Teaching History in conflict time; A dual-Narrative history approach

By
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The Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues over self-determination, territory, natural resources, holy places and security. Contradictory goals and interests in different domains have to be addressed in conflict resolution. Resolution of these disagreements is made more difficult by powerful socio-psychological forces which fuel distrust and hostility. These forces include beliefs, perceptions, images, myths or attitudes about the rival, the collective self and the conflict. Such beliefs and images are often part of each society's national narrative, and these narratives can be important as societies continue to marshal human and material resources demanded by the conflict. The narratives are propagated through many years by various channels of communication and various institutions in each involved society, including the education system. However, these collective narratives often leave little room for acknowledgement of the historical past, culture, and future aspirations of the other collective. Thus, while these narratives help sustain cultures during conflicts, they can stand as a major obstacle to any peace-making process and later processes of reconciliation. The narratives may need to be modified in order to facilitate building a new reality of peace. In this endeavor there can be a need to modify school textbooks which may serve as one agent among others in socializing new generations.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is long standing, and multiple observers have commented that negative stereotypic and dehumanizing views of the "other" create fear, hatred and enmity, contribute to mistrust, and obstruct diplomatic efforts to resolve conflict. Explicit attempts to address these issues have been made, especially after the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993. But the national narratives have strong roots due to the long duration of the conflict. Moreover, accusations by each side about the current content of the other's school books add to the mistrust and animosity.

Peace negotiations have included efforts to deal with this aspect of the conflict. In the Taba Agreement (Oslo 2, signed in 1995) under chapter four, Cooperation, article 22 says each side:

> ...shall accordingly abstain from incitement, including hostile propaganda, against each other...that their respective educational systems contribute to the peace between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples and to peace in the entire region, and will refrain from the introduction of any motifs that could adversely affect the process of reconciliation

School textbooks figure prominently in these discussions for two reasons. First, beliefs and attitudes about the other among the young generation are in part shaped by school textbooks and discussions based upon them. Second, the content of textbooks are public statements by the elders, leaders and governments of how they view one another and the conflict. While the effects on children can sustain fear and aggression across

generations, the effects of such public depictions of the other can impact trust between those currently charged with ending the conflict.

Israelis and Palestinians make at least six primary charges and countercharges about the role of textbooks in promoting the negative and inappropriate representation of the other and the conflict. The **first** is that each side as a nation, society, community, or religion is unfavorably and/or inaccurately depicted in the textbooks of the other and even its legitimacy is disregarded. The **second** is that the textbooks misrepresent the description of the conflict by omitting, marginalizing or magnifying certain events or processes in order to present them in line with the society's own narrative. The **third** is that the textbooks neglect to teach the history, culture, religion and tradition of the other, and therefore miss the opportunity to recognize the humanity of the other (PRIME project: 2001-2009). The **fourth** is that both sides school textbooks fail to include examples of the peaceful periods of coexistence between the two sides and especially do not portray fairly the nature of relationship between Jews and Arabs through the years of a long history (Firer and Adwan:2004). The **fifth** claim is that the shared beliefs of the three Abrahamic faiths that could promote trust and familiarity are rarely covered in textbooks, including the fact that each community's own scriptural sources include passages that emphasize the equality of all people under God/Allah, and the value of treating all people accordingly. The **sixth** claim is that the textbooks do not prepare their own students to live in peace through active peace education.

PRIME: The establishment, the structure, its premise, its commitment and objectives:

PRIME is a non-governmental, non-profit organization established in 1998 by Palestinian and Israeli researchers and educators with the help of the Peace Research Institute in Frankfurt(PRIF), Germany. Its purpose is to pursue coexistence and peace-building through joint research and outreach activities. PRIME was established in what is called Peace Era between Palestinians and Israelis from 1993 to 2000. It was decided that the location of PRIME should be in a place that is easily accessible by both sides without any prior arrangements or any security clearance or does not require a special permit for now and in the future. Therefore, PRIME's offices were rented from Talitha Kumi school which is located in Beit Jala. Part of the Talitha Kumi school is located in area (A) and the other part is located in area (C). According to Oslo Accords the Palestinian Occupied areas in 1967 war was divided into three areas: Area A, which is under Palestinian security and administrative control, Area B, which is under Palestinian administrative control and under Israeli security control and finally area C, which is under Israeli security and administrative control. Later on and after the start of the Aqsa Intifada in September 2000(second Palestinian Intifada) still both sides have freely access to the offices of PRIME.

PRIME is managed by joint and equal general assembly, joint executive committee and joint directors (one Palestinian and one Israeli). PRIME strives to create symmetry in its structure to alleviate the asymmetric situation in reality between Palestinian and Israeli at all levels: political, state building, economic and social and cultural. Palestinian are still under occupation and Israelis are their occupiers, Israel was established in 1948 while

Palestinians are in their first stages of building their nationhood, with limited freedom of movement, have no control of their borders or their natural resources and being subjected to imprisonment and their lands being continually confiscated and their houses being demolished. Though, they live under the same standards of livening but an average Israeli income is five times the income of an average Palestinian with un-employment rate among Palestinian is far higher than Israelis(almost three times higher).   Most Israelis are belong to western culture while Palestinians are belong to eastern culture.

PRIME was established on the premise that there are two formulas for resolving the Palestinian and Israeli conflict: One formula is called " Top-Down" and the second one is called " Bottom-Up".

The Top-Down formula is the responsibility of the politicians and decision makers. This is done through negotiation and peace talks between leaders to reach a political agreement that resolve and end the conflict. Sometimes this formula is called "Track I" or "Peace-Making".

The Bottom- Up formula is the responsibility of the people, NGOs, institutes and community based societies of both sides. This is done through encounters, projects, research initiatives, meetings between people on related issues of their professions and interests. The overall aim of the bottom-up formula is to create a space of humanization of both sides, get rid of animosity and fears, develop shared agenda and seek reconciliation. This formula is needed to prepare and support any peace negotiations, support any peace agreement whenever it is singed and sustain the peace afterword. Sometimes this formula is called "peace Building" or "People to people" or "Track II".

Of course for both formulas to succeed in their mission they have to recognize each other agenda, synchronize and support each other efforts and bridging the gap between their languages and considering each other goals and objectives. They need each other and no one formula can succeed in ending the conflict without the support of the other if a warm peace is to be established.   PRIME was established as a Palestinian Israeli NGO on the premise of the bottom-up formula toward peace building throughout its activities and projects.

Unfortunately, these formulas were unable and failed to support each other's efforts or synchronize their efforts. While between 1993 to 2000, the bottom-up formula continued their activities we witness almost a no progress in the top-down formula agenda. This caused so much frustration when the negotiation in Camp David II failed in August 2000, to be followed by the start of the Aqsa Intifada and consequently the relationship between both sides was moved back to conflict, fear and clashes.

To achieve its objectives, PRIME throughout the last 12 years organized many conferences, workshops, and meetings. It is engaged in many researches activities and published few books. It engaged in its activities educators, professionals, students and researchers from both sides and internationals. PRIME worked closely with international centers and institutes like PRIF, Georg Eckert Institute in Braunschwieq(GEI) and USIP

and carried out joint projects with international universities like the American University in Washington and Monmouth University in New Jersey. PRIME work and mission was so much appreciated, recognized and valued by international governments, institutes and organizations more than by Israeli and Palestinian governments, institutes and organizations. It won many peace prizes for its work.

International supports as well include intellectual, scientific, resources and logistical. It is main partner in the Dual Historical Narrative project is GEI. Now, there was a cooperation agreement between PRIME and Kungalv Municipality in Sweden to implement PRIME's dual narrative book in few Palestinian, Israeli and Swedish schools. The agreement was for two years and includes as well exchange visits of pupils and educators, meetings, workshops and publications.

PRIME organized its meetings mostly in the region and as well in other countries whenever it is possible.

PRIME focused on the Historical narratives of the Palestinian and Israelis of the 20th, Century. Three booklets were published to be used with pupil's age 15-17 years old. In 2008, the three booklets were integrated in one book and are available now in Arabic and Hebrew. The English edition was published by New Press in 2011 and the German language edition will be published in early 2015. A 45 minutes video that documents the process and the experiences of the Palestinian and Israeli teachers working together was produced.

Unfortunately and so far, both Palestinian and Israeli Ministries of Education refused to use the book in their respected schools for different reasons. So, the work on the project and the implementation of the book in schools are done under the radar of both ministries. Though, part one of the booklet is available in Hebrew and Arabic and has been translated to Italian, French, Spanish, German and Catalan and is being used in some schools of these countries.

Description of the Dual Narratives Project: The Processes and the products

As explained earlier, both Palestinian and Israeli school books do not include the other side narrative but they only focus on their own side narratives. Therefore, both sides' pupils learn their own historical narratives in a monolithic way. So, pupils of both sides grow up knowing only one side of the narrative without being aware of the existence of different narratives. Literature shows that narratives are important in forming identity, creating the images of the others and they play a significant role in either supporting conflict or in mitigating it.

Narrative is what people remember from the past especially the parts that support their ideologies and identities. It is the interpretation of the past that form the present and help in forming the orientation of the future.

If pupils (the future generations) continue only to accept one side of the story, to believe in it as the only legitimate one and even do not know of the existence of other narratives is an act of indoctrination and of denying pupils the right to know. Pupils become intolerant to differences and multi-perspectives. Differences become a source of fear and pupils develop barriers/walls between themselves and the others. These walls only create hate, insecurity and disrespect for other especially those who have an opposing narrative. Peace cannot be achieved as far as each side does not recognize the others and their narratives. Of course this does not mean to legitimize the other side narrative or to start deconstructing one's own narrative. Would the education system allow pupils to learn the other side narratives beside their owns? Would the education system of both sides allow their pupils to critique their own narrative? When this should take place in relation to the stage of conflict that both sides exist in? Who should take the first initiative to do this?

I think one of the main reasons that Palestinian and Israeli still could not achieve peace is because they are not ready to recognize each other historical narratives. I believe recognizing each other historical narrative is a first step toward peace agreement and reconciliation.

This project was born in late 1998 and continued until now. It aimed to address these challenges and questions. Of course it simply aimed at introducing the Palestinian and Israeli historical narratives to each other pupils through publishing booklets that includes both sides narrative. It was not meant that these booklets to substitute the existed history school books in both sides. But, these school booklets meant to be used as supplement and extra curricula activities along side with approved school books.

Two Education Systems:

It is worth mentioning here that Palestinian started using their own school books only in 2001 and before that Jordanian and Egyptian school books were used in the Palestinian schools in West Bank and Gaza Strips respectively. While Israeli school books started as early as 1925.

The Palestinian Ministry of Education is in charge of developing the guides for publishing school books, commission authors and supervise their works and then print the needed copies and distribute them to all schools regardless of the supervising authorities (public, Private and UNRWA) at the beginning of the school year. It is a centralized system. On the Israeli side, the Ministry of Education publishes the guides for authoring school books and authors write and submit their proposed school books to a special committee in the ministry. The committee could approve the use of the proposed school book and put it in a list from which the schools could choose from which book to use. Schools are free to choose only from the books listed. The committee may disapprove the proposed book or requested modifications from the authors before it approves it. This system is characterized as semi-centralized.

There are asymmetry in the conditions and the availability of resources and funds between the Palestinian and the Israeli schools. Also, differences exist in the teaching approaches, ways of evaluation of pupils, in the levels of pupils' participation in classrooms activities and finally in the role of the teachers. But, in any way the majority of the Palestinian and Israeli teachers are well trained and qualified to teach their own historical narratives.

In both cases, teachers only are allowed to use school books that were produced by the ministry of Education as in the Palestinian case and only allowed to use school books that approved by the ministry of Education as in the Israeli case. But teachers in both sides can use extra-curricular material to enrich school books. There are no specific criteria or guides for the selection of these materials but in some school they have to be approved by the school's principal.

Joint (One) narrative, bridging narratives or dual narratives: The choice

Palestinian and Israeli situation was describe at that time as it was not a post conflict nor it is a conflict one. It is best described "between and betwixt" since peace processes were going on for sometimes but no solution for the conflict. PRIME was and is stands for a two states solution according to UN resolutions 242 and 338.

There was heavy and serious discussion on whether to write one narrative that represent both sides history or to write a bridging narrative that mix parts from each narrative together or just to write each side narratives side by side with equal space.

It may take few generations to use and accept the first and second options. These choices have never been done in history before. Even in Europe discussing the school books only started after about 20 or more years of the War World II. Both sides felt uncomfortable with these options and they think even at that stage that putting the two sides' narratives together side by side was an innovative initiative. Therefore teachers were asked to write their narratives as they were narrated in their own community and put them side by side on the same pages with empty space between them for pupils' reactions and responses for one reason. For other reason, there is no end for historical narratives, there is no complete narrative and there is no way to include and document the full narrative in general and either side. Finally narratives may change according to the historical moment of the conflict. In the project, Each side was given responsibility for their own narratives and the other side may suggest things but not impose. The Dual Narratives choice was agreed upon.

Description of the Project:

The project started with 12 school teachers (6 Palestinian and 6 Israeli). They worked in mixed groups in bi-national and uni-national groips/meetings. They used to meet once for three days every three months in the region and one week seminar either in Turkey of Germany. It was decided through discussion and negotiation to start writing their

historical narratives of the 20th. Century and started with Balfour Declaration, 1948 war and 1987 first Palestinian Intifada. The first booklet was published in 2003 to include these narratives. Then teachers worked on the narratives of 1920s, 1930s and 1967 war which formed he second booklet and the third booklet includes the narratives of the 1950s, 1970s and 1990s. All booklets are available in Arabic and Hebrew but the first booklet was translated to many languages.

In 2008, the three booklets were integrated in one book according to historical order from 1900 to 2000. The book is available in Arabic and Hebrew. There is no claim that the book include "THE ISRAEI" nor "THE PALESTINIAN" narratives. It may represent about 60% of either side narratives.

New groups of Palestinian and Israeli teachers joined the project. They were trained by the first group of teachers.

The working language in the bi-national meetings was English but in the uni-national meetings Arabic and Hebrew in the Palestinian and Israeli meetings respectively.

Each group used to present to the other group their narrative, discuss it then ask only questions to describe or explain or make comments. No interruption or denial questions or discredit comments were allowed. Suggestions or recommendations were accepted as far as the group agreed to them. The processes were not free from conflict, disagreement and fighting. Emotion roused very often and many times. Project leaders and teachers engaged in mediation to resolve the conflict.

Some teachers could not continue with the project for different reasons: Personal, family or political. One Palestinian teacher arrived to the meeting late said "*I am coming here to work with Israelis and make peace but in my way here I was stopped by Israeli check point. I was beaten and humiliated and forced to stay under the sun for about 2 hours. So I do no know who am I anymore*" He left the project. An Israeli teacher said "*My family is concerned of my safety*". He left the project as well.

We found that younger teachers are more willing to continue with the project more than older ones.

Implementation of the narrative in classrooms:

Palestinian and Israeli teachers were able to introduce and use the material in their classes as a supplementary material and their experiences is very important that reflects working on peace building projects in the mist of conflict. They used many and non-traditional approaches of teaching the narratives: Role play, discussion groups, court trials, field research and drawings. Some teachers taught first their own narratives then they introduced the other side's narrative.

French, Spanish, Italian and German teachers used the booklets in their classes for two reasons as they said: One because they found the material on the same issue and approved by both sides and then they do not want to be see taking sides.

After the Spanish teachers finished teaching parts of the first booklet using role play and discussion group they returned back to use their traditional teaching style so their pupils asked them "why do we not continue teaching our history in the same way?" Palestinian and Israeli pupils responses to learning of the other side' narrative varies. Some rejected it as part of normalization, the enemy narrative and only accept their own narrative as the legitimate one. Others questioned and suspected the sincerity of their teachers and why they are teaching the other side narratives. Others, asked their teachers "do you believe in their narratives?". Some doubted if the other side teachers taught their narratives to their pupils. Some pupils said that our narrative is right and there is twisting history, full of mistakes and just a propaganda.

Other reactions were very positive and they would like to know more about the other sides and showed so much interest in meeting them. Others showed so much interest in knowing more and reading more about their own narratives.

Other pupils said now we know why the other side is behaving like this and now we realized why the conflict is taking so long to be resolved.

 Some parents protested the teaching of the booklets to their children, others were ambivalent and other were in favor.

Peace building project under fire

Peace Building under fire or in open conflict is not an easy process. It is like walking in a mine field and you do not know when it goes off. It is not a linear process. One day you may move forward 2-3 steps but the next day you may go back 5 steps. It needs patience, dedication and resilience. There is a need to care about emotions and feelings and to balance that with the work to be done. Flexibility is highly needed and changing the agenda and the program should not create a challenge. It is important to balance between focusing on the processes and the products. Flexibility when dealing with time Is highly required. It is usually takes more than you planned for in time and energy wise.

It needs some vision that goes beyond immediate reality and a careful balance between hopes and what is expected to achieve through such project. Hopes would not be raised to avoid great frustrations.

Leaders have to be charismatic in their approach and to empower people and let them lead the project and make it theirs. It is important to find resource for energizing the participants since these projects' results could not be achieved or realized in short term.

You have to keep answering this question" Why starting this project now? Why should not wait until a peace agreement has been signed first then do these projects? Other

question is more challenging" what did you achieve beside meetings and publishing these booklets, the reality out there is the same? People need quick answers and it is not acceptable to keep telling them promises.

It is hard to invite or convince more and more people to engage in peace building projects and to widen the peace camps. Official support and endorsement is impossible to secure so you have to always work through personal connections. So synchronizing the top and bottom up formulas and creating a strong synergy is missing in such projects which make them less effective.

Donors are concerned in completing the project in time of the contract but this is became a big challenge since it is hard to follow a timeline schedule because of things take place that do not allow you to meet.

But, the experience you gain during such projects is very valuable to use in other areas of conflict and especially in post conflict situations.

The dual narratives project is considered a one way to disarming history and an educational reform project that could be used in different parts of the world since it gives a new role to the school books, the pupils, and the teachers. It moved teaching for inoculation of knowledge to develop the hermeneutic ability of pupils to engage with knowledge. It moves the role of pupils from being passive learners to active participants. Teachers' role becomes more facilitation rather than the main source of information. School books should be a closed-text but flexible and legitimating of knowledge should be among people and not limited to official.

Therefore, reforming education systems is needed all over the world and not only from Palestinians and Israelis so as to be a tool for peace, co-existence and harmony. Schools should prepare the future generations with open minds and hearts to lead in a world free from occupation, injustice, discrimination, fear and hate.

Finally, different narratives exist in times and places in the past and the present and cannot be overlooked or neglected in trying to resolve conflict. They should be recognized and changing them should not be seen as a threat but as an asset**. It is recommended that National narratives to be replaced by international, global or human narratives. Narratives should be freed from ideologies and doctrines.**