



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

---

Word Crimes: Reclaiming The Language of The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Author(s): Donna Robinson Divine

Source: *Israel Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Word Crimes; Reclaiming The Language of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (Summer 2019), pp. 1-16

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/israelstudies.24.2.01>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Israel Studies*

JSTOR

# Word Crimes: Reclaiming The Language of The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

## INTRODUCTION

**O**F ALL THE CHANGES THAT CAN BE DOCUMENTED IN THE SEVENTY years since the founding of Israel, none is as dramatic and surprising as the country's status as a topic of intellectual inquiry. Once a trope for self-sacrifice and solidarity, a testament to the redemption of a bruised and battered people, the Jewish state, today, stands accused of practicing apartheid, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and of sustaining itself as a remnant of an outdated and thoroughly delegitimized colonial order. The Jewish state has not simply been re-branded; it has essentially been re-named. Once thought distinctive, Israel's singularity is now presented as an example of horrific bigotry if not savagery.

How the change took hold in academia is best understood by focusing on the vocabulary that purports to show why the establishment of a Jewish State was an international crime that can only be undone by taking command of the language deployed to study Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians. The articles in this issue of *Israel Studies* explore this lexical transformation and describe how and why it acquired its totemic standing in the academy.<sup>1</sup>

Do words matter? Plato certainly believed they do, arguing that rhetoric in democracies blurred fact and fiction and undermined the capacity to see or understand truth.<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt folds into her massive study of totalitarianism the corruption of language.<sup>3</sup> George Orwell's dystopian novel, *1984*, is structured around its ruler's power to control language by colonizing the meaning of words and denying people the capacity for independent judgment and critical thinking.<sup>4</sup> But while "fake news", "alternate facts", and "truth decay" have been incorporated into our daily news cycle, they are typically hurled at the views or rhetoric of opponents

rather than as terms provoking self-examination and a willingness to examine the accuracy of one's own convictions.<sup>5</sup> Denunciations of this distressing relationship to truth and evidence, issued constantly on campuses and in the mainstream media, have rarely been addressed to the ways in which a new vocabulary has acquired canonical status for describing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

Before turning to explore this linguistic alchemy, we must spend some time asking why engage in such an inquiry? Why not simply dismiss these words as irrelevant without examining how and why they were changed? Because the radical alteration of the way in which Israel is now described has come to exert such a strong hold on students and scholars and has so substantially degraded the study of Israel—and no less wildly misrepresents what can be said and written about Palestinians—polite denial is neither an adequate nor an intellectually respectable response. Let us not minimize the scope of this degradation.

Students learning only this language graduate with a vocabulary that identifies Israel not simply as a force hostile to Palestinian interests but also as a major source of evil for the world. Earning cultural capital for their anti-Israel words and deeds, university professors, in increasing numbers, venture far outside their disciplinary training to propose boycotts against Israeli educational institutions in order to deny their students stipends and research opportunities. Not only are these activist faculty gatekeepers, they are also advancing their careers with their polemics published by highly ranked journals and by university presses whose peer review systems bend in service of political advocacy for an anti-Israel cause even as it cannot help but bestow an academic cachet on the work. Norms, once taken for granted by scholars, are either ignored or overridden if they transgress a line now drawn very clearly against finding anything positive to say about Israel. Two recent examples come to mind—a long article by Saree Makdisi in the prestigious literary journal *Critical Inquiry*, and Puar Jasbir's book *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*, the first distorting the Israeli political system while the second hurls bizarre claims against the Jewish state for practicing a policy intended to destroy Palestinians by undermining their health and well-being. It does not take a legal specialist to provide a corrective to Saree Makdisi's uninformed polemic. Nor is expertise required to see the serious weaknesses in the argument advanced by Puar Jasbir's claims that Israel has assaulted the bodies and minds of Palestinians—maiming and cannibalizing organs and stunting growth by withholding nutrients. None of the charges can survive genuine scrutiny and would have, in an earlier age, been dismissed as typical of either overwrought polemics or

even worse, paranoid conspiracy theories. Instead, they are accorded high academic praise and awards.<sup>6</sup>

Consider, once again, the term genocide. Commonly associated with the extermination of the Jews and one reason for strong international support for Israel's founding in 1948, genocide is now defined as a Zionist impulse. A word that once engendered sympathy for Jews has been contaminated by becoming a rubric describing Israeli policies and a reason to fear Jewish power. The vocabulary is so baked into campus discourse on Israel that students think this is both a permanent feature of the way people always spoke about the founding of the Jewish state and an example of scholarly advancement. Although still largely confined to the campus, the discourse has already infiltrated the media and begun its migration to the political system as today's college graduates become tomorrow's legislative assistants and state department civil servants.

Words have histories. If meanings are not stable, they are altered for a reason.<sup>7</sup> Words are also social constructs whose change agents are people who speak or write and listen. Because language performs critical functions, patterns of speech are contagious. While transmitting information and clarifying thought, language unites and divides, shaping not only how we think but also how we feel. In this sense, questions of language are questions about the distribution of power. They signal affiliation enabling the formation of alliances. They empower not only because they claim to provide insight about events or developments but also because they generate calls to action. Words are often a pledge of allegiance disclosing more about political loyalties than about policy positions. Not surprisingly, then, language can be a potent instrument for exposing weakness in a society and for bringing together people who may have little in common except a shared belief that the present order is corrupt and that it yields a moral imperative to take it down.

Today much of the academic discourse on the Middle East Conflict has distorted the truth by transforming even the very idea of what constitutes a "fact". "Facts" are stitched into a narrative often to effect loyalty rather than to verify assertions. Think of "Deir Yassin", the name for Palestinian suffering before the *naqba*. Millions of people across the globe know something of this village as the site of a massacre and the bonfire it made of Israel's moral authority in waging its war for independence. Because the story of rape and the slaughter of innocents is critical to the new academic discourse on the Jewish State, what happened in the village lies behind a firewall of proclaimed sanctity rarely subjected to sustained scholarly scrutiny. Deir Yassin was taken for granted either as illustrative of Zionism's core savagery

against a defenseless population or as an example of the atrocities that inevitably follow when a poorly trained terrorist group is deployed into a battle zone.

No one disputed the facts until Israeli historian Eliezer Tauber undertook a meticulous investigation of the battle, ending up telling a very different story from the familiar one made sacred to the Palestinian cause. Tauber calls the massacre a myth constructed to arouse sympathy among Arabs and convince Arab heads of state to order their troops onto the battlefield to wage war against Israel. But outcries of butchery, which inflated the scale of casualties and distorted the injuries, tapped into the deep fears of Palestinians, many of whom fled for their lives rather than risk the slaughter they anticipated by standing their ground.

Tauber's book does not remove the stain of war crimes from the Irgun forces fighting in the village, but it does contest the scope of the brutality in that fateful attack in April 1948. Even to raise questions about whether a massacre occurred at Deir Yassin, however, is considered a transgression as Tauber learned from the several American university presses refusing to publish his book, one deeming it "unfit for English readers".<sup>8</sup> This presumed intractable conflict over land has been substantially reconceived as a war over words. Although the hegemonic discourse claims to be opening up new and better ways of understanding the Conflict, it has had a profound impact on closing down the possibility of following the best available evidence. An academic perspective, now expected to guide action and render moral judgments, cannot serve as a robust agenda for research.

The more we think of how this academic trend gained ground, the more we think, first and foremost, of Edward Said whose book *Orientalism*<sup>9</sup> became the foundational text for a scholarly approach that worked a powerful effect across the humanities and social sciences. Insisting that both scholars and scholarship must be liberated from a presumed "racialized" understanding of the world, Said claimed he could show how the West both created the Orient as a proving ground for its own identity and forged a discourse to sustain its imperial domination over a large part of the globe.

To Said, imperialism was the great moral monstrosity that had escaped both serious academic interrogation and a full moral reckoning. It may have quickened the pace of European commerce, but it also siphoned off wealth and freedom from peoples too weak to resist the onslaught of modern cannons or the indelible branding in consciousness and culture by that other canon. A large portion of the globe was presumed to exist primarily for the convenience and enrichment of Europe and America. For centuries, Europeans and Americans, according to Said, hid the magnitude of their

oppression and violence behind improvised rationales that celebrated their power to encircle the globe as bringing enlightenment and civilization to peoples depicted as “savages”. Language empowered imagery, and imagery sustained empire. But if language was critical to maintaining power, it could serve as an instrument for dismantling it as well. By affirming the links between knowledge and power, Said instilled in generations of scholars the faith that deconstructing Western discourse could finally and fully delegitimize imperialism, because established authorities required command over language as much as over the means of production and violence.

The academic mission, reimagined as essentially a form of social and political action, was charged to uncover what larger events and developments mean to ordinary people—stories that would flow from the voiceless and powerless. The validity of an argument or claim would now depend more on who originates it than on whether it possesses evidentiary support. It did not take long for such cutting-edge academic trends to turn their fury against Israel and to gain widespread acceptance. The media that denounces assaults on truth and reason incorporates what has become a vocabulary that has acquired the status of dogma, casting Israel as a country disposed to violence and bigotry. One obvious illustration is striking. The Walt/Mearsheimer book on the “Israel Lobby”, criticized for shoddy research when published, is now incorporated into articles as conventional wisdom—with all its rebutted arguments intact—dominating the way people talk and write about Israel.<sup>10</sup> Renaming Israel has re-imagined Palestinian interests as part of a universal struggle to advance justice for people made victims by those wielding power.

The ironies produced by this new set of terms for the Conflict abound. Take, for example, the current language of human rights whose gravitational pull now denies Israel the blessings it once conferred on the establishment of a Jewish state as advancing the cause for justice. Thus, is Zionism, more judged than understood, condemned as racist. The esteem bestowed on words and deeds associated with the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict is a function of their capacity not to promote peace, coexistence, or reconciliation but rather to signal affinity with a global progressive politics.

To read newspapers and magazine articles on the Israel-Palestine Conflict, to watch the violence broadcast on cable news, or to toggle through social media for information is to be bombarded by negative images of Israel and on more than one occasion of Jews. How an attack is initially framed, of course, gives it disproportionate influence on how it will be remembered. Reporters, fumbling their way through platitudes, produce a script rather than an analysis. There is a power attributed

to the right words in the right order or captured at the right angle for YouTube.

If the narrative amplifies sentiments in American culture that foster sympathy with the poor and powerless, it is accepted, turning unverified pronouncements into unverified reports that ignore or omit the dynamics explaining the vector of developments. Echoes of pain and loss can carry a narrative across oceans and continents, drawing false analogies between disparate groups or movements or histories that may expand allies but do nothing to deepen understanding of what caused their suffering and dislocation. The acrobatic logic interweaves fact and fiction spinning elaborate associative webs that deploy metaphors to fashion linkages between people, politics, and history with nothing in common except their calls for a reckoning with the powers presumably denying them justice.

The alchemy transforming language and politics works with astonishing speed through the categorical paradigm known as intersectionality. What began as an attempt to point out the dual sources of subservience and bias exacted upon Black women has become a voguish theory linking together all so-called marginal identities who are presumably victims of a common structure of power. These days, it has become trendy to see Palestinians as suffering from the same kind of racism experienced by African-Americans. The comparison has been recycled in election campaigns,<sup>11</sup> rap recordings, and statements drafted by progressives in their marches against recently enacted anti-immigration policies.<sup>12</sup>

Proponents of the Academic Boycott constantly call for banning Zionists from participation in progressive movements and activities. Looking at these analogies from the point of view of history or of politics, they make little sense. African-Americans share a system of government with the people accused of indifference or antagonism to their plight. A common set of constitutional principles, however disputed their interpretations and applications, can serve as a warrant for meeting demands.

Most Palestinians are not Israeli citizens; the majority are governed by either Hamas or by the Palestine Authority. Since 1997, the latter has had full jurisdiction over approximately 98% of Palestinians in the West Bank. In Gaza, Hamas has ruled since ousting Fatah and by extension the Palestine Authority in its 2007 coup. Apart from their proclaimed status as victims, Palestinians and African Americans have little in common and would derive no particular benefit from joining together for a common strategy to improve their lives. What might work in Gaza is likely to be outlawed in the United States. The Israeli experience that resonates in America is fighting terror, but it is often used as the basis for charging the

Jewish state with complicity in African American deaths by police, implying that racism on one continent can feed it on another. Progressives, intending to disrupt the once solid embrace of Israel by America's liberals, seize on race as a way of staining the idea of self-determination for Jews. What seemed obvious in the past—that American Jews would support Israel—has become complicated, particularly as the twentieth century history of Jews slides down in the scale of consciousness and partly because of the way ideas circulate and are evaluated. Adding up the “likes” won by a position is much less time-consuming than interrogating it for its logic and for its accuracy.

### REVISIONIST SCHOLARSHIP

Like others in academia, I am often drawn to revisionist interpretations, particularly if they emerge from raising questions that have never been posed or when they produce analyses more sophisticated than those of the past and make visible what has been suppressed or ignored but was always there. However, it is also important to consider whether the emphasis on a global discourse of injustice seemingly felt everywhere prevents the possibility of recognizing difference and whether it erases what is genuinely distinctive about the issues under scrutiny. Turning a presumed historical analysis into a morality tale of good and evil may shift public discourse, amplify its reach, or affect perhaps how even Israelis think about their country and imagine its future. But if it doesn't fit Israel's past or its development—nor explain why Palestinians have been victims of abuse in almost every jurisdiction in which they have lived—it should not be embraced in an academy upholding the standards normally set for scholarly work.

Academic essays not only advance arguments, they also join a conversation that tests the values and logic of the ideas put forward. Conclusions are expected to follow from evidence. Disrupting received wisdom is welcome as long as it results from examining the available facts. Academic work is not the same as political advocacy nor should a classroom become a staging ground for personal opinions or for expressing moral outrage.

Look closely at these linguistic transgressions and you will see how they have magnified their power by drawing on terms associated with powerful struggles across the globe linking them into what is rapidly becoming a conventional discourse. The only way to demonstrate the distortions generated through this discourse is to address its linguistic parts. Incorporating terms from global struggles for civil and human rights is calculated to sound an alarm about Israel as not simply the trigger for regional strife but also the



source of a savagery that radiates widely across land and sea. Following a formulaic pattern comprising books and articles that feed each other in a cul-de-sac-like echo chamber, the vocabulary delivers up a Jewish state that is, by its very nature, violent and racist.

Language matters. Intended to make sense of developments that are baffling, it generates terms that are expected to offer insight into why things happen. But if words construct imagination, they also limit it. Consider the word occupation, always modified by the word Israel, to refer to the lands on the West Bank conquered in the June 1967 War. With regard to the occupation, Israel may now be just as much its direct object as its adjective. How? Let me count the ways:

1967 offered both Israelis and Palestinians the chance to redefine their respective relationships to their homeland and to one another. At the troubled start of 1967, it was impossible to see a war triggered by Egypt, instigated by a Soviet lie—the “fake news” that Israeli troops were mobilizing in the north to attack Syria. In May 1967, Arabs were poised for victory and redemption. By the end of the first week in June, they were immersed in a massive defeat, their myths dismantled by reality, the gap between hope and betrayal narrowing with every official statement. All of this was symbolized by the unimaginable collapse of Arab Nationalism, once deemed the only idea powerful enough to liberate the region from the baleful spoils of colonialism—and by the weakening of its most admired exponent—Gamal Abd al-Nasser, president of what was then still called the United Arab Republic. A region once characterized as Arab was consumed by its own rhetoric and is today perennially in trouble, scrambling to keep up with its non-Arab neighbors and barely containing the violence and disorder it produces domestically.

The War that administered such a blistering defeat to Egypt, Syria, and Jordan and tripled the size of Israel’s landmass, also gave the Jewish state responsibility for more than a million Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The joy and comfort in military victory soon turned into what felt like a chronic entanglement with more landmines than exits on Israel’s yellow brick road to power. The idea of returning some land in return for some peace produced a breakthrough with Egypt but ran up against dead ends with other Arab countries until the 1993 Oslo Accords promised a full resolution of the Conflict. The Oslo Accords were intended to generate an agreement to resolve the many-layered Israel-Palestine disputes. Negotiations would determine the borders for two-states for two people, finding ways to share Jerusalem and bring relief and resolution to the refugee issue. The principle of step-by-step diplomacy

and implementation was supposed to build trust between people who, too often, encountered one another across battle lines. But discussions widened the gaps rather than bridged them as Palestinians proved reluctant to surrender their right of return and resistance while Israelis found it increasingly difficult to imagine a Jerusalem divided into two capitals or to withdraw from areas that could serve as launching pads for increasingly lethal attacks.

The notion of two states for two peoples, initially embraced with messianic hope, was soon subjected to withering criticism and ultimately so battered by outbreaks of violence that negotiations, themselves, deepened grievances. Yet, talk of the Occupation with Israel the sole modifier persists in implying that the country, on its own, can bring it to an end despite tidal waves of terrorism unleashed by Palestinians. Calls to stop the Israeli Occupation have become more a mantra than a realistic proposal—as impossible to discard as to implement. And while Palestinian and Israeli politicians confront each other as enemies or rivals, their populations ride together on buses or trains, shop in one another's stores or markets, interacting as if such interactions are commonplace, and they are between attacks. Because there has never been a breakdown of public order, no matter how much they fear one another, Palestinians and Israelis are constantly pushed back together.

Rather than build solidarity around the idea of coexistence and the benefits compromise would bring to Palestinians and Israelis now having to cope with the burdens of military service or with periodic violence, political forces typically pull toward stalemate. Political leaders, from both sides, stress differences apparently believing the current situation better than any of the realistic alternatives that fall short of their original high hopes and ambitions. They focus on identity to divert attention away from what would surely be divisive discussions on the measures necessary for an agreement to be forged. For Palestinians, identity politics brings Palestinians new allies who share the same feelings of powerlessness and victimization. It also postpones the serious thinking required to develop a strategy to deal with the problems certain to arise if and when Palestinians gain national sovereignty. Believing they are denied agency by a power structure dominated by Israel becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when the only response is one or another form of resistance and when alliances are calibrated in terms of intersectional precedence. Because Palestinians have incorporated the *naqba* as a core element of identity, they have found it impossible to separate history from memory. Goals for their future are often cast as romantic and unrealistic visions to restore a long-vanished order.

Israelis, too, are drawn towards stalemate. As the Palestinian issue festers, it takes its toll on the country's political system. Governing coalitions are often stitched together to avoid rather than address a problem that, given past efforts, has much more potential for failure than success. The political parties that list brokering a peace treaty with Palestinians as their priority have been diminished both in parliamentary representation and in popular opinion. In a sense, the so-called "doves" have won their argument because almost everyone embraces the idea of exchanging land for peace even as it has become a source of political trouble and fragmentation, particularly for parties on the right. Although most endorse the two-state principle, few see ways to apply it without endangering Israeli lives.

1967 radically altered Israel's relationship with its homeland. In the first months after the 1967 War, Israelis rushed to reconstitute communities destroyed in 1948. Some founded settlements in response to terror attacks. Moreover, the country's postwar economic expansion enabled many Israelis—aided by government subsidies—to build their dream house and recast their culture from a celebration of a Spartan labor ideal into a nation that could offer more liberty to its citizens in their quest for material prosperity and for communities of like-minded families with the kinds of local services—religious or not—congruent with their life styles. The word settlement—once summoning up images of a return to the soil, to agricultural labor, and to a work imbued with an egalitarian ethic—became the incarnation of a new spirit of individualism taking over the society. And when the Israeli Government renamed the West Bank Judea and Samaria, stamping the territories with Biblical names, it invented a language to symbolize that the settlement mission was as Jewish as it was Zionist.

The settlement enterprise, then, is far more diverse and complicated than the standard settler colonialist rubric can admit. To view settlements as simply a crime and a major threat to resolving the Conflict should propel Palestinians forward to a final agreement before the land is swallowed up and no longer available for their official map. But the more settlements are condemned, the more gridlock becomes the default stance of Palestinians who rush to return to their ideological comfort zone instead of to the bargaining table to hammer out an accord. For Israelis, settlements are places more than a generation calls home. Many helped design their homes and the educational curricula for their children's schools. No one, perhaps, knew that building these towns and villages would become a fault line for both Israelis and Palestinians that pulled them apart and pushed them together. No category of analysis that fails to tap into the differences between the

cosmic rhetoric and the very normal behavior truly grasps how the Conflict structures peoples' lives.

To return this essay to where it began is to acknowledge that of all the catchwords, none has done more to pervert the scholarly study of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict than genocide. To conjure up an image of Israel as a Nazi-like state requires so many inversions of language: the country is condemned now not by might or power but rather by false analogies, misplaced modifiers, and mistakenly applied theories. Once the idea that a Zionism built on a logic of elimination, is accepted, its law-like application means that the movement to build a Jewish homeland and state always sought to eliminate its Arab inhabitants from the land of Israel. Except Zionism was not predisposed to eliminating the so-called indigenous population. In fact, Hebrew literature in the early years of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine is saturated with romantic notions of the Arab as overflowing with life in contrast to the Diaspora Jew who is typically represented as withered and dying. Zionists aimed at bringing a new civilization to the Diaspora Jew and not to the Arabs they encountered in Palestine. In short, because Zionism focused on transforming the Jewish people, this was a cultural program that, at least initially, was more than willing to make room for so-called "others".

It is equally important to ask if this vocabulary has uncovered anything new about the history of Zionism and of Israel's development. Charges that Israeli military forces carried out a strategy of ethnic cleansing in 1948 have been refuted by the scholars who have subjected the archival material to the most intense examination.<sup>13</sup> Those who insist on leveling these charges typically do so without mentioning that Palestinian flight (forced or not) occurred during a war with a devastating loss of life for both Jews and Arabs. Even accounts of material losses must be discounted if they fail to explore whether Palestinians owned the lands they worked or the homes they left behind. It is also no linguistic strain to ask whether victory for the forces battling the Jewish state would have made an Arab Palestine independent.

Marked so heavily with charges of genocide, this perspective falls short even in its application to post-1967 developments. Palestinian educational institutions have expanded as has the level of the population's literacy since that June war.<sup>14</sup> Arabic is now a required language in Israeli schools, a measure introduced by a political party aiming to annex parts of the territories conquered in 1967. What has now become the standard revisionist template cannot account for the continued willingness of the very official agencies of that purportedly "racialist" ideology to divide Palestine into two sovereign states—one for Jews and one for Arabs with borders fixed either by Britain

as Mandatory authority in 1937, by the United Nations in 1947, or through the several Israeli proposals for ending the conflict during the recent Oslo process negotiations.

More importantly, joining scholarly revisionism to political activism has produced no insights not disclosed through old fashioned research methods and access to archives holding newly declassified records. Traditional academic work had already liberated Israeli scholars from subscribing to a simple narrative of their country's state-building experience as fulfilling only a progressive national mission. Many newly minted Israeli academicians—some calling themselves new historians, others critical sociologists—probed the Zionist nation-building project by examining its impact on Palestine's Arab population, Middle Eastern immigrants, and on the lives and experiences of women long before the new vocabulary commanded serious attention. In fact, the generation that witnessed Israel's founding debated almost every aspect of the country's public policy even if these heated discussions were not always translated into English or incorporated into the published material reaching bookstores in the West.

Finally, nothing has done more to diminish the incentive among Palestinians for political calculation than the idea that Zionist successes automatically translate into Arab failures. Here is how Neguib Azuri put it in 1905:

Two important phenomena, of the same nature, yet opposed, which have not yet attracted anyone's attention, are evident at this moment in Asian Turkey: These are the awakening of the Arab nation and the veiled effort of the Jews to reconstitute on a very large scale the ancient monarchy of Israel. These two movements are destined to fight until one vanquishes the other. The fate of the entire world will depend on the final outcome of this battle between these two peoples representing two contrary principles.<sup>15</sup>

As much as a hardening of the perspective supposedly imposes an indelible stamp of guilt on Zionism and Israel, it also injects in Palestinians a brooding pessimism and passivity suggesting that they cannot control their own destiny because they confront an enmity so implacable and evil in character that without total international mobilization, they will never be given the independence enjoyed by other nations.

When there were more Zionists leaving Palestine than arriving or when the number of dunams owned and plowed by Zionists was miniscule, Arab writers urged absolute and violent resistance to a movement whose success they claimed meant total defeat and dispossession. Warning that "Israel is

so close to succeeding in its quest for universal domination,” Naguib Azuri elevated the Zionism of 1905 into the kind of global menace imagined only by those steeped in superstitions about the power of Jews.<sup>16</sup> By turning their confrontation with Zionism into a clash of civilizations, the dominant narrative may have denied Palestinians the chance to cultivate the capacity for flexible responses and for the creation of a politics capable of responding to shifting circumstances. Echoes of this earlier narrative can be found in the current way of thinking that reframes the Palestinian narrative to accommodate global forces and weakens the idea of Palestinians, themselves, forging their own national future.

The power of this narrative of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, the force that makes it resonate in academia, comes through a distillation of history. But by straining out the awkward facts such as the rejection by Palestinians not by Zionists of a division of the country into two states for two people, the perspective subordinates the historical record beneath a narrative that ignores facts, avoids logic, and closes rather than opens debate, thereby undermining the core principles of the academic mission. The deepest problem with this approach, however, is that it deprives Palestinians of access to their actual history<sup>17</sup> and to the real options available for advancing their political interests. The question never raised by this approach is whether total opposition to Zionism became a self-fulfilling strategy for failure. Would sharing the land when Zionists accepted much more equitable proposals for dividing the territory—as in 1937 or 1947 or even in 1949—represent a road not taken and one that would have given Palestinians a base for their own nation-state? Engendering fatalism about politics as the art of the possible while making a totem of the impossible may satisfy the conceit of leaders but does nothing to improve the lives of ordinary people.

## THE ESSAYS AND THE DECOMPOSITION OF LANGUAGE

As much as the essays that follow are about words, they are also about history and politics. For that reason, the first section focuses on terms—indigeneity, colonialism, occupation, and terrorism, and apartheid—claiming to disclose new aspects of the Conflict’s history and of the mechanisms deployed to perpetuate it. The terms suggest, however, that a vocabulary of historical explanation has been transposed into a crude moral idiom. The second section examines terms coopted from the modern Jewish experience—holocaust, refugee, human rights, Zionism, and Israel

Lobby—that have been projected on to the experience of Palestinians. Finally, the special issue evaluates concepts that are decidedly post-modern inventions—Islamophobia, intersectionality, pink washing—that aim to rally allies around a new logic of ethical reasoning. The last essay deals with the contorted reasoning required to apply the words taken for granted as expanding democracies in the late twentieth century—“civil society”—to the organizations whose actions are not simply funded but also programmed by foreign governments and whose ties to movements thriving on acts of terror are well-known. Such linkages are more likely to deny than preserve the autonomy believed central to a civil society that forms the basis for democracy and for the spirit of active political engagement.

An academic jargon draped in scholarly prestige implies that Israel's founding in 1948 is not settled history. The intention is not simply to raise ethical questions but also to suggest the possibility of righting what is taken for granted as an historical wrong. Those who subscribe to this approach are not talking about historical facts that continue to weigh heavily on present circumstances, which is to say the persistence of Israel's unresolved conflicts with Palestinians, problems that affect the country's politics and compromise its democracy. The implication that shadows this discourse is that history can be reversed, registering a kind of magical thinking more fit for novels than for classrooms. More than 70 years since its founding and more than a half century since the war that reconfigured the Jewish state and not incidentally, the entire Middle East, raising the same questions, albeit cast in new forms, opens a chasm between language and reality.

The essays before you thus offer potent insight into the difference between how words operate as an echo chamber advocating a cause and how they can function when they strive for exactitude and when they aim for a reliable assessment of a complex situation. What motivates these essays is the conviction that conclusions must be supported by facts and tested in accordance with the principles long undergirding academia and the ones primarily responsible for bestowing legitimate praise and power on it. This collection, then, is as important for academia as it is for the study of the Israel-Palestine Conflict.

What brings together this particular group of scholars? Certainly not ideology or a common political agenda. My guess—and it is a guess because I never asked—is that the contributors hold varied views on Israeli society and on its policies. What unites the group is the shared notion that language is the most accurate measure of mind and that not only do words matter but also the right words because they shape how people think, read, and how

they are moved to action. Taken together, the essays should return sanity to the discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict within and without the classroom, and most importantly, contribute to restoring its academic integrity.

## NOTES

1. This essay, as well as the entire special issue, is the result of a collaborative effort with Miriam Elman and Asaf Romirowsky. I am grateful for all they have done to turn an idea into a publication.

2. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, 1992), see Book VIII.

3. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1973).

4. George Orwell, *1984* (New York, 1961).

5. Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (New York, 2018).

6. Cary Nelson and Russell Berman, "Anti-Zionism and the Humanities: A Response to Saree Makdisi," *Fathom*, April 2018. See also Peter Reitzes, "Opinion: Duke University Press and the Demonization of Israel," *Herald Sun*, 22 November 2017 and Mark G. Yudof and Ken Waltzer, "Majoring in Anti-Semitism at Vassar," *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 February 2016; David Berger, "Academic Prize for Scholarly Form of Blood Libel," *The New York Jewish Week*, 27 September 2018. Berger writes: "Even amidst the moral and intellectual wreckage that litters the academic landscape with respect to Israel, this award [Puar Jasbir's book has just been awarded the National Women's Studies Association Alison Piepmeier Book Prize for scholarship focusing on feminist disability studies] stands out.

7. John McWhorter, *Words on The Move: Why English Won't—and Can't—Sit Still*, (New York, 2017).

8. Miriam Elman includes all the articles about the book in her essay, "Silencing History: US Publishers shun Book 'Ending Deir Yassin Myth,'" *Legal Insurrection*, 18 March 2018.

9. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979); and *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1994).

10. Thomas L. Friedman wrote in his *New York Times* column on 13 December 2011: "I sure hope that Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, understands that the standing ovation he got in Congress this year was not for his politics. That ovation was bought and paid for by the Israel lobby."

11. Allison Kaplan Sommer, "This Young Progressive Could Become the First Palestinian-American Congresswoman," *Ha'aretz*, 5 August 2018, on the candidacy of Rashida Tlaib. Michael R. Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestinian Transnational Countries of Color* (Stanford, 2018) examines how Black Power leaders saw the



Palestinian issue as a way to reshape the civil rights movement and the distribution of power controlling it.

12. See George Washington political science Professor Marc Lynch's blog—Abu Aardvark—on 15 September 2014 where he talks about a rap called *Checkpoint: From Ferguson to Gaza*. The Palestinian Rap group called DAM has linked to the African-American album, *Fear of a Black Planet* recorded by Public Enemy.

13. Benny Morris, "Israel Conducted No Ethnic Cleansing in 1948," *Ha'aretz*, 9 October 2016.

14. Amir Grinstein, "Education and Hope in the Arab World: The Successful, Underdiscussed Case of the Palestinians," *Times of Israel*, 23 September 2016.

15. Neguib Azuri, *Le Reveil de la nation arabe dans l'Asie Turque* (Paris, 1905), V.

16. Laura C. Robson, "Najib Azuri's *Le Reveil de la Nation Arabe*: A Reception in History," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31.3 (2011): 644–57.

17. David P. Little, "Three Arab Critiques of Orientalism," *Muslim World* 69.2 (1979): 110–31.

PROF. DONNA ROBINSON DIVINE is Professor Emerita of Jewish Studies and Government at Smith College. Her recent publications include: "Palestinians," in *Handbook of The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in the Middle East* (Washington, D.C., 2019), "The World of Our Founders: Being Jewish in Palestine After Balfour," *Fathom Summer* (2017); "Citizenship and Democracy in Israel," in *Essential Israel*, ed. Ilan Troen and Rachel Fish (Bloomington, IN, 2017); "Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: A Contest in Word and Deed," in *Routledge Handbook of Muslim-Jewish Relations*, ed. Joseph Meri (New York, 2016).