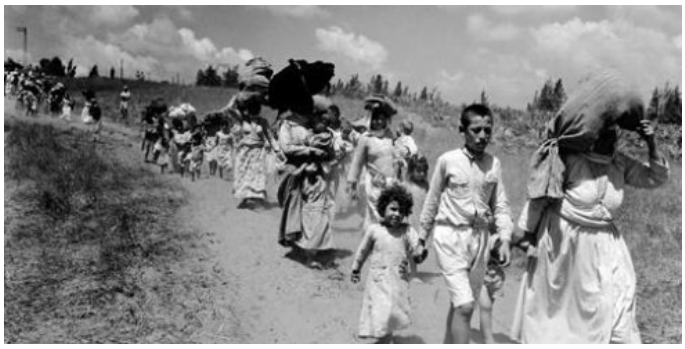
Empathy in the Israel-Palestine conflict: a new approach to peace

By Simon Baron-Cohen, November 12, 2015



July 12th, 1948: Tens of thousands of Arabs were ordered to leave their city of Lydda, following the murder of 200 Arabs in the Small Mosque by the IDF

Zionism was a utopian dream of creating a safe homeland, born in the minds of Jewish refugees fleeing the horrific pogroms of Eastern Europe in the 1880s and 1890s. Some 30,000 Jewish utopians took the boat to Palestine, erecting tents and building the first idealistic socialist communes, the kibbutzim. With extraordinary prescience, those Zionists anticipated that a Jewish homeland might be needed to protect Jews from further persecution. They could never have imagined that, in the 1930s and 1940s, two out of every three European Jews would be killed by the Nazis. This is an important early context to the Middle East conflict.

But there is another important context: in 1897, there were more than half a million Arabs, Bedouins, and Druze living in Palestine. The 30,000 Jews who arrived were really guests in someone else's land. By 1935, the Jewish population comprised a quarter of the population of Palestine and each year the number of Jews in Palestine rose by more than 10 per cent. Arabs in Palestine felt and were displaced. This displacement lies at the heart of the current conflict. By 1936, anger towards the Jews in Palestine was palpable: al-Kassam called on Arabs to kill Jews, and to carry out a jihad against the Jewish immigrants whom he saw as stealing Palestine from the Palestinians. By 1936, the national Arab leadership was inciting violence against the Jews. The Arab revolt of 1937 led to an increasingly frequent murder of Jews.

In case the claim of Arab displacement is disputed, I provide a clear example of this from Ari Shavit's important book My Promised Land: On July 4, 1948, Ben Gurion launched Operation Larlar, to conquer the Arab town of Lydda. On July 11, Arabs fired machine guns from Lydda at the advancing Israeli army, who sent in an armoured battalion with a cannon.

In 47 minutes, more than 100 Arab civilians were shot dead, including women, children and old people. The Israeli convoy entered Lydda and confined thousands of civilians in the Great Mosque, the small mosque, and St George's Cathedral. In the combat, Israeli soldiers fired an anti-tank shell into the small mosque and, in 30 minutes, more than 200 Arab civilians were killed. The next day, July 12, Operations Officer Yitzhak Rabin issued a written order: "The inhabitants of Lydda must be expelled quickly, without regard to age." By the evening, tens of thousands of Palestinian Arabs left Lydda in a long column. The photo here captures this exodus. In Shavit's words "Zionism obliterates the city of Lydda." He describes Lydda as the "dark secret of Zionism".

Shavit, and the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, call this "ethnic cleansing", an emotive term that is debated by other Israeli historians such as Benny Morris, who nevertheless conclude that the "old history" of Israel was "less than honest" and who are now writing the "new history". In Shavit's words: "By the end of May 1948… the entire Safed-Tiberias region is cleansed of Arabs" and he reminds us that those Palestinian Arab refugees are "languishing… in the refugee camps of Jericho, Balata, Deheisha, and Jabalia… Seven hundred thousand [Palestinian] human beings have lost their homes and their homeland".

Israel was founded by the UN on May 14 1948 and the next day five armies (Egypt,

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Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon) invaded her. This is the war that Israel celebrates as the War of Independence; but it is the same war that the Palestinian Arabs memorialise as the "Nakba", or "the Catastrophe". To understand why a war can have a different name to each community, one needs to listen to the Israeli and Palestinian perspectives separately, and see the world through the eyes of each community. I don't have space to go beyond 1948, and my historical examples here are inevitably partial and incomplete. But this alone reveals the roots of a conflict that has escalated into more than 12 wars since - each with an Israeli name and a different Palestinian name. In the ensuing 70 years, life for Palestinians under occupation and in refugee camps has been and continues to be dire. Life for Israeli Arabs is the experience of being second-class citizens, where different laws apply to Israeli Jews and Arabs. And all the while, both Palestinians and Israelis mirror each other's feelings of being under threat and under siege.

Fast forward to 2015: On October 27 this year, more than 300 academics printed an advert in the Guardian entitled: "A commitment by UK scholars to the rights of Palestinians", declaring their support for the academic boycott against universities in Israel. These signatories wrote that they are "deeply disturbed by Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian land, [and] the intolerable human rights violations that it inflicts on all sections of the Palestinian people".

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I, too, am deeply disturbed by these two issues. Let's take each one in turn: First, Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian land refers to the need for Israel to return to the 1948 (or pre-1967) legal border, as defined by the UN "Green line". Some 400,000 Israeli settlers now live over the Green line. What must it feel like to ordinary Palestinians to see these illegal settlements on their land? For Israel to have peace with the Palestinians, it must stay within the international law, which these settlements do not. Second, the violation of the Palestinians' human rights is now well documented in accounts of the suffering of ordinary Palestinians living under occupation. These include no freedom of movement, no passports, and being subject to aggressive interrogation and policing on a daily basis. In addition, as we have seen, there was historical violation of Palestinian human rights: the creation of Israel displacing an estimated 700,000 Arabs. Both of these are unacceptable and unethical. Restoration of Palestinian human rights is therefore an urgent priority.

So, while I share the same goals as those who support the academic boycott, I disagree with it as a means for reaching these goals, for four reasons. First, academics in Israel are a potential channel for peace. We need to encourage them to reach out to their fellow academics in Palestine, to move the debate in a more moderate and liberal direction, and let them know we support them. An academic boycott would close down dialogue when increasing dialogue is the aim. Second, academic historians in both Israel and Palestine are doing the careful historical research to document the human rights violations that have occurred and continue to occur towards Palestinians. Again, we need to support such vital research. Third, it is not clear that an academic boycott will end the cycle of violence or bring about peace. The wider Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement is now 10 years old, yet Israel has diplomatic ties to 157 out of 192 member states of the UN.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the academic boycott targets Israel but we need an approach that addresses how to change the oppressive or violent actions of both communities, and that guarantees the security of both Palestinians and Israelis. Palestinian Arabs live under daily threat and many Arabs have been killed, injured or displaced during the past 100 years of conflict, but we cannot overlook that many Israeli families, too, have lost a relative during this long conflict, to suicide bombers and other acts of violence. Although there is no symmetry in the number of casualties on each side, in any two-sided conflict we need to look for solutions for both communities.

As a psychologist, I can offer a modest proposal. It is an approach based on empathy, which has worked in other conflicts, particularly post-Apartheid. Empathy involves each side listening to the other, hearing the feelings of the other, and the process entails two steps: first "truth", then "reconciliation", to kick-start the peace talks. In this proposal, the route to peace involves going back into the history of the 100-year conflict, and acknowledging the pain each side has caused. To arrive at the truth, we need universities on both sides of the conflict, and we particularly need historians, to unearth the events of the early 20th century in Palestine objectively. My suggestion is that to lead to a lasting peace, so that the symptoms of violence don't keep recurring in an awful cycle of attack and counter-attack and counter-counter-attack, we need an empathy-based approach, one that applies to any human conflict.

If the Israeli government wants peace, step one is for them to acknowledge the Nakba to the 700,000 Palestinians: those who lost their homes and were driven out, many of whom continue to live in poverty, without basic human rights. This would have three immediate benefits.

If the Israeli government want peace, step one is... to acknowledge the Nakba

First, it would be the start of a meaningful dialogue, because it would show that Israel

is listening to the Palestinians' pain, and acknowledging a difficult truth: its role in causing that pain. It would be a sign that Israel is no longer denying the painful tragedy of Palestinian displacement, and it would open up the important issue of Palestinian human rights. Second, it would show that Israel is taking the brave step towards truth and reconciliation, which will ultimately be needed for peace. And finally, it would enable trust to rebuild, so that other difficult steps can follow in peace talks: the discussion about reparations, freezing the building of illegal settlements, going back to the UN agreed Green line borders and, most importantly, the discussion about mutual security for both Israel and Palestine.

But all that is for later. The first step is listening, acknowledging, and deciding to use a politics based on empathy.

Professor Simon Baron-Cohen is co-organizer, with Palestinian colleagues, Haifa Staiti and Ahmad Abu-Akel, of a conference to be held on March 7th and 8th 2016 at London's prestigious British Academy, entitled 'Empathy Neuroscience: translational relevance for conflict resolution' which brings together Israeli and Palestinian scholars, doctors and those working in conflict resolution, to explore an empathy-based, truth-and-reconciliation alternative approach to peace. He is a trustee of the British Friends of Haifa University.

Last updated: 11:47am, November 16 2015

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