

The facts of the matter

American author David Brog seeks to set the record straight on the Arab-Israeli conflict

By Tibor Krausz

WARS AREN'T just fought with guns; they're also fought with words. And Palestinians have been winning the war of words with Israelis.

Despite having engaged in relentlessly inventive forms of terrorism since long before Israel even came into being, Palestinians have painted themselves as innocent and powerless victims whose only recourse to justice lies in stones, knives, guns and bombs. Abetted by the Arab/Muslim world and anti-Israel firebrands in the West who have embraced their cause as today's foremost human rights issue, Palestinians have convinced much of the world that theirs is a struggle with a clear-cut dividing line between good and evil.

And if Palestinians are on the side of the angels and can thus be absolved of their moral failings and wrongdoings, it follows that Israelis – whose every action, however rational or well-intentioned, is forever probed and condemned – must be in the wrong. Israel's sundry detractors, from Marxists to neo-Nazis, might not agree on anything else but that Israel is criminal and illegitimate. The country's defenders can be just as strident by dismissing all Palestinian claims of victimhood as fraudulent.

Israel has been turned into an either/or state. It's widely portrayed as either a nation of progressive humanism or one without redeeming qualities, depending on whom you ask.

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Israel is either a small, beleaguered island of modernism and democracy in a violent and benighted region, as its defenders stress, or it's the singular cause of all that violence and benightedness in that same region, as the country's enemies insist. It's either a bastion of religious tolerance, human rights and ethnic diversity or a Jewish supremacist apartheid state that puts Nazi Germany to shame with unrelenting ethnic cleansing and genocide. It's either the fulfillment of Biblical prophecies about the ingathering of exiles to the Promised Land or a crime against God through its abrogation of true Jewish values. It's either the rightful inheritance of the world's most persecuted minority as their ancestral homeland or the ill-gotten colonial outpost of rapacious European faux-Jewish settlers lording it over the indigenous population.

Does this mean that all these polarized

opinions are equally spurious? No. The facts should guide us in separating rights from wrongs and truths from falsehoods in the world's most emotionally charged conflict.

This is what David Brog, the executive director of the prominent American pro-Israel organization, Christians United for Israel, sets out to do in "Reclaiming Israel's History" – reclaiming it, that is, from its myriad falsifiers.

Right away, Brog seeks to establish himself as a fair-minded commentator who is no kneejerk apologist for the Jewish state. "Israel has committed sins large and small," he writes. "Israeli soldiers have killed innocent Arab civilians – and not always by mistake. Israeli commanders have expelled Arabs from their villages and destroyed their homes – and not always in cases of clear military necessity."

Following that caveat he gets down to offering a spirited defense of the country. In short order, he dispenses with several malignant notions. Israeli Jews aren't colonizers: they're by right just as indigenous to Palestine as local Arabs by virtue of the unbroken Jewish presence in the land for thousands of years.

Nor are Israelis brutal oppressors. A common hallmark of bias against Israel is a propensity to divorce consequences (Israeli retaliation) from their proximate causes (Palestinian violence). Thus, Israel's

retributive military actions in the wake of terror attacks on its citizens are either portrayed as unprovoked or condemned as “disproportionate.” Brog sees this tendency as an attempt to distance Israel’s actions from the reasons that have led to them by willfully overlooking Arab and Palestinian violence, rejectionism, irredentism and intransigence. Slanders such as that Israel is a brutal occupier “can survive only in a rarified environment empty of all context and history,” he posits.

Brog also challenges the popular view that Palestinians are the world’s most wronged people. Not so, he insists. The Palestinians, being stateless and occupied, may have it bad, but they don’t have it worse than many other stateless, oppressed and dispossessed ethnic groups the world over from the Kurds to the Tibetans. Yet these peoples’ misfortunes don’t seem to weigh heavily on the world’s collective conscience given the comparatively little attention paid to them.

So why the inordinate attention to the Palestinians’ plight? Out of deep-seated concerns for minority rights and universal justice? Hardly. Here’s a clue: Even with Palestinians, it’s only when they’re victimized by Israelis that their sufferings are accorded widespread attention and concern.

Palestinians have been languishing for generations in permanent “refugee camps” in countries like Lebanon in the semi-legal status of outcasts. Many of them have been denied citizenship in their countries of birth and residence across the Arab Middle East from Kuwait to Saudi Arabia. Yet scarcely have such forms of enduring discrimination merited so much as a peep of protest. But it’s exactly such prejudicial treatment that has perpetuated Palestinians as “refugees” through the decades.

The question, the author argues convincingly, isn’t whether peoples have suffered injustices. Many of them have. The question is how a people decides to respond to those injustices. After WWII, millions of ethnic Germans were expelled from their homes across Eastern Europe in revenge

for the crimes of Nazi Germany. These refugees resettled in postwar Germany and set about rebuilding their lives with nary a backward glance.

The Palestinians – 700,000 of whom fled their homes in those same years – have chosen a different path. “When you come right down to it,” observed Albert Memmi, a Tunisian-born French-Jewish writer who has long been both a Zionist and a supporter of Palestinian nationhood, “the Palestinian Arabs’ misfortune is having been moved about thirty miles within one vast [Arab] nation. Is that so serious?”

Palestinian refusals have always been predicated on an all-or-nothing approach

Serious or not, seven decades on, many Palestinians still want to take back every square inch of those few thousand lost square miles of territory. Trapped emotionally in their collective *nakba*, the “catastrophe” of Israel’s creation, they continue to pine, old keys in hand, for a return to homes within Israel that almost none of them, having been born after 1948, has ever even had. “The Palestinians,” Brog surmises, “are the only refugee population from the World War II era to remain frozen in time.”

That’s not entirely their own fault. Having served as proxies for the Arab/Muslim world in its long war on Israel, Palestinians have been used and indulged like no other dispossessed minority. Alone among the world’s refugees, they’ve had an entire well-financed UN agency (UNRWA) dedicated to their needs. The UN classifies Palestinians as perpetual refugees who inherit this title from their fathers and bequeath it to their sons, even if they’re already citi-

zens in another country. Hence, while there were some 700,000 Palestinian refugees in 1950, there are now seven times as many, and counting.

Nor have their unceasing acts of terror and celebrations of the “martyrs” who have died killing Jews harmed the Palestinians’ cause. If anything, they’ve benefitted it. “A century of Palestinian terror has produced a perverse public relations payoff,” Brog points out. “Rather than blame the Palestinians for resorting to so violent a tactic, the world’s morally challenged have concluded that a people so especially outraged must have been uniquely wronged.”

Yet this view has it backwards. Palestinian terrorism isn’t an outcome of Israel’s crimes but a symptom of Palestinians’ misplaced priorities. Rather than take stock, compromise and start building a state of their own at last, they remain bent on murder and mayhem. Not all Palestinians, to be sure, but enough of them to perpetuate the conflict.

“The conflict between the Arabs and Jews in Palestine persists because one side – the Arab side – has linked their national liberation to the other side’s destruction,” Brog writes. “The Palestinians, despite their moderates, have refused to share the land. The Israelis, despite their hardliners, have repeatedly offered to do exactly that.”

It’s hard to quibble with that. The Palestinians could have had their state several times over, yet since the late 1930s they’ve turned down every single offer to do so – including, most recently, Ehud Olmert’s historic concessions in 2008 to Mahmoud Abbas, who refused to take the Israeli prime minister up on his offer. Why this long record of intransigence? Palestinian refusals have always been predicated on an all-or-nothing approach. Palestinian Arabs have wanted their own state less than they’ve wanted to destroy the Jewish state, whose existence they continue to see as an affront to their collective dignity.

Israel shares some blame for the current impasse: continued settlement building on

disputed land hardly helps. Yet it isn't clear what the country could have done much differently, short of dismantling its settlements in the West Bank and unilaterally drawing new borders along the pre-1967 lines, from behind which it would have to keep defending itself tooth and nail against continued attacks on its citizens in a heavily fortified bunker of a rump state now shorn of vital security buffers. Israel did try just such unilateral withdrawal with Gaza in 2005: it has been facing a belligerent enclave of implacable Islamism ever since.

Seeing as the Palestinians' national narrative has it that Tel Aviv and Haifa are just as much "occupied" by the "Zionists" as Hebron and Nablus, Israel can do little to achieve lasting peace beyond waiting for the Palestinian side to accept Israelis' own rightful claims on historic Palestine, which the Palestinian leadership has always refused to do. When, if ever, that day will come is anyone's guess. Yet even as they themselves refuse to compromise, Palestinians, aided by their enablers far and wide, keep on demonizing Israel and rewriting history by airbrushing out rightful Jewish claims to the land.

That's why much of pro-Israel advocacy – derided by pro-Palestinian firebrands as barefaced Zionist *hasbara* (public diplomacy) – must consist of dismantling bogus claims. That often entails stating the obvious, but stating and restating the obvious is a necessary act given the nature of fervent anti-Israel activism: fact-free emoting, historical revisionism and unceasing vitriol. In recent years, books written in defense of Israel have become a veritable subgenre, including "The Case for Israel" by Alan Dershowitz, "Making David into Goliath" by Joshua Muravchik, and "The Tail Wags the Dog" by Efraim Karsh.

Thus, Brog travels well-trodden terrain. Yet he does so with verve, and "Reclaiming Israel's History" is a welcome addition to pro-Israel apologetics through its series of vignettes that provide telling, if at times episodic, snapshots of Palestine's long his-

tory and Jews' undying longing to resettle in their ancestral land, often against overwhelming odds.

Brog charts the fortunes of Palestinian Jews under centuries-long Muslim rule when their lot was punctuated by short spells of relative tolerance amid periodic bouts of violent oppression. Only with the arrival of Zionism in the late 19th century did their situation begin to improve markedly. "Zionism was not some dramatic re-discovery of Palestine after two thousand years," he explains. "Zionism is merely the latest – and the most successful – of the long list of Jewish efforts to return to their homeland dating back to their first expulsion therefrom."

Mercifully, the Christian Zionist author keeps his religious views out of it: there's not one word about Jesus or biblical prophecies about the End of Days. Nor does he go easy on Christians whose centuries-long persecutions of Palestinian Jews during the era of Byzantine rule and later the Crusades added greatly to the sum total of collective Jewish misery.

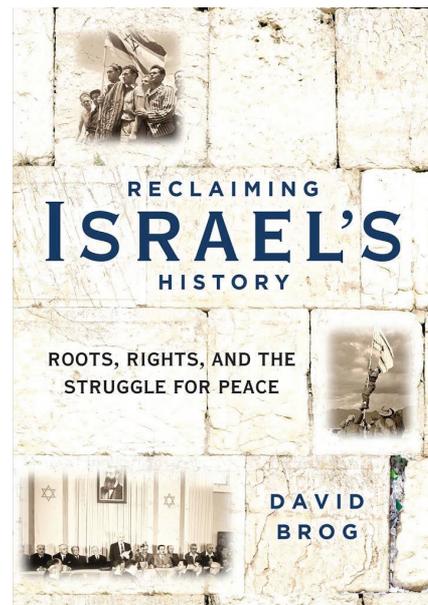
The book can be especially useful as a primer for people who know little about the world's longest-running conflict but want to learn – albeit a few inaccuracies mar an otherwise well-researched treatise, such as when Brog declares the Western Wall to be "Judaism's holiest site," which it isn't. (The Temple Mount is.) In some of its most trenchant parts, Brog expounds on the Zionists' vision of creating a tolerant and inclusive new state in Palestine, with Arab citizens enjoying full rights alongside Jews and recounts the annals of Arab leaders' animosity to the very idea of such a state. The author's aim is to demonstrate how Jewish attempts at rapprochement were invariably rebuffed (often violently) or ignored, while, simultaneously, Arab moderates were either sidelined or murdered.

Whereas Jews boasted far better historical and cultural ties to Palestine, local Arabs could base their own claim to the land on the strength of their superior demographics.

Many of the local Arabs had themselves been recent migrants from neighboring lands, but they did outnumber Jews in the Holy Land until Jews from Europe started arriving en masse. Yet demographics alone do not make a nation. "Even under the most generous definition of nationhood," Brog writes, "the Palestinians did not exist as a separate people until some point after 1967," when Israel seized territories hitherto controlled by Egypt and Jordan.

This doesn't mean that Palestinians don't deserve a state of their own. But it does mean that their quest for nationhood seems to have been rather less like the result of genuine aspirations for true self-determination than of efforts to undo the national project of the Jews.

Therein lies the reason the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been so intractable. ■



Reclaiming Israel's History: Roots, Rights, and the Struggle for Peace

David Brog
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288 pages; \$20.71