

## Construction of the Israeli-Jewish Conflict-Supportive Narrative and the Struggle Over Its Dominance

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*Societies involved in intractable conflicts form a conflict-supporting master narrative that provides justification and explanation of the conflict as a whole as well as narratives about its specific events and relevant persons. Both types of narratives fulfill important functions in satisfying the basic sociopsychological needs of the individuals and the collectives involved, as well as in maintaining a positive image of the society in the international community. In order to fill these needs, the narratives tend to be selective, biased, and simplistic. Moreover, because these narratives are so functional, societies go to extraordinary lengths to maintain their dominance among their own people and internationally. The present article analyzes the specific case of the Israeli-Jewish narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with regard to the methods that are used in the narrative's construction and the ways through which formal authorities strive to preserve its dominance in Israel and in the international community.*

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Societies involved in an intergroup conflict form conflict-supporting narratives that provide justification and explanation of the entire conflict. These narratives play an important role in satisfying basic sociopsychological needs of the individuals and collectives involved, such as the need for a meaningful and coherent understanding of the world and for self-esteem (Bar-Tal, 2013). In order to fulfill this role, the narratives tend to be selective, biased, and simplistic.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, over the years counternarratives may appear. Social groups therefore strive to maintain the hegemony of their own dominant narratives among ingroup members and to persuade the international community of their validity. These efforts are especially prevalent during intractable conflicts that last for many years and

<sup>1</sup> We are not dealing with the important question of whether violent conflicts are morally justified and to what extent the conflict-supporting narratives are biased. We recognize that conflicts differ with regard to their moral justification and the nature of their narratives. The underlying premise of the present article is that a conflict is rarely a clear-cut case of moral forces against purely evil forces and that conflict-supporting narratives in all current intractable conflicts fuel the conflicts and prevent their peaceful resolution.

that involve extreme violence and human losses that inevitably lead to deprivation of basic needs and chronic stress.

This article makes three distinct contributions to the literature on conflict-supporting narratives in intractable conflicts. First, it clarifies the nature of these narratives, in particular their unique themes and the functions they fulfill. Second, it describes the methods that are used in their construction. Finally, it elaborates on the practices that are used in preserving the hegemony of the narratives within the societies and in the international arena.

The above framework will be used to analyze one case of a society involved in intractable conflict as a prototypical example—namely the Jewish-Israeli<sup>2</sup> society engaged in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>3</sup> This example was selected because the authors are well acquainted with this case, being Israelis and having investigated the society in many studies. While we focus on the Israeli conflict-supportive narratives, the underlying premise of the present article is that similar conflict-supportive narratives can also be found among Palestinians—as mirror images of Israeli narratives (see, for example, Gayer, 2012; Rotberg, 2006)—as well as in those of other societies involved in intractable conflicts (e.g., Bar-Tal, 2013).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been ongoing for many decades; it is characterized by a high level of violence and has long been perceived by both sides as a “zero-sum game.” Over the years, several both major and smaller-scale violent encounters have been carried out. At the same time, there have also been some significant attempts to resolve the conflict peacefully, such as the 1993 Oslo agreement. Yet the conflict continues. We believe that the current article points to some important barriers to the resolution of this conflict through the years and that some changes in the dominance of conflict-supportive narratives in both sides are necessary for achieving such a resolution.

### Narratives: Conceptions

The concept “narrative” generally refers to a plot with a clear starting point and end point that provides sequential and causal coherence to an event or a set of events (Bruner, 1990). This term is frequently used in various disciplines, such as history (White, 1987), sociology (E. Zerubavel, 2003), and psychology (Bruner, 1990; Hammack, 2012). The current study focuses on *collective* narratives, which are sequences of historical and current events that describe a community’s collective experiences, contribute content to the shared identity and are embodied in its cultural products (Novick, 1999; Wertsch, 2002; E. Zerubavel, 2003; Y. Zerubavel, 1995).

Another common distinction is between *specific narratives* and *metanarratives*. (Auerbach, 2010). The former focus on specific dates, settings, characters, and events and get their meaning in relation to other narratives of the group (Y. Zerubavel, 1995). Metanarratives, in contrast, consist of holistic, complete, and comprehensive stories that provide a wide ranging outlook on a group’s past, present, or even future. This type of narrative is sometimes labeled “master” narrative (Elkins, 2005; Y. Zerubavel, 1995). In our study, we will mostly use the general term *conflict-supporting narratives*,

<sup>2</sup> From here on, unless otherwise specified, the term “Israeli” or “Israelis” will refer to Israelis-Jews (or their society/media, etc.), the main sector in Israel.

<sup>3</sup> While we focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it should be noted that the Israeli-Jews tend to see this conflict as inseparable from a broader conflict—the Arab-Israeli conflict (Oren, 2010). This probably can be explained in part by the Out-Group Homogeneity Bias, where parties involved in conflicts tend to see all their opponents as homogenous (Brauer, 2001). Therefore, the conflict-supportive narratives of Israeli-Jews about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Palestinians often refer also to the Israeli-Arab conflict and the Arabs, and the reverse (Bar-Tal, 2007b; Podeh, 2002). For example, the Israeli conflict-supportive narrative often referred during the 1950s to the infiltration of Palestinians into Israel (the “Fedayuns”), but the Palestinians were seen mostly as Arabs and the conflict with them as part of the Israeli-Arab conflict (Nets-Zehngut, 2008). Over the years, the centrality of the conflict with the Palestinians in the Israeli conflict-supportive narrative has increased, and the tendency has been to refer to them as a particular entity—although they have still been perceived as part of a coalition of Arab and Muslim groups that aim to destroy Israel.

which includes both the Israeli specific and metanarratives, as they contain the same themes, fulfill the same functions, and are subject to the same principles of construction.

Collective narratives, whether in the form of metanarratives or specific narratives, differ as to the extent of their acceptance within a society. They may be accepted by only subgroups within society, or they may be dominant, that is, accepted by a majority of society members as valid stories that illuminate reality and thereby serve as guidance for further collective practices (Hammack, 2008).

Dominant specific and metanarratives about the past present the *collective memory* of the society, defined as representations of the past that are collectively adopted by the group members (Kansteiner, 2002). Indeed, narratives are among the notable cultural tools available to a society for representing its past (Wertsch, 2002). In addition, collective memory, as the narrative of the past, is constructed to serve the societal needs and goals of the present and not to tell the well-researched history of the society (Novick, 1999; Wertsch, 2002; E. Zerubavel, 2003; Y. Zerubavel, 1995). For example, Eviatar Zerubavel (2003) shows how strategies in collective narrative construction, such as structures of time sequence (e.g., linear, circular, zigzag), separation of historical periods from one another, and presentation of the historical beginning, provide meaning to the past that legitimize present claims and acts, such as an establishment of territorial rights. In addition, dominant metanarratives and specific narratives about the present are the building blocks of the *ethos of the society*. Ethos in general consists of a configuration of narratives with societal beliefs, attitudes, and values that provide a particular orientation to a society to illuminate its present situation and provide an outlook for the future (Bar-Tal 2007a, 2013; Oren, 2009).

Typically, in intractable conflicts, the parties involved construct conflict-supportive metanarratives and specific narratives; these often become hegemonic in the society (Auerbach, 2010). These narratives are expressed within a predominant ethos of conflict and its corresponding collective memory (Bar-Tal, 2007a, 2013). While the ethos of conflict illuminates the present state of the conflict with its future goals (Bar-Tal 2007a, 2013; Oren, 2009), collective memories recount the eruption of the conflict, its course and its major events (Nets-Zehngut, 2011; Tint, 2010).

### *Themes of the Conflict-Supportive Narratives*

Narratives of all types are usually based at least to some degree on real events. Yet they are by nature selective and biased—intended to promote a specific preferred meaning, while ignoring possible undesired perspectives. We suggest that conflict-supporting narratives, whether in the form of metanarratives or specific narratives, emphasize at least one of the eight common themes that can be found in every society involved in intractable conflict. Conceptually, the ethos of conflict contains all of them (Bar-Tal, 2007a, 2013; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998).

We will now present the themes and provide examples from Israeli leaders' speeches, noting the fact that various lines of research have found evidence of these themes in other Israeli social and cultural products too (Bar-Tal, 2007b; Liebman & Don-Yehiya, 1983; Oren, Forthcoming; Podeh, 2002; Shohat, 2010; Y. Zerubavel, 1995). Furthermore, public polls that have been conducted in Israel over the years indicate that these themes have been widely accepted by the Israeli public (see the review at Oren, 1998, 2010).

*Justness of one's own group's goals.* This theme contains the reasons and justifications for the conflictive ingroup's goals. At the same time, it discredits the goals of the rival. Israel's dominant metanarrative (often called the Zionist narrative) which defines its collective memory, tells the story of the return of the Jews to *Eretz-Israel* (Hebrew for "the Land of Israel") after 2000 years of exile to establish a state in their historical homeland. As other national metanarratives, it offers historical, theological, national, political, societal, and cultural justifications for exclusive Jewish rights to the land (Shimoni, 1997).

This theme, which can be found in the Israeli 1948 Declaration of Independence, reappears in leaders' speeches, including recent ones—as in a speech by Israel Premier Benjamin Netanyahu on June 14, 2009. He begins with ancient times and claims that “*The connection of the Jewish People to the Land has been in existence for more than 3,500 years.*” He then specifically refers to land that stood at the core of the conflict in 2000, Judea and Samaria, as the homeland of the Jewish people. He continues by referencing the later periods of exile and the Holocaust, mentioning “the series of disasters that befell the Jewish People over 2,000 years—persecutions, expulsions, pogroms, blood libels, murders, which reached its climax in the Holocaust.” He then notes that “The tragedies that arose from the Jewish People’s helplessness demonstrate very pointedly that we need a protective state.” Yet, he concludes that “The right to establish our sovereign state here, in the Land of Israel, arises from one simple fact: Eretz Israel is the birthplace of the Jewish People” (Netanyahu, June 14, 2009).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Israeli metanarrative did not recognize the existence of a Palestinian people and referred to the Palestinians as “Arabs” (Oren, 2009). Thus it refuted the Palestinians’ claim to their own state. However, this view has changed since the late 1970s (Magal, Oren, Halperin, Bar-Tal, 2013; Oren, 2009). Indeed, in contrast to speeches of Israeli leaders in earlier years, Netanyahu acknowledges the Palestinian people’s existence and their claim to their own state, but still refers to the land as belonging exclusively to Jews:

Within this [Jewish] homeland lives a large Palestinian community... In my vision of peace, in this small land *of ours* two peoples will live freely, side-by-side, as good neighbors with mutual respect. Each will have its own flag, its own anthem, and its own government.” (Netanyahu, June 14, 2009)

*Security.* This theme centers on the dangers that the conflict constitutes to the society, the sources of these threats, as well as the conditions that could overcome them. The Israeli metanarrative presents the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as inseparable from a larger conflict (the Israeli-Arab conflict). By doing so, the Israeli metanarrative tells a story of a nation that is under existential threat, fighting against numerous enemies that are united in their effort to destroy it (see review by Bar-Tal, Jacobson, & Klieman, 1998). This narrative, then, presents a different balance of power than the one that emerges when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is considered separately; it enables Israel to perceive itself as the weaker side and, hence, as we will see below, as the victim. This theme can also be found in specific narratives. In a 1956 speech, for example, David Ben-Gurion claims that the Palestinians (which he called “Fidayun”) were “ordered by the Egyptian dictator to suspend their murderous activities in Israel” and the result is that a “noose which had been prepared for us was tightening and every mean was used to destroy us.”<sup>4</sup>

*Delegitimization.* The opponent is delegitimized through various dehumanizing labels. The Israeli metanarrative accordingly presents the Palestinians as violent and as aiming to exterminate the Jews in Israel, while refusing to seek a peaceful resolution of the conflict (see extensive review by Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005). For example, in a speech in January 2012, Netanyahu claims that “there is a legacy of hate and destruction among the Palestinians starting with the Mufti Haj Amin el-Husseini” who, according to Netanyahu, “was one of the leading architects of the Final Solution” (Netanyahu, January 24, 2012).

*Positive collective self-image.* In contrast to a society’s description of the opponent, this theme depicts one’s own society in glorifying terms. Especially prevalent among positive self-image narratives are redemptive images that tell a story of suffering and success and of the emergence of power

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from (<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/bgsinai.htm>)

and strength out of weakness and persecution. The Israeli metanarrative is a typical example of such a story (Hammack, 2011). For example, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in a 2007 speech refers to “the great miracle of the Jewish people, which clawed its way out of the abyss of the Holocaust to the height of national rebirth” (Olmert, December 3, 2007).

Throughout the years, the Israeli metanarrative has emphasized the moral nature of Israeli society and its army as manifested in specific narratives about specific wars. Not only once, leaders have noted that the Israeli army (IDF) is the most moral in the world. For example, following the 1967 War, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan praises the Israeli army’s morality and claims that “there are not many wars in which the civilian population suffered as little as the Palestinian population in this war” (Lorch, 1993, pp. 1601–1602).

*Collective self-victimhood.* This theme refers to a group’s perception of itself as the sole victim in the conflict. The Israeli metanarrative’s content about victimization is based on Jewish history and the traditional Jewish ethos whereby Jews are seen as victims in a hostile world (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992). Palestinians are viewed as the sole aggressor in the conflict, forcing confrontations upon Israel. As President Shimon Peres says in a 2008 speech regarding Israel’s confrontations with the Palestinians in Gaza, “The Israeli nation defends itself and does not seek war. We do not wish to harm innocent civilians, but we will not let our enemies hurt our civilians” (Zino, December 2, 2008).

*Patriotism.* This theme refers to patriotism—along with all of its expressions of mobilization and sacrifice. The Israeli metanarrative praises citizens’ loyalty and sacrifices for the country and glorifies patriotic models from past and current historical periods of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Ben-Amos & Bar-Tal, 2004; Y. Zerubavel, 1995). Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu refers to this theme in a 2010 speech when he says: “From those who went to the gallows until today, from the ‘30’s through the reality of our current lives, the message of sacrifice and heroism didn’t fall silent” (Netanyahu, March 9, 2010).

*Unity.* This theme refers to the importance of maintaining unity within the society in the face of the external threat—the enemy. The Israeli metanarrative stresses the common heritage of the Jews in Israel and minimizes disputes within Israeli society. Specific narratives about wars and confrontations also support this theme. For example, in his speech following the 2009 confrontation with the Palestinians in Gaza, Olmert refers to the “social solidarity they [Israeli citizens] demonstrated over these past weeks” as “the secret of our strength” (Olmert, January 17, 2009).

*Peace.* This theme refers to peace as the ultimate desire of the society that describes itself as peace loving—a pervasive description in the Israeli metanarrative. For example, in a 2010 speech Netanyahu says:

“The prophets of Israel also introduced to humanity the vision of universal peace—‘the beating of the swords into plowshares’—and this aspiration has been beating in the hearts of our people ever since.” (Netanyahu, February 3, 2010)

Identification of these themes is based on extensive systematic studies of Israeli society (see Bar-Tal, 2007b; Oren 2009, 2010). They are also found to be hegemonic in other societies engaged in intractable conflict such as the Serbs, Kosovars, Albanians, Croats, and Bosnians (MacDonald, 2002), the Hutus in Rwanda (Slocum-Bradley, 2008), as well as Greek and Turkish Cypriots (Papadakis, 1998; Papadakis, Peristianis, & Welz, 2006). Some of these themes (such as positive collective self-image) exist as well in societies that are not engaged in intractable conflict. Yet, the combination of these themes (i.e., positive collective self-image and negative image of the other side), as well as

some specific conflict-related themes (e.g., victimhood), are unique to societies engaged in intractable conflict. In addition, the contents of these eight themes are dominated by the conflict experience.

### *Functions of the Conflict-Supportive Narratives*

The conflict-supportive narratives in general fulfill several important positive functions for a society in intractable conflict. One function is to provide an ideological system for interpreting the reality of the ambiguous situation of the conflict (Bar-Tal, Sharvit, Halperin, & Zafran, 2012; Burton, 1990). More specifically, it explains the goals of the conflict, why the ingroup is in conflict, what challenges it faces, how the conflict erupted, and why it still continues. By providing such a system, the narratives satisfy the epistemic need of humans to have a coherent, organized, and predictable picture of the world in which they live (Baumeister, 1991; Burton, 1990). This need is especially important in times of stress. According to Antonovsky (1987), who studied conflict-related stressful experiences in Israel, the most important factor that contributes to successful coping with traumatic events is a “sense of coherence.”

Conflict-supportive narratives also justify negative acts of the ingroup towards the enemy (Apter, 1997). Themes of a narrative that presents a society’s own goals as justified include portraying itself as a victim and delegitimizing the enemy, thus reducing activation of psychological mechanisms such as feelings of guilt and shame that usually prevent individuals and groups from committing harmful acts (Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009; Bar-Tal & Hammack, 2012; Schori-Eyal, Klar, & Roccas, 2011). As a result, conflict-supporting narratives allow what Bandura (1999) calls “moral disengagement”—a psychological separation from moral considerations and other human safeguards that prevent acts of violence. Thus, such narratives also fulfill the important function of allowing society members to maintain positive self-images as well as positive personal and collective identities, in spite of the violence perpetrated by the ingroup against the rival.

Additionally, themes such as the opponent’s delegitimization as well as the sense of one’s own victimhood and insecurity attune the society to information that signals potential harm and violent confrontations, allowing psychological preparation for the inevitable negative experiences (Antonovsky, 1987). Also, by justifying the goals of the conflict and focusing on delegitimization of the opponent, as well as on self-victimhood, patriotism, and unity, the narratives function as a motivating force that encourages willingness to make sacrifices on behalf of the group (Bar-Tal & Staub, 1997). Finally, conflict-supportive narratives also help to project—before the international community—a positive self-presentation on the one hand and a claim to victimhood on the other (Langenbacher, 2010).

In sum, the narratives play a positive and crucial role in helping society members on both the individual and collective levels to adapt to the harsh, stressful, and demanding conditions of the intractable conflict. Yet, along with all of their positive functions, the narratives also have a fundamental negative consequence: they become stubborn barriers to peacemaking (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011).

### *Construction of the Conflict-Supportive Narratives*

Given the functions of the narratives as discussed above, it is not surprising that historical accuracy is not an overriding imperative in their formulation. Rather, they are, as already noted, often selective, biased, and distortive in their depiction of reality and history (Auerbach, 2010; Baumeister & Hastings, 1997; Tint, 2010). The following are several practices used by societies in the construction of their narratives—including Israeli leaders, officials, and formal and informal institutions (Caspi & Limor, 1992; Dor, 2004; Liebes, 1997; Ram, 2011):

*Reliance on supportive sources.* The conflict-supporting narratives are based on sources (e.g., testimonies, documents, journalists and scholars) that support the narratives’ themes, while sources



that contradict these themes are ignored or minimized (Havel, 2005). This practice has been used extensively over the years in Israel to ensure that the public discourse corresponds with the themes of the conflict-supportive narratives (Caspi & Limor, 1992; Ram, 2011). For example, from the 1960s to 2003, the National Information Center contacted only those scholars, teachers, or journalists whose publications, they assumed, would line up with the Israeli (Zionist) metanarrative and support the eight themes described above (Nets-Zehngut, 2008).

*Magnification of supportive information and marginalization of contradictory information.* Specific events in the history of the conflict that are in line with the conflict-supportive narrative are accorded greater importance, especially those that concern justness of goals, positive self-presentation, self-presentation as the victim in the conflict, and delegitimization of the rival. This process magnifies the importance of these events by discussing them at length, giving them prominent placing (e.g., on front page of newspaper) and bringing them up repeatedly (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997). At the same time, information that contradicts major themes of the conflict-supportive narratives is marginalized by referencing it with minimized importance and infrequently.

Over the years, certain events providing support for the negative characterization of the Palestinians and the positive Israeli self-image have been discussed repeatedly and at length and have been given magnified importance in Israeli publications (Dor, 2004; Liebes, 1997). At the same time, the perceived destructive impact of the conflict on the Palestinians has been minimized. For instance, this can be found in the construction of the specific narrative about the first months of the second Intifada (October–December, 2000)—the Israeli media marginalized the number of Palestinians who were killed by the IDF (327 killed and 1,040 wounded) while emphasizing the claim that the IDF response was restrained (Dor, 2004; Wolfsfeld, 2004).

*Use of framing language.* This practice is based on the assumption that language influences the way in which reality is perceived. Thus, use of language (e.g., euphemisms, understatement) in creating conflict-supporting narratives can influence society members to feel certain emotions that foster continuation of the conflict (Winter, 2010). For example, after the 1967 Six Days War, many Israelis, including official sources (mostly since 1977), referred to the West Bank by its biblical-era name, “Judea and Samaria.” This was meant to promote the metanarrative about the historical link between the Jewish people and this area (Tsur, 2013).

*Omission of contradictory contents.* This practice is used to suppress evidence that contradicts the justness of the ingroup’s goals in the conflict or its moral image (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997). In the 1950s–1960s, for example, Israeli academia and state institutions ignored information suggesting that part of the Palestinian exodus during the 1948 War was an outcome of expulsions carried out by the Jewish/Israeli security forces (Ghazi-Bouillon, 2009), though their personnel were aware of some evidence implying that expulsion did take place (Nets-Zehngut, 2008, 2011, 2013).

In summary, several of the above practices have been exercised during a number of conflicts, at various stages, and in various combinations. These methods may have been used deliberately by ingroup gatekeepers, such as leaders, scholars, and mass media, as well as by formal and informal institutions (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997; Nets-Zehngut, 2008; Tint, 2010). The methods might also have come into play subconsciously in the sense that society members tend to “close their minds” and process information in distorted and selective ways that support the conflict-supportive narratives and ignore alternative narratives (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Members of a group learn the “norms of remembrance”—what they should forget and what they should remember, as well as how information should be remembered. Once these norms are internalized, they operate as automatic psychological filters that control the way the past is viewed (Fivush & Nelson, 2004). It is not surprising, then, that studies have shown that cognitive processes bias encoding and retrieval of information in favor of the narratives that people hold (Ecker, Lewandowsky, & Tang, 2010). It has also been found that high identification of group members with their group leads

to lower recall of historical incidents of violence and hatred conducted by their fellow group members (Sahdra & Ross, 2007).

### The Struggles over the Conflict-Supportive Narrative

From time to time, the hegemony of a dominant conflict-supporting narrative is challenged by a counternarrative that provides an alternative sequence of historical and current events—with new implications that support peacemaking (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004).<sup>5</sup> Two major types of campaigns are carried out against these counternarratives. The first struggle is intrasocietal, where the battle is over maintaining the hegemony of the conflict-supportive narrative among own society members. The second campaign aims to persuade relevant third parties about the truthfulness of the society's conflict-supportive narrative.

#### *Level 1: Intrasocietal Struggle*

Conflict-supportive narratives are disseminated by formal and informal institutions within a social group and appear through various channels of communication such as mass media, ceremonies, and cultural products. They also appear in school textbooks and are expressed by leaders (Bar-Tal, 2013; Tint, 2010). To maintain the hegemony of conflict-supportive narratives and to block counternarratives, societal institutions use various mechanisms. All of the mechanisms described below have been applied over the years in Israel (Caspi & Limor, 1992; Ghazi-Bouillon, 2009; Nave & Yogev, 2002; Nets-Zehngut, 2011; Podeh, 2002):

*Control of information.* First, formal and informal societal institutions may selectively disseminate information about the conflict that sustains the dominant conflict-supportive narrative, while suppressing information that might challenge its hegemony. This is done, for instance, by establishing a central organization that controls the dissemination of the official conflict-supportive narrative and by preventing journalists or monitoring NGOs from entering particular geographical regions (Dixon, 2010). Second, the state might practice censorship of publications whose content challenges the themes of the conflict-supportive narrative (Peleg, 1993). In Israel, censorship is conducted mainly by a special unit in the IDF, based on a law that predates the establishment of Israel. On many occasions, the Censor has blocked the publication of information that contradicted conflict-supportive narratives (Caspi & Limor, 1992; Negbi, 2005). Finally, while attempting to keep the hegemony of a narrative of the past, the state may also prevent exposure of documents stored in state archives—to varying degrees of comprehensiveness—that might contradict the narrative (Brown & Davis-Brown, 1998). In Israel, the 1955 Archives Law prohibits the exposure of archival documents that could damage Israel's security or its foreign affairs for a period of 30 to 50 years. In 2010, the classification of archival documents was extended for a total of 70 years (Protocol of the Supreme Archives Council, 2010).

*Discrediting of counterinformation.* This practice describes information that supports counternarratives and/or their sources (individuals or organizations) as unreliable and damaging to the interests of the ingroup. Occasionally these methods reach the level of delegitimization of the individuals and organizations that originate such information (Berger, 2005). This method was applied, for example, in the late 1960s against members of the NGO *Matspen* ("Compass") that operated during these years and criticized Israel's conduct during the conflict. They were portrayed as traitors who damage the international standing of Israel, and their claims were dismissed as unreliable (Wigoder, 1999).

*Monitoring.* Formal and informal societal institutions may regularly monitor information that is being disseminated to the public sphere (e.g., school textbooks, mass media news, and studies by

<sup>5</sup> Societies may also have counternarratives that advocate further escalation of the conflict, but we focus on counternarratives that support peacemaking.



scholars) in order to identify information that contradicts the conflict-supportive narratives. For example, informal monitoring is currently being conducted in Israel by NGO's such as *Israel AcademiaMonitor*,<sup>6</sup> *IsraCampus*,<sup>7</sup> *Im Tirtzu*,<sup>8</sup> and *NGO Monitor*,<sup>9</sup> which single out scholars, higher education institutions, and other NGOs that they view as undermining the Jewish Zionist narrative.

*Punishment.* When individuals and groups challenge the hegemony of the conflict-supportive narratives, they may face formal and informal sanctions (Carruthers, 2000). During the 1950s and 1960s, for example, the weekly *Haolam Haze* often published narratives that contradicted the Israeli conflict-supportive narratives. The weekly was punished in various ways, including disruption of its paper supply, prevention of its dissemination in IDF bases, and prohibiting public institutions from advertising in its pages (Arel, 2006; Caspi & Limor, 1992).

### *Level 2: International Struggle*

This is an important struggle since the ingroup needs moral, and at times diplomatic, support and tangible assistance (both financial and military) from the international community. Thus, it is not surprising that the ingroup makes every effort to persuade leaders of state and international organizations or societies of the validity and justness of its conflict-supportive narratives (Cronin, 2010). In fact, societies involved in conflicts invest significant resources in this struggle, including the establishment of special organizations for that purpose. In Israel, this task has been carried out over the years by several organizations such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Government Press Office—which is part of the Prime Minister Office—the Ministry of Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs, and the IDF spokesman (see review at Office of the Israeli State Comptroller, 2000). In this section, we will describe the practices and themes that are most common at the international level.

Some practices are used to defend the hegemony of the conflict-supporting narratives both within a society and among the international community. For example, society might control information from zones of violence by prohibiting the foreign press from entering them (Thrall, 2000). A society might also encourage ingroup individuals and NGO's to promote the conflict-supportive narrative by providing guidance and instruction in doing so. In Israel, for example, the Ministry of Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs established a web site aimed at arming Israeli civilians traveling or living abroad with “information and pride in Israel's global contributions and history.”<sup>10</sup>

Another mechanism for maintaining the legitimization of official narratives among the public of a target state involves the activities of a society's own diaspora and lobbying groups within that state—through demonstrations, interviews, and monitoring of the media (Koinova, 2011). The Jewish-American lobby is a typical example of this practice. It was established in the early 1960s and is acknowledged today as the most effective means of advocating Israeli interests and promoting its formal narratives within the U.S. political system (Shain, 2002).

In terms of the content distributed by the channels noted above and in leaders' speeches abroad, the most important theme is justness of one's own goals. Indeed, the theme of the justness of Israeli goals in the conflict has been dominant in Israeli rhetoric in international forums over the years. Israeli leaders and diplomats, when addressing foreign audiences, have generally echoed the same narrative and justifications that they provide to domestic audiences (see, for example, Eban, 1957, pp. 149–151). In addition, Israel has tried over the years to link its metanarrative to metanarratives in the target states. For example, since 9/11, Israel has been framing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as similar to the conflict that the United States and the West are involved in (i.e., “the war on terrorism” and “the

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.israel-academia-monitor.com/index.php?new\\_lang=en](http://www.israel-academia-monitor.com/index.php?new_lang=en)

<sup>7</sup> <http://isracampus.org.il/index.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <http://en.imti.org.il>

<sup>9</sup> [www.ngo-monitor.org](http://www.ngo-monitor.org)

<sup>10</sup> <http://masbirim.gov.il/>

war for democracy”) when addressing foreign audiences on the subject. This is illustrated in Netanyahu’s speech to the American Congress in 2011: “We stand together to defend democracy. We stand together to advance peace. We stand together to fight terrorism” (Netanyahu, May 5, 2011).

Societies also try at times to discredit their rivals’ conflict-supportive metanarratives by portraying them as false and unjustified—while presenting their own goals as just. A common theme in Israeli rhetoric abroad during the 1950s and 1960s was that there was no “Palestinian people” (see 1969 interview with Israeli Premier Golda Meir in *Sunday Times* at Giles, June 15, 1969).<sup>11</sup>

Another common theme is differentiation between the ingroup and the opponent through two important factors: the positive collective self-image of one group and its delegitimization of the other. This trend is very common in Israeli rhetoric abroad. It presents the Israelis as moderate and peace seekers and the Palestinians as rigid extremists who do not want peace. This argument can be found, for example, in Netanyahu’s speeches abroad, such as his 2011 speech to the UN in which he delineates the sharp contrast between the Israelis and the Palestinians through a story that compares the many steps that Israel has taken in furtherance of peace (calling for direct negotiations without preconditions, outlining a vision of peace composed of two states for two peoples, removing hundreds of roadblocks and checkpoints, freezing new building in the settlements for 10 months) with the complete lack of response from the Palestinians (“there was no response”) (Netanyahu, September 23, 2011).

A second contrast between Israel and the Palestinians is that of the underdog versus the powerful rival (the David vs. Goliath story). Again, this theme is constructed by presenting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as part of the Israeli-Arab conflict and emphasizing the small size of Israel as compared to the huge size of all of its Palestinian *and* Arab rivals combined. Netanyahu also tried to refute the Palestinian claim that Israel is the Goliath by using historical analogies that magnify the Palestinians’ power. This can be found in his 2009 speech to the UN General Assembly when he compared attacks on Israel by Hamas rockets to attacks on British cities during World War II by Nazis (Netanyahu, September 24, 2009).

Indeed, the related theme of victimization is dominant in conflict-supportive narratives as presented abroad. This theme is of special importance because the international community tends to sympathize with victims and denounce their aggressors (Barkan, 2000). Moreover, when a society is recognized as a victim and receives international empathy, this can lead to a legitimization of even violent acts against its aggressor to end its suffering (Boltanski, 1999). In line with this dynamic, the theme of Israel’s victimization by Palestinian aggression is conveyed by emphasizing the suffering of Israeli civilians in the conflict (Schleife, 2007).

## Conclusion

Narratives are an inseparable part of human life and satisfy an array of individual and collective needs. In the context of intractable conflict, the need for conflict-supporting narratives is considerably amplified (Bar-Tal, 2007a, 2013). Thus, it is extremely important to study conflict-supportive narratives of societies involved in intractable conflicts.

Specific narratives about events and characters in a conflict sustain more general conflict-supportive metanarratives, and together they serve as building blocks of collective memory and an ethos of conflict. Society members often rely on dominant conflict-supporting narratives to describe and explain the reality of the conflict and use them as a guide to their behaviors (Bar-Tal, 2013). Furthermore, official epistemic authorities in a society, at times along with mass media, often strive to maintain the dominance of these conflict-supportive narratives and actively try to prevent

<sup>11</sup> However, since 2000, in line with the narrative that is told to domestic audiences, Israeli rhetoric abroad recognizes the existence of a Palestinian people and its right to statehood (see, for example, Netanyahu, May 5, 2011).

counternarratives from being formed and disseminated within their society. By doing so, authorities may resort to mechanisms that violate principles of democracy and especially freedom of expression. In addition, they try to persuade the international community that their own metanarrative is the only valid and truthful one. Indeed, the struggle over the narrative is as fierce as the actual field battles, and losing this struggle may lead to losing the conflict. Yet these same narratives become stubborn barriers to peace.

Peace building requires weakening the grasp of a society on several themes of conflict-supportive narratives such as firm adherence to one's own conflict goals and delegitimization of the rival. This can happen when the narratives cease to fulfill some of their positive functions for individuals and the society. For example, they might no longer provide a clear interpretation of reality, or they might even negate experiences or absorbed information. The reasons behind such shifts could be changes in the context of the conflict, such as heavy losses, or democratization processes which may lead to relaxation of narrative reinforcement mechanisms (such as censorship) or a lack of legitimization for the society's conflict-supportive narrative from the international community. As part of this process, new specific narratives and even a new metanarrative, which are functional within the new reality, might be established. Changes often start with specific narratives rather than the entire metanarratives. With time, these lower level changes may affect the metanarratives and even the collective memory and ethos of the society.

This article analyzes the Israeli society that has been engaged in intractable conflict with the Palestinians for over a hundred years (see Bar-Tal, 2007b) and that has also developed conflict-supportive narratives and struggles with the Palestinian conflict-supporting narratives—which have same themes as their own and are constructed in similar ways (Abu-Harthieh, 1993; Khalidi, 1997). Both societies still engage in a “battle” in the international community to establish their own narratives as truthful and to delegitimize the narratives of the opponent. They also make every effort to refute the counternarratives that evolve in their own societies and that negate the conflict-supporting metanarrative.

From an analysis of the current trends in Israeli Jewish society, it is evident that the conflict is far from being on the advanced track toward peaceful resolution (see Bar-Tal, Halperin, & Oren, 2010). Our analysis demonstrates that despite diminishment of the intractable nature of the conflict over the years, currently the parties are still holding some core old conflict-supporting themes and are retaining the practices that sustain them (Kelman, 2007; Magal et al., 2012; Shamir & Shikaki, 2010). This situation does not facilitate the peace negotiations that began again in the summer of 2013 under the lead of the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that due to changes in Israeli society—it's becoming more open, democratic, critical, and skeptical (Mahler, 2011; Nossek, 2002; Ya'ar & Shavit, 2001)—and as a result of some major events in the conflict, there appears to be a decline in dominance of specific conflict-supportive narratives and an increase in acceptance of counternarratives that support peacemaking.

Following the Camp David accord between Israel and Egypt in 1979 that included a recognition in the “legitimate rights of the Palestinian people,” the dominance of the narrative in which Palestinians do not constitute a separate people but rather a part of the Arab nation, sharply declined. The percentage of Israeli respondents in public polls who agreed with the statement, “The ‘Palestinian Arab nation’ is an artificial concept that has only emerged in the last years due to developments in our area” dropped from 70% in the period between 1973 and 1977 to around 50% in 1979 (Oren, 2009). By 2009, only 32% of the Israeli Jewish public said that they do not recognize the existence of a Palestinian people (Peace Index, June 2009).<sup>12</sup> Before the 1993 Oslo accords, changes appeared in the extent of dominance of the Israeli ethos as a whole. That means a general weakening of most beliefs

<sup>12</sup> [http://en.idi.org.il/media/597848/peaceindex2009\\_6\\_3.pdf](http://en.idi.org.il/media/597848/peaceindex2009_6_3.pdf)

and narratives of the ethos of conflict as a unifying element for Israeli society and its various divisions. However, it has been noted that since 2000 the adherence of the Israeli society to the ethos of conflict has strengthened again (Bar-Tal, 2007b; Oren, Forthcoming; Sharvit & Bar-Tal 2007).

Over the years there have even been several attempts to address Palestinian and Israeli narratives about the past in the form of joint history books (see a review in Nets-Zehngut, 2013). These attempts have focused on specific narratives such as “the War of Independence” (Jewish narrative) versus “the Nakba of 1948” (Palestinian narrative) rather than the collective memory as a whole. Such programs may increase the willingness of the two societies to consider multiple narratives of the past rather than a single perspective of it (E. Zerubavel, 2003). However, the Israeli Education Ministry banned the use of these books, nor were they accepted by the Palestinian Authority. Furthermore, in 2008, 59% of Israeli Jews opposed adopting a school curriculum that recognized the Palestinian state, even in the context of a peace agreement with the Palestinians and the establishment of a Palestinian state recognized by Israel.<sup>13</sup>

Today, with the proliferation of some specific counternarratives that provide a good foundation for peace-supportive narratives, it is possible that in the future a coherent ethos of peace will emerge. Nevertheless, any substantive change must be accompanied by changes in reality—that is, a cessation of the struggle over narratives and an eventual agreement that settles the conflict. It is in some respects a chicken-and-egg situation, as both processes (narrative change and conflict resolution) are interrelated and interdependent. When information that contradicts conflict-supporting narratives is no longer blocked—that is an indication that a society is ready to seriously consider peacemaking.

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<sup>13</sup> Eighty-four percent of the Palestinians opposed adopt school curriculum in the Palestinian state that recognizes Israel and teaches school children not to demand the return of all Palestine to the Palestinians. (<http://truman.huji.ac.il/upload/Polls%202008%202009.pdf>)

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