

Mythic Rhetoric and Rectification in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Israelis and Palestinians are engaged in a civil war, and their mythic systems will need to change before a pragmatic peace can break out. In this study, we examine Palestinian and Israeli myths, which consist of narratives both people use to define their identity, land, and the “other.” Drawing from the literature on rhetoric and myth, we explain how Israeli Revisionist and Palestinian Islamic fundamentalist discourse set forth stories to counter threats to identity. After describing the features of these stories, we place them in historical context and track how they change in and over time.

Keywords: Ideology; Israeli/Palestinian Conflict; Middle East Rhetoric; Myth; Narrative

At the core of the divide between Palestinians and Israelis are two competing and seemingly mutually exclusive systems of myth. Both peoples, even those with secular temperaments, adhere to a covenantal myth system declaring God has vested them with sacred right to the land.¹ Israelis and Palestinians, as a consequence, derive their identity from the land, a connection perplexing to those outside the region. These myths function differently than do other symbolic forms as they articulate for Israelis and Palestinians the ultimate objectives and values in the form of sacred narratives. Myths are central to identity. Israelis and Palestinians root their myths and derive their identities from their connection to the land. They are not false stories but constitute a sense of truth that may appear to resist empirical challenge and the reach of argumentative reason.

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The most extended discussion in the rhetoric literature on the topics of myth and mythic criticism is Robert Rowland's 1990 *Communication Studies* article and the responses to his view by Solomon, Osborn, Brummett, and Rushing.² In his article, Rowland describes in detail the function and structure of myth, which he grounds in the works of Malinowski, Levi-Strauss, Joseph Campbell, and a host of others.³ Myths, Rowland argues, function to answer the basic questions of human life, setting forth the values in the form of sacred and transcendent stories that inform speech and induce action. Myths are different from folklore and legends because the latter do not provoke action. In this study, we continue the conversation about mythic rhetoric, doing so to illuminate the undervalued role played by myth in the civil war between Israelis and Palestinians. We argue that Palestinians and Israelis will need to revise their mythic symbol systems if peace is to be achieved. We illustrate mythic change, what we term mythic rectification, in Revisionist⁴ rhetoric and the rhetoric of Hamas.⁵

Mythic Rhetoric

Since the publication of Rowland's article, anthropologists have conducted sustained studies underscoring the importance of myth and mythic discourse, and, in doing so, they have justified Rowland's attempt to constrain the meaning of myth. Wendy Doniger writes in *The Implied Spider* that "a myth is a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it; it is a story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past, . . . an event that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered."⁶ Karen Armstrong in her *Short History of Myth* observes: "Myth is not a story told for its own sake. It shows us how we should behave . . . Mythology puts us in the correct psychological or spiritual posture for right action."⁷ Anthropologists, from whom rhetoricians have borrowed the best thinking on myth, continue to assume that myths function to give life sacred meaning and identity, moving groups of people to action.

Kenneth Burke's work is foundational to our understanding of myth, and scholars now presume myths sponsor communal identification and division, affirm a preferred order while simultaneously opposing others, and offer humans transcendent meaning.⁸ According to Burke and a host of others, myths are sacred stories that inspire action, but these stories have historical and rhetorical contexts. At a certain moment in time, a community might hold to one interpretation of a myth, see it as immutable, outside the realm of experience. When viewed synchronically, myth is frozen in time, its meaning immobilized. A diachronic view of myth, one we call for here, views the sacred stories at the core of myth as plastic, open to mutation and change. Here, we follow Burke, who according to Coupe saw that new rhetorical situations invited a change in symbols systems, identity, and mythic systems.⁹ This view invites an examination of the trajectories of myth as the meaning of sacred stories is altered to account for changes in rhetorical situations, including the significant alterations in the ratios developed among the scene, actors, agency, etc. As Bronislaw

Malinowski noted, “every historical change creates its mythology” and with it a need for a “regenerated mythology.”¹⁰ Mythic regeneration and rectification must both acknowledge the need to affirm identity and adapt to historical change. “Mythic traditions,” writes Habermas, “cannot be revised without danger to the order of things and to the identity of the tribe set within it.”¹¹ Habermas crystallizes the problem faced by groups who may need to revise their myths in the face of historical change; attempts to alter founding myths can be seen as attempts to destroy identity. This is the case in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

When ethnic groups are threatened, the mythic systems they construct can become impervious to the suffering of others and resist historical change. This tendency is what Burke, drawing from Aristotle, termed *entelechy*, a symbolic force that causes humans to extend an idea to the “end of the line” in search of perfection, which often produces terrible results.¹² In defense of identity, a group’s mythic system can become an ideal that cannot be negotiated or compromised because to do so would be to surrender. An obvious example of an entelechial symbol system is Nazi Germany.¹³ Within pre-state Israel, Revisionist Zionists, prescient in their anticipation of the Holocaust, responded to European anti-Semitism by creating a mythic system with entelechial characteristics, one that was maximalist and willing to endorse force to secure the end of a Jewish state in Palestine. Similarly, the mythic foundations of Hamas, as expressed in its charter, explain its commitment to maximalist territorial claims and willingness to use violence.

To summarize, we suggest that one characteristic explaining the tendency toward entelechy is a perceived threat to identity. When people perceive that their very existence, either in a literal sense or as a cultural group, is threatened, their need for a renewed identity and a transcendent purpose is intensified, making it far more likely the group will embrace a fundamentalist (entelechial) ideology/myth system. Human beings are not entelechial beings by nature. They can and often do change their myths in response to the empirical facts of the world. Indeed, we believe mythic change is a necessary condition that must be met for peace agreements to succeed. We illustrate this point with an analysis of how threats to identity led to the creation and the subsequent rectification of entelechial myth systems in Revisionist Zionism and the Islamist Palestinian movement Hamas.

Mythic Rhetoric and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

In reality, there is a general consensus on the broad outlines of a resolution to the conflict, which is best captured in the Geneva Initiative.¹⁴ This initiative, a result of conversations and negotiations between key Israeli and Palestinian leaders, foreshadows a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That resolution will involve the creation of a contiguous Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Israeli settlements will have to be withdrawn from the West Bank, as they already have been from Gaza; although the settlement blocs immediately around Jerusalem almost certainly will remain under Israeli control. In return for retaining this land, Israel will compensate the new Palestinian state with other land or some other recompense.

The new Palestinian state will have a presence in Islamic neighborhoods in Jerusalem and control Islamic holy sites there. Large numbers of Palestinians will not be allowed to return to land their families left during the period of the founding of Israel in 1948 and 1949, although return of a small number for the purpose of family reunification may be allowed. Israel and/or the West undoubtedly will compensate the families of Palestinians who fled Israel in that period.

Despite the consensus on the shape of an ultimate peace, any number of peace initiatives, diplomatic efforts, international meetings, shuttle diplomacy, and other efforts to bring peace to the region have failed because the underlying mythic systems of both peoples have resisted change. The Oslo process floundered in the wake of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination because those involved in the peace process failed to "filter its messages" down to the people.¹⁵ The negotiators stressed pragmatic arguments rather than those that would have invited a rectification of myths and a crafting of Palestinian and Israeli myth systems allowing for rapprochement and peace.

We believe peace proposals like the Geneva Initiative will require Palestinians and Israelis to regenerate and rectify their myth systems, accounting for the mythic claims made by both peoples if the pragmatic consensus on the parameters of a solution is to be implemented. In this process of mythic rectification, sacred narratives are interpreted to account for the realities facing the community, such as another people making a mythic claim on the same land.

Palestinian and Israeli myth systems were born in response to trauma, death, and dispossession. To work through the issues both peoples face, their respective mythic systems will need careful rectification, allowing for the maintenance of identity in the face of the sacrifices needed for survival and the achievement of peace. In order to understand the process of entelechial development and mythic rectification, it is important to sketch the development of the symbol systems of Revisionist Zionism and Hamas.

Revisionist Myth

Revisionist Zionism was founded by Vladimir Jabotinsky, who was much less concerned with creating a new society in Palestine than were the Labor Zionists and much more concerned with the physical dangers that the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe posed for Jews. Jabotinsky testified before the Palestine Royal Commission in 1937 about this danger, concluding: "We have got to save millions, many millions. I do not know whether it is a question of rehousing one-third of the Jewish race, half of the Jewish race, or a quarter of the Jewish race; I do not know; but it is a question of millions."¹⁶ He warned Jews in Europe that they must "liquidate the diaspora or the diaspora will liquidate you."¹⁷

While Jabotinsky now seems prescient in his warnings about anti-Semitism, he dealt with only a potential threat to identity. It was his successor, Menachem Begin, the dominant leader of Revisionism from 1944 through the early 1980s, who dealt with the physical and psychological dimensions of the actualization of that threat. Begin, a noted orator, codified in his writings and speech, the Revisionist myth.

In response to the Holocaust, Begin created a mythic symbolic system that provided a very strong sense of identity for his followers, who were redefined as heroes, but also completely negated the identity of the Palestinian population.

The core out of which Begin's ideological worldview and mythic narrative developed was the Holocaust. In Begin's memoir of the underground, *The Revolt*,¹⁸ and in other writings of the Irgun, the impact of that event is obvious. Evident is not only the physical threat to Jewish life but also the threat to identity. For example, Begin and others from the underground expressed a clear sense of guilt for surviving; a guilt that could be cleansed only through their revolt against the British. Thus, Irgun soldier David Kripitchnkoff stated, "There is no escape from the shameful feeling that he enjoys a quiet life while his brethren and sisters are exterminated in Europe."¹⁹ The shame of survival could be overcome only through action.

In response to the Holocaust, Begin developed a myth of return and a corresponding ideology aimed at providing physical security for Jews in Palestine, but of equal importance a redefined sense of identity. In Begin's view, the fundamental cause of the Holocaust was Jewish weakness. He wrote in the introduction to *The Revolt* that the Irgun

had to hate first and foremost the horrifying age-old, inexcusable utter *defencelessness* of our Jewish people, wandering through millennia, through a cruel world to the majority of whose inhabitants the defencelessness of the Jews was a standing invitation to massacre them. We had to hate the humiliating disgrace of the homelessness of our people.²⁰

Begin also said that victims of the Holocaust had been led "like sheep led to the slaughter"²¹ and even placed the ultimate blame for the death camps on the "inexcusable" and "humiliating" weakness of the Jewish people. Begin argued that "The world does not pity the slaughtered. It only respects those who fight."²²

The sense of shame that is evident in Begin's comments and those of other Irgun fighters was clearly irrational. It was the Nazis who committed the Holocaust. But it is evident that the sense of shame was real and reflected the feeling that Jews were threatened not only with physical destruction but also with a complete denial of their identity. In response to both these threats, Begin and the Irgun created the myth of Redemption through Return to provide a new sense of identity and to overcome the guilt.

In Begin's mythic narrative, Jews could find the strength to protect themselves by "returning" to the heroism of the ancient Hebrew past. According to Begin, Jews had become weak because they had been separated from their homeland. Irgun soldier Chaim Luster made this point during a trial by the British authorities:

You will never succeed in bringing the inhabitants of this country to extermination camps without resistance, without an enormous price that you will have to pay with your own blood. This was possible only there, in the damned countries of the diaspora, truly damned, on that soil of the Exile that robbed our brethren of

the physical and spiritual will of resistance, which has led them to be completely defenceless.²³

However, with a return to the “homeland,” Jews would be strong and heroic again. Begin wrote:

The revolt sprang from the earth. The ancient Greek story of Antaeus and the strength he drew from contact with Mother Earth, is a legend. The renewed strength which came to us, and especially to our youth, from contact with the soil of our ancient land, is no legend but a fact.²⁴

Here, Begin drew a distinction between a mere story, the legend of Antaeus, and a “true” myth. And for Begin, there was no doubt about the “fact” of Jewish revival because of Jewish return to Palestine.

Begin’s myth was built around a return in terms of time as well as space. The soldiers of the Irgun had “returned” to the heroism of ancient Hebrew warriors. Time and again Begin made clear the linkage between the soldiers of the Irgun and heroes from the past. For example, Begin claimed that “The miracle of Return was accompanied by the miracle of Revival.”²⁵ Luster’s jury speech emphasized this linkage as well, “Our country has revived in us the heroes of Masada and Jodefeth. It has given us strength, it calls us from the depths: ‘Arise and fight for me and for the People that has been led away from me into exile.’”²⁶

Similarly, the Irgun emphasized the return to ancient heroism in testimony to a United Nations committee:

[A] new generation, who have revived the soil of the Homeland, as the soil of the Homeland has revived them and restored to them the image of *free* men, free from fear, freed from the complexes resulting from two thousand years of persecution; a generation healthy in body and mind, whose sons know how to plough and how to fight, how to labour and how to fight.²⁷

In Begin’s view, return to Palestine had revived in Irgun soldiers the heroism of the ancient Hebrew heroes. He wrote, for example, of how one Irgun soldier (Amitai Paglin) was transformed from “little Amitai” into the heroic “Gideon who did such great things for the salvation . . . of his people.”²⁸ According to the Irgun, “Enormous forces” that “have arisen out of the past of our nation” are “leading us . . . out of slavery into freedom, out of darkness into light.”²⁹

With the twin returns to the sacred place of Zion and to the time of Jewish heroism, Jewish identity could be reborn and guilt cleansed. Begin stated:

When Descartes said: “I think, therefore I am,” he uttered a very profound thought There are times when everything in you cries out: your very self-respect as a human being lies in your resistance to evil.

*We fight, therefore we are!*³⁰

Thus, the shame of passivity could be cleansed via the new identity provided in the myth, which in turn made it possible for the Irgun to actively resist the British.

In response to the horrors of the Holocaust, both physical and psychological, Begin created a myth of return, which provided a model of Jewish heroism that could both protect Jews physically and provide a renewed identity. But there was a cost in providing that new identity: the tendency to deny the identity of all those who did not accept the Myth of Redemption through Return. In Begin's story, there was a strong tendency to view any opponent as a kind of Nazi. For example, the Irgun often attacked the "Nazo-British"³¹ and accused the main leaders of the Jewish community in Palestine as having "grovelled like willing-slaves before every Nazo-British official."³² Of course, the British were hardly Nazis, but Begin's mythic system led him to see them or any opponent that way.

Begin's mythic worldview also led him to negate the identity of the Palestinian population. In this view, violence, even if it resulted in the death of innocent Palestinians, was needed to protect Jews. In what he often called the Generation of Holocaust and Redemption, there must be no compromise with Jewish security. Begin wrote in *The Revolt*: "We never broke them [the rules of war] unless the enemy first did so and thus forced us, in accordance with the accepted custom of war, to apply reprisals."³³ If Jews were attacked, reprisals against innocent people were justified because weakness had led to the Holocaust. And thus the Irgun threw bombs into some Arab areas and destroyed the Arab village of Dir Yassin, resulting in many deaths. Begin was not a racist or anti-Arab. However, as a member of the Generation of Holocaust and Redemption, he believed that all attacks must be met with an overwhelming response, no matter the innocent lives lost. Begin's narrative provided a strong new sense of identity, but at the cost of complete negation of the identity of the Palestinians. The term "Nazi" was what Ilan Peleg has called an "analytical device"³⁴ that shaped Begin's understanding of the world.

Mythic regeneration and rectification

Jabotinsky and Begin were both territorial maximalists (a belief that both sides of the Jordan belonged to Israel), but they and the Revisionist myth system would change. For Jabotinsky the control of the Transjordan was instrumental, for Begin, it stemmed from a deeply held myth. As a revolutionary movement, operating without the constraints of a state, the leaders of Revisionist Zionist could engage in hyperbolic statements that they would seize control of the Transjordan and create a Jewish kingdom from the Nile to the Euphrates. With the creation of a Jewish state, the "both side of Jordan" Revisionist mythic system was significantly challenged by the existential reality of an Arab nationalist movement and political movements, both within the new nation and the party itself.

In 1948, Begin held to the view that "The Land of Israel is part of our eternal faith. Every inch of it is sacred to us and makes us sacred."³⁵ And yet, Revisionist myth gradually changed, adapting to the realities of the Middle East and the politics of Israel. The leaders and heirs of the Revisionist movement were often in conflict over

ideology, strategy, and tactics, and the meaning of *Eretz Israel* (the Land of Israel) was subjected to significant dispute and argument. Jabotinsky and Begin clashed at the Betar convention held September 1938 in Warsaw over Begin's call for military force to liberate *Eretz Israel*,³⁶ Begin and future prime minister Ehud Olmert debated the issue of *Eretz Israel* at a Gahal meeting in 1968,³⁷ and more recently, Benjamin Netanyahu and Arik Sharon engaged in vicious argumentative exchanges over the 2005 Gaza withdrawal. In these debates, the Revisionist myth was gradually rectified.

The rectification of Revisionist myth was prompted by two stark realities: First, the "both sides of the Jordan" mythic system, while salient in the revolutionary stage of Zionism, did not mobilize sufficient political support for Revisionists once the Jewish state came into being. In the first five Knesset elections (1948, 1951, 1955, 1959, 1961), Begin and Revisionist parties achieved no more than 13% of the vote, leaving them without power. The affairs of state, including economic development, were far more important to the Israeli electorate than an agenda to reclaim the Transjordan in the name of *Eretz Israel*.³⁸ Second, the geopolitical realities of a Hashemite Kingdom in the Transjordan that Israel did not have the capacity to conquer and the emergence of a Palestinian nationalist movement undeterred by Israel's military might required Revisionist leaders to recalibrate the myth of *Eretz Israel*, limiting it to the West Bank. Indeed, Begin ceded the Sinai to Anwar Sadat in 1979, further constricting the initial Revisionist mythic system.³⁹

Revisionist thought continued to evolve, and the reason was the stark reality of a Palestinian people that made a similar claim to the land. Even myth systems must account for an existential reality, or they become dreams and fantasies rather than political charters. More changes occurred in the 1990s, when the Netanyahu government finally accepted the need for territorial compromise on the West Bank in the Wye Accords.⁴⁰ The Sharon/Olmert plan for peace that was based on a strategy of unilateral Israeli withdrawal from parts of the West Bank as a way of improving Israeli security continued this evolution. A January 24, 2006 speech by acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert illustrates the rectified Revisionist myth system:

The existence of a Jewish majority in the State of Israel cannot be maintained with the continued control over the Palestinian population in Judea, Samara and the Gaza Strip. We firmly stand by the historic right of the people of Israel to the entire Land of Israel. Every hill in Samaria and every valley in Judea is part of our historic homeland. We do not forget this, not even for one moment. However, the choice between the desire to allow every Jew to live anywhere in the Land of Israel to the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish country—obligates relinquishing parts of the Land of Israel. This is not a relinquishing of the Zionist idea, rather the essential realization of the Zionist goal—ensuring the existence of a Jewish and democratic state in the Land of Israel.⁴¹

Olmert supported a rectified myth system that allowed for the possibility of a real peace, and the rectified myth system he presented featured pragmatic tradeoffs, sacrificing the "historic right" and mythic claim on all the land to the goal of a Jewish and democratic state. Olmert faced the pyrrhic consequences of the Israeli "victory" in 1967 that the state of Israel would soon host more Palestinians than Jews.

Myth-based symbol systems are not always interpreted in a fundamentalist manner. Sometimes the systems can be rectified in order to create space for compromise of mythic ideas. Note, however, Olmert did not cede the “historic right” to the land, allowing him to frame for Israelis how their identity, one tied directly to the notion of Eretz Israel, would remain intact in the face of compromise. The mythic and ideological symbolic system of Hamas was conceived with similar deficiencies and, similarly, has adjusted to the realities on the ground.

Hamas Myths

While Palestinians did not face physical extinction in the way that Jews did during the Holocaust, their identity clearly has been and remains threatened. Just as denial of identity led Begin and the Irgun to embrace a fundamentalist symbolic system based in myth, a similar pattern is evident in the response of the Palestinian to their feeling of symbolic erasure. At the time of the formation of the Israeli state in 1948, more than 600,000 Palestinians fled what would become Israel to live in exile. Palestinians use the term “al-Nakba” (the catastrophe) to describe this tragedy.⁴² Along with the hardship of living in exile, as an Israeli Arab inside the state of Israel, or after 1967 in Israeli-occupied Gaza or the West Bank, came a feeling of symbolic erasure. It long was the Israeli view that Palestinians as a people simply did not exist. As Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir stated famously in London in 1969, “There is no such thing as Palestinians.”⁴³

Until the rise of the Hamas Islamic fundamentalist movement in 1987, Yasser Arafat and his party Fatah controlled the Palestinian narrative, doing so by bridging religious and secular values. While not granting Israel the status of a legitimate state or fully amending its founding documents calling for the destruction of the Zionist entity, between 1948 and 1992, Arafat and Fatah yielded to the existential reality of Israel and with the Oslo accords, endorsed a two-state solution. Hamas opposed this endorsement on religious grounds and, when the movement achieved electoral success in 2006, subordinated secular and pragmatic considerations to a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, which held that all the land of Palestine belonged to Palestinian Arabs. However, since 2006 Hamas has followed the same pattern revealed by Fatah between 1948 and 1992, a grudging acceptance of the existential reality of Israel.⁴⁴

One place that symbolic patterns are often evident is in founding ideological documents. It is for this reason that rhetorical critics have focused great attention on foundational documents of democratic liberalism such as the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Gettysburg Address. For similar reasons, the most appropriate place to look for the underlying ideology/myth of Hamas is in the charter of the organization.⁴⁵ The symbolic pattern that is evident in the charter is clearly mythic and entelechial and also quite similar to the pattern found in the rhetoric of Revisionism.

The motive behind the Charter and the organization itself is obvious in the final paragraph prior to the “Introduction.” Here, it states “The Islamic World is burning. It is incumbent upon each one of us to pour some water, little as it may be, with a view of extinguishing as much of the fire as he can, without awaiting action by the

others.” The point is clear, the Palestinian people are threatened, by “evil-doers” and can only protect themselves and regain their identity by embracing struggle. The Charter also makes it clear that separation from the land of Palestine is a form of symbolic death. Article 20 says, “Exiling people from their country is another way of killing them.”

Although the story is not fleshed out, the Charter contains what might be called an implied narrative. As with the myth of the Irgun, this narrative is built around a sacred place and a sacred time. The Charter contains many references to Palestine as a sacred place. Article 34 states this point most strongly, “Palestine is the navel of the earth, the convergence of continents, the object of greed for the greedy, since the dawn of history.” Article 11 states that “the land of Palestine has been an Islamic Waqf through the generations and until the Day of Resurrection no one can renounce it or part of it, or abandon it or part of it.” Given that all of Palestine is sacred, the movement “strives to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine” (Article 6). Just as Begin viewed all of Eretz Israel as sacred and granted directly from God, so does Hamas view all Palestine as sacred and, consequently, compromise is seen as impossible. Article 13 makes this point quite clear, stating “so-called peaceful solutions, and the international conferences to resolve the Palestinian problem, are all contrary to the beliefs of the Islamic Resistance Movement. For renouncing any part of Palestine means renouncing part of religion.”

Who are the heroes in this narrative? Hamas links together two groups as the heroes of their mythic story: “Jihad fighters,” and heroes from the Islamic past, usually the time of the Prophet. In the present day, it is the “Jihad fighters” who have “joined . . . hands . . . for the purpose of liberating Palestine” (Introduction). Hamas also makes clear that these Jihad fighters are part of a larger Islamic movement that believes in the “complete comprehensiveness of all concepts of Islam in all domains of life” (Article 2).

However, the heroes of Hamas are also linked to the greatest heroes from Islamic history, a point that is evident in Article 5, where the Charter states: “the Movement adopts Islam as its way of life, its time dimension extends back as far as the birth of the Islamic Message and of the Righteous Ancestor.” Thus, the heroes of the present day are reborn heroes from the golden age of Islam. The ultimate grounding for the heroism of “Jihad fighters” is Islam and the ultimate grounding for the narrative is the certainty that “Allah’s victory prevails” (Introduction).

Hamas also links the present struggle to the heroic past in calling for Palestinians to reject the “ideological invasion which has been brought about by the orientalist and missionaries,” an invasion that began “following the defeat of the Crusader armies by Salah a-Din” (Article 15). Article 27 makes it clear that Hamas is fighting “the ideological invasion which has swept the Arab world since the rout of the Crusades.” Thus, Hamas continues a struggle against the West that began centuries ago.

Today, the heroes of Islam are opposed by the Zionist enemy, a vast and powerful group that includes “the Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, gangs of spies and the like” (Article 17), and their allies in “the Crusader West” (Article 25). “Those Zionist organizations control vast material resources, which enable them to fulfill their

mission amidst societies, with a view of implementing Zionist goals and sowing the conceptions that can be of use to the enemy” (Article 17). The Zionist enemy is totally evil and “has resorted to breaking bones, opening fire on women and children and the old, with or without reason, and to setting up detention camps where thousands upon thousands are interned in inhuman conditions” (Article 20). At several points, the Charter compares Israel to the Nazi regime. For example, Article 20 notes that “The Nazism of the Jews does not skip women and children, it scares everyone.” Victory in the war with the “Nazi-like enemy” (Article 20) will result in wiping “out those organizations which are the enemy of humanity and Islam” (Article 17).

Just as Begin labeled the British as Nazis, so does Hamas label Israel and its supporters as the “Nazi-like enemy.” And just as Begin claimed that the soldiers of the Irgun were reborn Hebrew heroes, Hamas links its “Jihad fighters” to heroes from Islamic history.

The plot of the implied narrative is also quite similar to that of the Revisionist myth. In the implied story present in the Charter, the ultimate cause of Palestinian exile and symbolic erasure is not Israel; although the Charter attacks Israel as evil at many points. Rather, the ultimate cause is that people have moved away from Islam and therefore lost their way. Article 9 states:

Hamas finds itself at a period of time when Islam has waned away from the reality of life. For this reason, the checks and balances have been upset, concepts have become confused, and values have been transformed; evil has prevailed, oppression and obscurity have reigned; cowards have turned tigers; homelands have been usurped, people have been uprooted and are wandering all over the globe. The state of truth has disappeared and was replaced by the state of evil. Nothing has remained in its right place, for when Islam is removed from the scene, everything changes.

Here the Charter echoes Begin’s statements that placed ultimate responsibility for the Holocaust on Jewish weakness. In this case, the ultimate cause of the Palestinian exile is that Palestinians turned away from Islam.

Through participation in the mythic narrative implicit in the Charter of Hamas, Palestinians may reject symbolic erasure and take on a heroic identity. The “Slogan of Hamas,” in Article 8, reduces that identity to its essence: “Allah is its goal, the Prophet its model, the Qur’an its Constitution, Jihad its path and death for the case of Allah its most sublime belief.” By returning to the heroic identity associated with the greatest heroes of Islam, Palestinians may regain their land and achieve redemption. For, “There is no solution to the Palestinian problem except by Jihad” (Article 13).

A close analysis of the Hamas Charter reveals a myth-based symbolic system that clearly responded to the loss of Palestinian identity. Hamas offered a renewed sense of identity in which Palestinians could embrace jihad and take on a role that was linked to Islamic heroes from the time of the Prophet onward. In this narrative, the Zionist oppressors and all who aided them were evil, “Nazi-like” in the language of the Charter. But the new Nazis could be defeated by returning to Islamic values that had been forsaken.

Rectification of Hamas myths

In a careful study for the United States Institute of Peace, titled *Hamas: Ideological Rigidity and Political Flexibility*, Paul Scham and Osama Abu-Irshaid identify what we would call mythic rectification, as these authors share evidence that Hamas has been “carefully and consciously adjusting its political program for years and has sent repeated signals that it is ready to begin a process of coexisting with Israel.”⁴⁶ They warn, however, that these signals are coded, and many in the West demand

clear, explicit, and unambiguous language. Such language is the norm in the West but not in the Middle East, where indirection and nuance are often used to indicate change, largely in order to spare the party making the change from public humiliation. The West tends to consider this as *prima facie* bad faith and, as in this instance, either ignores the nuance or denounces it as fraudulent.⁴⁷

Similar to the rectification efforts made by Begin and Olmert, Hamas has juggled its ideological aspirations with the political realities on the ground. Accordingly, while the Hamas Charter sets forth its desired ideological goals with the language of entelechical myth, its political discourse has adjusted, in its own terms, to the realities of Israel and the occupation.

Indeed, Khalid Meshal, the Hamas leader in Damascus, Syria told the *New York Times* in 2009, that outsiders should “ignore the Hamas Charter . . . [that] it was 20 years old . . . [and] ‘shaped by our experiences.’”⁴⁸ In an overture to the new Obama administration, he declared that “the movement was seeking a state only in the areas Israel won in 1967” and that he sought to be part of a solution.⁴⁹ He refused to admit the existence of Israel, but, according to the *New York Times* reporters, “Mr. Meshal’s terms approximate the Arab League peace plan and what the Palestinian Authority of President Mahmoud Abbas says it is seeking.”⁵⁰ Both the league and Abbas admit the existence of Israel. The refusal to admit the existence of Israel, while articulating a two-state solution, is a function of identity maintenance and political strategy. For Hamas to admit the existence of Israel at this point would be to cede its “historic right” to the land of Palestine and would serve to undermine Palestinian identity. However, the political language of Hamas acknowledges the existential, if not moral, status of Israel.

Scham and Abu-Irshaid cull a host of documents in Arabic and English to document how Hamas has, during its reign, maintained its “solid ideological” position and simultaneously governed from a “flexible and pragmatic political line.”⁵¹ The goal Hamas seeks is to find a “political path that would allow it to coexist with Israel without jettisoning its ideological moorings.”⁵² To do so, Hamas is engaged in a “phased liberation” policy, rooted in the Islamic concept of *hudna*, which is a truce:

The Prophet Muhammad’s life and the experience of Islamic history and jurisprudence offer an alternative to an unending war. A *hudna* provides a mechanism to wait until circumstances might change and the Muslim situation might improve while, presumably, one’s adversaries are making a similar calculation.⁵³

A *hudna* would allow Hamas myths to regenerate and to undergo rectification, which appears to be the Meshal's aspiration when he asks Western audiences to ignore the Hamas charter.

The gradual shift in the Hamas' mythic structure, one largely undetected in the West, indicates that Hamas does not strictly adhere to its 20-year-old charter, rejects the Israeli claim on Palestine, acknowledges the existential reality of Israel, embraces the Islamic notion of *hudna* and the political position of "phased liberation" as a short-term approach and seems to accept the need for a two-state solution. Scham and Abu-Irshaid conclude:

These developments—in and of themselves—show a significant progression from the ideology embodied in Hamas's 1988 charter. If we want to see a formal modification of Hamas's convictions and ideological rhetoric (as opposed to its political statements, which we have cited), we must accept that this is a process that requires great time and effort.⁵⁴

As Hamas continues to regenerate and rectify its myths, it will need the political and material support necessary to foster the changes necessary in mythic system necessary for rapprochement with the Israelis.

Conclusion

In this essay, we argue that one key factor explaining why some myth systems are rectified and others extended in a disastrous fashion to the end of the line is the presence of perceived threats to identity. When a people feels that their very identity is threatened, either literally in the sense that they could be destroyed or metaphorically in the sense that the defining essence of who they are is threatened, they are likely to seek fundamentalist myths as a solution. We build this argument by showing how threats to identity led to the creation of the Revisionist mythic system in the period after the Holocaust and how a similar threat to identity is evident in the symbol system created by Hamas. Although these threats were real, both the Revisionist and Hamas myth systems had no choice but to regenerate, and it is in this caldron of regeneration that symbolic frames can change to account for both identity and the need for compromise.

The primary barrier to achieving peace between Israel and the Palestinians is not finding a pragmatic solution that would make life better for both peoples. The outlines of such a solution have been obvious since at least the middle 1980s when Shimon Peres and King Hussein met secretly to discuss possible solutions. No solution will provide complete justice for both sides. A settlement requiring the Palestinians to give up land containing Israeli settlement blocs around Jerusalem is clearly unjust. And Israel will have to give up control of many holy sites from the Old Testament period, sites that are now on Palestinian land in the West Bank, but that are holy places for Jews. Perfect justice is not attainable, but a settlement that dramatically improves the life of both peoples is easily attainable.

The barrier to peace is not finding a settlement, but selling that settlement. In the short term, memories of the latest outrage committed by the other side, fears about security, and other political factors make it difficult to sell a pragmatic peace. Viewed more broadly, the greatest barriers to peace are mythic systems that demonize the Other and label all of the contested land as sacred. It is difficult to find a means of compromising ownership of land that is holy. Yet, human beings often compromise over myth-based truths. That compromise can occur only when myths are rectified, a process requiring the rejection of fundamentalist and entelechial symbol systems.

Threatened identity is a crucial reason that people embrace entelechial as opposed to rectified mythic systems. When people feel that they face literal or symbolic threats to their identity, they are likely to turn toward symbol systems that are grounded in a strong sense of the sacred. As the analysis of the myths of Hamas and Revisionist Zionism indicates, these symbol systems provide a very strong sense of identity, but at the cost of making compromise all but impossible. In them, identity is created (or re-created) but at the expense of denying the identity of the Other. The obvious implication is that achieving peace in the Middle East and fighting against entelechial symbol systems around the globe will require taking steps to protect identity. Palestinians and Israelis will find it much easier to make peace if they do not feel that the other side wants their total destruction.

The foregoing has two implications for those who favor a just peace. First, it suggests the importance of a rhetoric that reaches out to the other side and recognizes their concerns. Such a rhetoric might be paired with programs that bring peoples together to confront images of demonization, an approach that has been found to be useful in the past in breaking down stereotypes.⁵⁵ Such programs also need to be combined with tangible efforts to improve the conditions in Palestinian society. While it sometimes is argued that such aid programs only assist terrorists, in fact they undercut the ground for terrorism by reducing the sense that identity is threatened.⁵⁶

Second, the previous analysis suggests the limits of military responses to terrorism. The problem with military responses is that they reinforce the sense of threatened identity, often transforming it from a symbolic threat to a sense that actual existence is threatened. People are most likely to embrace a fully entelechial and fundamentalist mythic system when they feel that their identity has been destroyed and that their physical existence is threatened. It is that identity destruction, which creates the symbolic space in which a suicide-terror attack may be viewed, not as pointless murder, but as heroic. Thus, military actions that threaten identity are likely to be counterproductive.⁵⁷ This is not to say that military action is never justified. Certainly, Israel has paid dearly because of the perception that Hezbollah forced the withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000.⁵⁸ In that case, withdrawal may have made things worse by creating a perception of weakness. At the same time, military reaction that causes mass casualties or that seems indiscriminate only aids those who want to transform the present age into a battle of civilizations. Military overreaction makes it more likely that attempts at mythic rectification will fail because they seem to threaten “the order of things.” Consequently, there is enormous need for confidence-building measures to create trust among Israelis and Palestinians to lay the groundwork for mythic change and a just end to the conflict.

Notes

- [1] Robert C. Rowland and David A. Frank, *Shared Land/Conflicting Identity: Trajectories of Israeli and Palestinian Symbol Use* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002); Donald Akenson, *God's Peoples: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster* (Ithaca, NJ: Cornell University Press, 1992); Baruch Kimmerling, *Zionism and Territory: The Socio-Territorial Dimensions of Zionist Politics* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies University of California, 1983).
- [2] Robert C. Rowland, "On Mythic Criticism," *Communication Studies* 41 (1990): 101–116; Martha Solomon, "Responding to Rowland's Myth or in Defense of Pluralism, a Reply to Rowland," *Communication Studies* 41 (1990): 117–120; Michael Osborn, "In Defense of Broad Mythic Criticism, a Reply to Rowland," *Communication Studies* 41 (1990): 121–127; Barry Brummett, "How to Propose a Discourse, a Reply to Rowland," *Communication Studies* 41 (1990): 128–135. For other work in rhetorical studies and other disciplines, see Waldo W. Braden, "Myths in a Rhetorical Context," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 40 (1975): 113–126; Jeff Bass and Richard Cherwitz, "Imperial Mission and Manifest Destiny: A Case Study of Political Myth in Rhetorical Discourse," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 43 (1978): 213–232; Anthony Smith, "The Myth of the 'Modern Nation' and the Myths of Nations," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 11 (1988): 1–20; Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas S. Frentz, "The Rhetoric of Rocky: A Social Value Model of Criticism," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 42 (1978): 63–72.; Matthew Lvinger and Paula Franklin Lytle, "Myth and Mobilisation: The Triadic Structure of Nationalist Rhetoric," *Nations and Nationalism* 7 (1988): 175–194. See also Arthur G. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1998); Alan Dundes, *Sacred Narrative, Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).
- [3] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Garden City, NH: Doubleday, 1948); Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in *The Structuralists: From Marx to Levi-Strauss*, ed. Richard DeGeorge and Fernande DeGeorge (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 169–194; Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (New York: Bantam, 1972); Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of the Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).
- [4] Revisionism is a movement within Zionism intended to "revise" and expand the claim of practical Zionism to include a state encompassing both sides of the Jordan River as set forth in the British Mandate.
- [5] Hamas is the Islamic fundamentalist expression of the Palestinian nationalist movement.
- [6] Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 2.
- [7] Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005), 6.
- [8] Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes toward History*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950); See Laurence Coupe, *Kenneth Burke on Myth: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
- [9] Coupe, *Kenneth Burke on Myth*, 71–72.
- [10] Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Father in Primitive Psychology/Myth in Primitive Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1982), 125.
- [11] Jürgen Habermas and Frederick Lawrence, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 114.

- [12] Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), 19.
- [13] Burke illustrated this principle in his insightful analysis of “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle,” in *Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 191–220.
- [14] See: <http://www.geneva-accord.org/mainmenu/english> (accessed Feb 24, 2010).
- [15] See Uri Savir, *The Process: 1,100 Days That Changed the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 1998), 111.
- [16] Vladimir Jabotinsky, “Evidence Submitted to the Palestine Royal Commission (1937),” in *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, ed. Arthur Hertzberg (New York: Atheneum, 1977), 560–561.
- [17] Jabotinsky as cited in Erich and Raël Jean Isaac, “The Impact of Jabotinsky on Likud’s Policies,” *Middle East Review* 10 (1977): 32.
- [18] Menachem Begin, *The Revolt*, trans. Samuel Katz (New York: Nash, 1972).
- [19] See Irgun Zvai Leumi, *The Hebrew Struggle For National Liberation, National Liberation*, presented to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, 40. Also see p. 18.
- [20] Begin, *The Revolt*, xii (emphasis in original).
- [21] *Ibid.*, 26.
- [22] *Ibid.*, 36.
- [23] See Irgun Zvai Leumi, *The Hebrew Struggle*, 53.
- [24] Begin, *The Revolt*, 40.
- [25] *Ibid.*, 372.
- [26] See Irgun Zvai Leumi, *The Hebrew Struggle*, 54.
- [27] Irgun Zvai Leumi, *Memorandum to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine*, presented to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine(1947), 3–4 (emphasis in original).
- [28] Begin, *The Revolt*, 72.
- [29] Irgun Zvai Leumi, “To The People,” *The Answer*, March 21, 1947, 6.
- [30] Begin, *The Revolt*, 46 (emphasis in original).
- [31] See, for instance, Irgun Zvai Leumi, “Attack is Best Defense Against Rioting Arabs,” *The Answer*, December 26, 1947, 6.
- [32] Irgun Zvai Leumi, “Irgun Proclaims Iron Fund for Liberation,” *The Answer*, March 19, 1948, 6.
- [33] Begin, *The Revolt*, 164.
- [34] Ilan Peleg, “The Legacy of Begin and Beginism for the Israeli Political System,” in *Israel After Begin*, ed. Gregory S. Mahler (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 33; Shindler makes a similar argument. See Colin Shindler, *Israel, Likud and the Zionist Dream: Power, Politics, and Ideology from Begin to Netanyahu* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1995), 145.
- [35] Menachem Begin, “Breakup of the National Unity Government.” *Major Knesset Debates, 1948–1981*, vol. 5, ed. Netanel Lorch (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), 1732.
- [36] Yonathan Shapiro, *The Road to Power: Herut Party in Israel*, trans. Ralph Mandel (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 58–59.
- [37] *Ibid.*, 138.
- [38] Nadav G. Shelef, “From ‘Both Banks of the Jordan’ To The ‘Whole Land of Israel’: Ideological Change in Revisionist Zionism,” *Israel Studies* 9 (2004), 126–127.
- [39] *Ibid.*
- [40] Ya’aqov Erez stated in *Ma’ariv*, that Netanyahu “dissociate[d] himself from his political heritage” and abandoned “the hawkish positions of the Greater Israel camp.” See Ya’aqov Erez, “Hopes for a New Era,” *Ma’ariv* in *FBIS*, October 25, 1998.

- [41] “Address by Acting PM Ehud Olmert to the 6th Herzliya Conference, 24 January 2006,” www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2006/Address+by+Acting+PM+Ehud+Olmert+to+the+6th+Herzliya+Conference+24-Jan-2006.htm.
- [42] Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 33.
- [43] Golda Meir, quoted in *London Times*, June 15, 1969, 12.
- [44] For a more detailed explanation of Fatah and Hamas’ rhetorical trajectories, see Rowland and Frank, *Shared Land/Conflicting Identity*, 223–240.
- [45] See “The Charter of Allah: The Platform of the Islamic Resistance Movement,” www.palestinecenter.org/cpap/documents/charter.html. Future references will be made by section in the text.
- [46] Paul Scham and Osama Abu-Irshaid, *Hamas: Ideological Rigidity and Political Flexibility* (Washington, DC: USIP, 2009).
- [47] Scham and Abu-Irshaid, *Hamas*, 14.
- [48] Taghreed el-Khodary and Ethan Bronner, “Addressing U.S., Hamas Says It Has Grounded Its Rockets to Israel,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2009, A6.
- [49] *Ibid.*, A6.
- [50] *Ibid.*, A6.
- [51] Scham and Abu-Irshaid, *Hamas*, 16..
- [52] *Ibid.*
- [53] *Ibid.*, 9.
- [54] *Ibid.*, 17.
- [55] See Serge Schmemmann, “Negotiators, Arab and Israeli, Built Friendship From Mistrust,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1995, A1, A6.
- [56] It is notable that a Pentagon analysis found that tsunami relief “did more to counter terrorist ideology than any attack mission.” The point is that people are much less likely to demonize those who they see helping them. See T. Shanker, “Pentagon Hones Strategy for Countering Terrorism,” *New York Times*, February 5, 2006, A11.
- [57] Jessica Stern made a similar argument in reference to the Israeli attack on Qana in Lebanon that resulted in many civilian deaths in July 2006. See Jessica Stern, “Jihad—A Global Fad,” *Boston Globe*, www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial, August 1, 2006.
- [58] See T. Rubin, “Exit from Gaza will backfire,” *Kansas City Star*, July 24, 2005, B9.

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