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Good-and-evil caricatures of the Israel-Palestine conflict are costing lives

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The Telegraph (Opinion)

March 4, 2013 - 12:00am

<http://www.americantaskforce.org/node/add/daily-news> ^[1]

March 5, 2013

Article Author(s): Matt Hill

Media Outlet: The Telegraph

Article Type: Opinion

Date: March 4, 2013

Source Link(s): <http://www.americantaskforce.org/node/add/daily-news> ^[1]

Is there another issue that generates as much sound and fury as the Israel-Palestine conflict? Last month **George Galloway attracted derision** ^[2] for storming out of an Oxford University debate when he discovered one of his opponents was an Israeli. The fallout continued into last week, with students at the university voting on whether to join a blanket boycott of Israeli companies and institutions. **The motion was defeated** ^[3], but not before causing a storm of outrage that included hate mail, accusations of racism in both directions, and **headlines in the national press** ^[4].

As portrayed by diehard supporters of both Israel and the Palestinians, the conflict is set in a land that bears less resemblance to the modern Middle East than the Wild West of early Hollywood, with its good-versus-evil tales of cowboys and Indians. Certain of the justice of their cause, both sides shut their ears to the other's views, resulting in a vicious circle of solipsism. Instead of a debate, there are two echo chambers, airlocked against doubt and nuance.

This is because the argument is an extension of the conflict itself. The Israel-Palestine struggle has always been as much a war of narratives as of tanks and missiles. Did **the Palestinian refugees of 1948** ^[5] leave their homes voluntarily or at Israeli gunpoint? When Israel conquered the West Bank and Gaza in **the Six-Day War** ^[6], was it acting in aggression or self-defence? Do the remains of **the First Jewish Temple** ^[7] lie beneath the Golden Dome in the heart of Jerusalem? These debates aren't just the preserve of historians: they are thrashed out in the summit rooms where Israelis and Palestinians meet to try and

resolve their century-old disagreement.

Both sides filter the facts through the lens of a simplified historical narrative that is all the more self-serving for being almost, but not quite, true. Israelis see the conflict as the latest phase in the Jewish people's battle for survival against implacable foes. And Arabs see the conflict through the prism of colonialism, with Israel a reincarnation of the Western powers who for many years humiliated and exploited them.

Once you've accepted the logic of either of these stories, each new fact falls neatly into place like a mosaic tile. During **the Second Intifada** [8], Israelis saw suicide bombings as proof the Palestinians were more interested in bloodshed than peace; for Palestinians, the attacks showed their increasing desperation under an unyielding occupation. Once the bombings stopped, pro-Palestinians said the newfound quiet showed their side's readiness to crack down on violence and seek peace; pro-Israelis said it proved the occupation was working.

There are real-world consequences to this willful blindness. One of the more depressing episodes in the modern peace process occurred when **Al Jazeera leaked thousand of official records of negotiations** [9], which showed the Palestinians had been prepared to make far-reaching concessions for the sake of peace. But instead of demanding that Israel meet them halfway, anti-Israel journalists **whipped up a storm** [10] over Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas's "**betrayal**" [11] of his people – forcing him to back away from compromise on sensitive issues like Jerusalem and refugees.

On university campuses and in the media, the conflict's racial dimension gives the discussion a particularly nasty edge. It's true that a few loathsome anti-Semites hide their hate under the "pro-Palestinian" banner. But that doesn't excuse the way Israel's apologists so readily resort to smearing their opponents as anti-Jewish – a charge that anybody who publicly criticises Israel soon gets used to. Not that the Left is any stranger to such tactics, with anyone who defends the Jewish character of Israel accused of supporting racial supremacism. While one side trumpets that **Zionism equals racism** [12], the other insists that **anti-Zionism is racism** [13].

None of this means we ought to throw up our hands and simply split the blame equally between the two sides. But some simple principles can help introduce much-needed sanity to the debate. Most fundamentally, we must see that neither side has a monopoly on justice. Israel is fighting a just war of self-defence against Palestinian terror, and an unjust war for the conquest of the occupied territories. And the Palestinians are fighting a just war against the occupation, and an unjust war against Israeli civilians inside the 1967 lines. Both Israelis and Palestinians deserve to live in peace and security in a state of their own – not because they're angels, but because they're people who have nowhere else to go.

The great Israeli writer **Amos Oz** [14] has called the Israel-Palestine conflict "a tragedy in the ancient and most precise sense of the word: a clash between right and right". He could just as easily have called it a dogfight between wrong and wrong. Either way we must do away with our caricatures of this conflict, and attempt to see the messy reality for what it is. Because in this game of cowboys and Indians, the casualties are real.

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