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Palestinians and Israelis must be taught the truth

Media Mention of Hussein Ibish in The National - April 11, 2014 - 11:00pm

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Palestinians and Israelis must be taught the truth

[Hussein Ibish](#)[2]

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It is a universal human impulse to shrink from uncomfortable truths. People instinctively only want to hear what reinforces their existing world views and their collective identities, which can be unbearably fragile. Therefore many deliberately prefer myth over reality, ignorance to knowledge, and the warm cocoon of self-satisfaction – especially the supposed moral authority that attaches to victimhood – instead of empathy and understanding.

Cultural leadership requires disrupting such impulses. Political power is more easily gained and maintained by pandering to the lowest common denominator. But no compatriots are more valuable than those who decline to tell their society what they want to hear, and insist instead on telling them what they need to hear.

Mohammed S Dajani Daoudi, a professor at Al-Quds University in occupied East Jerusalem, is the latest groundbreaking figure to champion the virtue of historical truth over the seductive allure of national dogma. As so often befalls those who challenge easy and convenient attitudes, Prof Dajani is facing an angry backlash when he deserves thanks and respect.

His “transgression” was to take 30 Palestinian students to Krakow and Auschwitz-Birkenau to learn about the history of Jews in Europe and especially the Holocaust, while an Israeli professor took a similar number of Jewish students to Dheishe refugee camp in occupied Bethlehem to learn about the Palestinian experience, particularly the Nakba and the dispossession and exile of the refugees.

As word of this project, which took place in March, spread in Palestinian society, Prof Dajani has faced a wave of angry denunciations. He’s been threatened and called a “traitor,” a “normaliser,” and similar epithets. Al-Quds University distanced itself by saying he was acting in his private capacity. He has received some Palestinian support, but not enough.

Prof Dajani, who has a deep history of Palestinian nationalist activism, has long advocated the necessity of teaching about the Holocaust and its “universal truths” in Palestine. His points are unassailable. Historical truth has merit simply as truth. Palestinians deserve to know the truth. Palestinian students, in particular, have a right to be taught the truth.

Moreover, Palestinians have an urgent need to understand the Jewish Israelis who occupy their land and control so much of their daily lives. Palestinians could justifiably claim to understand Israelis all too well at a certain register, through the inescapable lived experience of the occupation.

What’s often missing is a clear sense of the historical experiences that inform Jewish Israeli attitudes about the world, their apparently

bewildering sense of constant insecurity when they both seem, and are, overwhelmingly powerful compared to the Palestinians, and their consequent obsession with security – a motif that is effectively deployed in Israel to rationalise many illegal or indefensible practices, typically at the expense of Palestinian human rights.

Palestinians have nothing to fear from any aspect of the historical truth, particularly events in Europe that were a culmination of centuries of European anti-Semitism that do not have any traditional or deep-seated analogue in either Arab culture or Islamic theology. Palestinians cannot be implicated in any meaningful way in Nazi genocide, so objectively they only stand to benefit from its lessons. But it still can be an unwelcome intrusion on otherwise reassuringly simple assumptions about victims and victimisers.

For some, acknowledging that Jews in Europe were the victims of a monstrous crime is experienced as an evasion or an inversion of moral perceptions moulded by the occupation. It requires those who are oppressive to be nonetheless understood as belonging to a people who have been horribly victimised. It can seem an objectionable distraction, truth notwithstanding.

Prof Dajani challenges Palestinians to recognise the complexities of the Jewish experience, while his colleagues who went to refugee camps ask Israelis to open their eyes to the reality of Palestinian suffering. Angry resistance to such projects is not merely the championing of ignorance. It is a wilful withholding of empathy, and insistence on an imagined binary reality neatly divided between essentially “good” and “bad” people.

Refusal of empathy is distressingly widespread and can be disturbingly casual. On April 9, the prominent Jewish-American writer Norman Podhoretz averred with a twisted nonchalance in The Wall Street Journal, “I have no sympathy – none – for the Palestinians,” because they don’t “deserve any”. He describes Palestinians as harbouring “evil intents” and bizarrely insists they will never recognise Israel, even though the Palestine Liberation Organisation did in 1993.

Mr Podhoretz churlishly spurns the complexities of truth, instead cuddling the comforting fiction of a caricature alternate universe in which – most conveniently – anything Palestinians suffer under occupation by his fellow Jews is unobjectionable because these uniquely wicked people “deserve” absolutely no sympathy. His twisted mentality perfectly echoes that of those Palestinians who are angry with Prof Dajani for insisting Palestinians need to learn about the Holocaust in their schools, just as Israelis need to learn about the Nakba.

By stark contrast, in response to the threats, Prof Dajani declared: “I will not remain a bystander even if the victims of the suffering I show empathy for are my occupiers.”

That is real cultural and educational leadership and integrity. It is principled, brave, intelligent and unflinching. It deserves only support, applause and emulation.

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