responsibility. Because the New Historians came from within the Israeli society, and due to the large attention the debate provoked, this narrative could no longer be avoided or dismissed from public and political settings. The taboo on the origins of the Palestinian refugee problem began to dissolve. The first indications of this were evident in the change in the representation of the refugee problem in state-sponsored settings, such as public television and history textbooks.

Since the refugee issue was set to be negotiated in the permanent status talks, one could argue that it was only expected that the issue would come up eventually and that the debate over the works of the New Historians had little to do with it. Indeed, it was not the New Historians who placed the refugee issue in the negotiations; however, these studies possessed professional credibility and became both the factual benchmark and the historical point of reference for these negotiations. Accordingly, this historical

representation influenced how the refugee issue was framed during the negotiations. Most significantly, the changes in the representation of the refugee problem among the Israeli public informed negotiators both on the Israeli and Palestinian sides that the proposition that Israel admit responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem is allowable, if not legitimate.[77] Consequently, this proposition became an asset in the negotiations by introducing new negotiable tradeoffs, namely the tradeoff between the symbolic acts of an Israeli acknowledgment or even apology and a Palestinian concession on their actual right of return.

Since the breakup of the peace negotiations in Taba there has been an intense spiral of violence and continuing standstill in the permanent status negotiations. Currently, it is hard to predict when the peace talks would resume; however, when the talks do resume it is certain that the refugee issue will be one of the major issues. The political solution for the Palestinian refugee problem remains complex and unsettled. From an Israeli point of view, the return of hundred of thousands Palestinians into Israel remains a real threat to the viability and Jewish character of the state. In this sense there are still genuine constraints on the accepted solutions for the refugee problem. However, unlike taboo, constraining conditions may be subject to rational political bargaining, in which new tradeoffs and compromising solutions are more likely to emerge and can be made acceptable to the Israeli public.

The Geneva Initiative (December 2003) for example, which is the only public joint Israeli-Palestinian effort to draft a final status agreement, follows and even further develops the role of symbolic acts in exchange for concessions. With regard to the question of the Palestinian refugees, the Geneva Accord reaffirms the significance of the refugee problem to the resolution of the conflict and calls for "creating forums for exchanging historical narratives and enhancing mutual understanding about the past." The accord also prescribes cross-community programs that "include developing appropriate ways of commemorating those villages and communities that existed prior to 1949."[78] While the Geneva Initiative is far from being the official consensual framework for the permanent status agreement, recent polls do show that the majority of both Israelis (64 percent) and Palestinians (54 percent) support the content of the Geneva Initiative.[79]

While concluding that the political effect of the change in the representation of the refugee problem was benign, one caveat stands. After all, it was the Israeli Left that handled the negotiations, while most of the details and content of the talks became public only after a new Likud government was elected. It is not farfetched to assume that an Israeli political leadership from the Right would have been less attentive to the changes in the representation of the refugee problem and less likely to develop or endorse new negotiable tradeoffs. Indeed, under the Likud Government there were attempts to re-revise the Israeli educational curriculum so that it will be "more patriotic." Limor Livnat, the Minister of Education in the Likud Government, reportedly said upon entering office in March 2001 that she will "dedicate her life to root out the influence of the revisionist historians."[80] As of today, however, no major changes or reversals in the educational curriculum have been made and the Ministry of Education is still recommending the textbooks sampled here, which include the New Historians theses. The possibility of actively re-revising the narrative and ignoring its benign value for the negotiations is real, and its likelihood depends on the nature of the political leadership and on the scale of violence. Nevertheless, this paper demonstrated that the change in the representation of the refugee problem in public settings was wide and deep, so it is unlikely that it will be easily reversed. Moreover, the likelihood of reversibility is further diminished in light of the international publicity that the Israeli New Historians and their studies have received.

First implication of the conclusion of this paper is that a Palestinian narrative, which is less "nationalistic," may also facilitate negotiable tradeoffs and would increase the likelihood of reaching compromise. Israeli society, however, was able to critically address its history only once its national identity was well established and once its statehood was well secured. The Palestinians, on the other hand, are in their early stages of nation- and state-building. The broader question that emerges is whether chauvinist or nationalistic historical narrative is a necessary condition for the consolidation of new nations and states. The practical challenge is, therefore, to identify the ways in which new nations, including the Palestinians, can construct a national historical narrative that acknowledges past wrongdoings and yet is a source of national affirmation and pride.

Second, it appears that the relationship between history and politics cannot be fully understood without considering the implication and the role of the wider public. Historical narratives are important precisely because they have a significant role in constituting the national collective. Moreover, historical narratives are reproduced and change in different state and societal settings such as the media, education systems, militaries and more. Therefore, the relationship between history and politics is determined not only by politicians, but also by the public and by the interaction between them both.

Finally, this study demonstrates that the nexus between history and politics still provides us with important questions and puzzles. Historical narratives provide an important setting for contemporary political struggles, and the ongoing reconstruction of historical narratives is shaping and being shaped by current political realties and actors. As we saw here, the Israeli New Historians challenged core myths in the Israeli ethos and as a result constituted a change in the representation of the refugee problem. This

change enabled the Israeli negotiators to define new negotiable tradeoffs. The significant political implications stem from the changes in and the interaction between the emotional and rational-instrumental meanings of historical narratives.

Notes

1 Morris 1988, 102.
2 According to a recent study, the majority of Palestinians and Israelis denoted the refugee issue as one of the most "important" and "difficult" issues. See Daneels 2001, 53–54.
3 Olick and Levy 1997.
4 Mueller 1989, 240. In Mueller's work the idea that becomes a taboo or "sub-rationally unthinkable" is the idea of a war; nevertheless, the logic is the same.
5 The UN's recent estimation is that there are 3.7 million Palestinians refugees. For background concerning the Palestinian refugees, including numerical estimates, legal status, social and living conditions, see Farsoun and Zacharia 1997, Artz 1997, Focus on Refugees 1995.
6 Quoted in Frid 2001, 12.
7 Ibid.
8 Abba Eban, The Refugees Problem, excerpts from a speech at the United Nations, November 17, 1958, in Laqueur and Rubin 1995, 129.
9 Ibid., 133.
10 Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, speech at the Madrid Peace Conference, October 31, 1992, in Laqueur and Rubin 1995, 579.
11 Gazit 1995,: 12.
12 Israel-PLO Declaration on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, Article V, Paragraph 3, September 13, 1993, in Laqueur and Rubin, 601.
13 Sureik 1996, 73
14 For example, Nadav Safran, an Israeli scholar and a former aide to Ben-Gurion wrote in 1969, "Since then [June 1948] they [the Palestinians] were expelled from almost all the new territories that came under Israeli control . . . the Jews that by then overcame the attempt to distract their state, held the opinion that it is better to have homogenous population, and turned to the expulsion of the Arabs." Quoted in Zaks 1996, 77. Another reliable source is the autobiography of Yitzhak Rabin. Rabin describes at length the forced evacuations, in which he participated, of the Arab population from the cities Lydda and Ramle. See Rabin 1979.
15 Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Hosking and Schopelin 1997. Here a cautionary note is in place. Like others, my starting point for the analysis of the New Historians' debate is the Israeli national narrative that was hegemonic prior to this debate. However,

this starting point is somewhat artificial. Myths and ethos are, by definition, accepted as uncontested quasi-realities by nations and their respective people; therefore, any attempt to identify and analyze these myths and the ethos comes after a process of deconstruction. A process that is usually critical. The result is that when I, and others, refer to the Israeli national narrative, we in fact refer to a concept that never existed as such, but is in itself an outcome of critical scholarship.
16 Zerubavel 1995, 17–22; Kimmerling 1995.
17 The empty land and the backwardness of the indigenous Arab population is well expressed in the fictional book *Altneuland* by the "father" of the Zionist movement Theodor Herzel.
18 Gertz 2000.
19 According to cross-time survey data "the widely held view was that Israeli government had done all it could to achieve peace [including the period immediately after the founding of the state, and then again in the early 1970s]. The establishment position that the Arab states rejected Israel and the potential of peace, and that Israel persistently and patiently waited for a breakthrough, was the generally accepted view." See, Arian 1995, 55.
20 Morris 1988, 20.
21 The most important works of Israeli New Historians include Bar Joseph 1987; Flapan 1987; Morris 1987; Morris 1993; Pappe 1992; Shlaim 1988; Shlaim 2001); Segev 1999. This is by no means a full list. A number of non-Israeli scholars have also made contributions along the same line of historical research and arguments, Palumbo 1987, Finkelstein 1995, and Tessler 1994 to name just few. For further review, see "The New Historians," *Teoria Ve-Bikoret,* Special Issue [Theory and Criticism—Hebrew], No. 8, 1996; and "Israeli Historiography Revisited," Special Issue edited by Gulie Ne'eman Arad, *History and Memory,* Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring/Summer 1995.
22 Kimmerling 1983; Shafir 1989. For a critical response, see Zahor 1994.
23 Segev 1999. For a critique on Segev's book, see Lisak 1999.
24 Pappe 1994; Flapan 1987.
25 Morris 1987, 61–131.
26 The Palestinian Exodus, 1995; Morris 1987.
27 The Dir Yassin massacre received intense publicity when it actually occurred. There was no controversy over the facts. On April 6, 1948 units of the ETZEL and LEHI conquered the village of Dir Yassin on the western outskirts of Jerusalem, and later summoned the villagers, killing 100 to 254 villagers, by different estimates, most of whom were noncombatants. The Jewish leadership, including Ben-Gurion, publicly denounced the massacre and

attributed it to the radical and fringe Jewish elements. The controversy with the New Historians, however, is over other killings. On mass killings (massacres), see Morris 1987, 158–9, 297–7, 304–5.

28 According to Morris, Ben-Gurion's activist policy during the early 1950s led to escalation and to the initiation of the 1956 War. Morris 1993, Shlaim 2001.

29 Teveth 1989, 25; Karsh 1997; Morris 1998. Criticism also came from Palestinian and non-Zionist scholars. Nur Masalha, for example, charges Morris with not always living up to his own claim of using archival material in a critical manner and with ignoring non-Zionist materials. Finkelstein, along the same line, praises Morris's archival work yet charges that his conclusions present "a new myth," and that Morris should have stressed more the premeditated nature of the Israeli actions during 1948. See A correspondence and debate over the 1948 Exodus [1991]; Finkelstein 1995.

30 Shapira 1995, 1999.

31 The most heated exchange was between Morris and Shlaim on the one hand and Karsh on the other hand. In his book, as well as in lectures and interviews, Karsh stressed his obligation to empty the "balloon called New Historians before their academic manipulations will spread into public knowledge and from their into the education system . . . it is a gang that aim to systematically falsify the past of the state [Israel]." Morris's response was equally harsh: "Karsh is not a historian of the Arab-Israeli conflict . . . all I can say is that his accusations are foolish and say something about the man himself, who may try in this way to advance his personal interests." See Sade 1997.

32 Mahler 1997.

33 Megged 1994. Megged's article was the opening shot in a lengthy exchange in the Op-Ed and Letters to the Editor pages in the Israeli daily *Haartze*; see Gurani 1994; Margalit 1994a, 1994b; Segev 1994.

34 An interview with the Israeli New Historians, Ilan Pappe, Department of Political Science, Haifa University. The interview took place in Cambridge, MA, November 30, 2001.

35 On Zionism, Post-Zionism, and Anti-Zionism [1995]; 1948–1998 in the Eyes of Two Peoples [1998].

36 Ram 1995, 1998.

37 Dror 1996, 248; Barnett 1996.

38 Shapira 1997; Segev 2001; Pappe 1997a, 1997b, 1997c.

39 There were anti-Zionist trends from the beginning of Zionism (e.g., Communism and Bonds in the early stages and groups such as Matzpen in the 1970s); however these need to be distinguished from today's post-Zionists. Post-Zionists do not question the existence or the legitimacy of the State of Israel; yet they point out that the Zionist enterprise had flaws and that Israel need to abandon the Zionist agenda; see Selberstein 2000.

40 In a 2004 interview with Ari Shavit, Morris not only proclaimed again that he is a Zionist but also went further arguing that "there are circumstances in history that justify ethnic cleansing," and that in 1948 "that is what the Zionist faced." See Shavit 2004.

41 Gillis 1994.

42 Apple 1990.

43 Pappe 1998.

44 Kleinberg 1998, 32. The texts in the book correspond to the transcript of the TV series produced and edited by Gidon Drori and broadcast by The Broadcasting Authority—Israeli Television.

45 Lusin 1982, 495–7, 532–3.

46 Washington Institute for Near East Policy 2000; Bar Tal, 1996; Hazony 2001.

47 The books compared in this section were/are used in secondary schools (lower and upper levels) at the state education system, which accounts for approximately 75% of the students enrolled in secondary schools attended the state education system. www.education.gov.il/moe/english/facts.html Section D, Part 3.

48 Podeh 1997, 66.

49 Ibid., 53–58.

50 Offek 1984,176.

51 Kolat 1985, 291–292.

52 Ibid., 300.

53 Nave 1999, 160–179; Avieli-Tabibyen 1999, 292–293.

54 Ibid.

55 Avieli-Tabibyen 2001, 310.

56 In the questions for review and discussion that appear at the end of the chapter, the students are asked to consider the following question: "The War of Independence in termed in many names that reflect different points of view about the war: War of Independence, War of Tashach [the year 5708 in the Hebrew calendar], War of Liberation, War of "Coming to Existence" and El Nekaba. (1) Explain the meaning of each name. You may use a dictionary. (2) Explain the different point of views that led to each of these names" (Avieli-Tabibyan. 2001, 315; author's translation).

57 Yuchtman-Yaar and Herman 2001. This poll does not allow assessing the influence of the New Historians, as it does not ask directly about the information sources that facilitated these opinions. Hence it is not considered here as part of the evidence for the influence of the New Historians but as an indication for the breaking of the taboo.

58 Kelman 1995.

59 Baskin and al Qaq 1999.

60 Personal interview with Prof. Herb Kelman, Director of the Program on International Analysis and Resolution, The Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University Cambridge, MA, March 7, 2002.

61 The different versions of the narratives are presented in the final paper that the group published. It is also important to note that the bibliography of this paper that the only historical source that is cited on the origins of the refugee problem is Benny Morris's book. See Alpher and Shikak et al. 1999.

62 Phone interview with the author, February 19, 2002.

63 Ibid.

64 Pressman 2003; Sontag 2001; Slater 2001.

65 Shavit and Bana 2001.

66 As various sources indicate, the Palestinian negotiators presented numbers ranging from 150,000 to 300,000 per year for a 10-year period, while Israel was willing to discuss some 10 percent of that total.

67 Phone interview with the author, March 4, 2002.

68 Pundak 2001.

69 Middle East: The faultline. [2001]. *Le Monde Diplomatique,* www.en.monde-diplomatique.fr, September 14.

70 Ibid.

71 Eldar 2000.

72 President Bill Clinton, minutes of a meeting held in the White House, December 23, 2000.

73 Phone interview with the author, March 10, 2002.

74 Phone interview with the author, March 10, 2002/Ibid

75 Phone interview with the author, March 10, 2002/Ibid

76 Personal interview with the author, December 13, 2001, Cambridge, MA, USA.

77 This finding closely corresponds with the classic two-level game to international diplomacy, Putnam, 1988. A "win-set" is defined as a set of possible agreements at the international or bilateral level that could gain the necessary majority among the constituents at the domestic level. Accordingly, a peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians (the international win-set) is bounded by all possible agreements that could be ratified at home (the domestic win-set). Therefore, the change in the representation of the refugee problem among Israelis enlarges the overlapping international win-set.

78 The Geneva Accord, Article 7—Refugees, http://www.geneva-accord.org

79 These polls are jointly commissioned by the Israeli Truman Institute and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, http://www.geneva-accord.org

80 For a review and analysis of the battle over the Israeli history textbooks, see Nave and Yogev 2002.

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