

A Snapshot of Shifting Israeli Propaganda and Myths Over the Years

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One of the more tiresome experiences for anyone engaged in long-term solidarity work with the Palestinians is encountering the same old Zionist myths, churned out year after year despite having been conclusively disproved by any objective standard. Anyone who watched "The X-Files" will recall the poster in Mulder's room of a UFO beneath which were the words, "I want to believe." The doggedness with which veteran Israel supporters cling to myths suggests a similar commitment of faith.

Perhaps the most obviously discredited myth is that the majority of Palestinian Arabs fled their homes in 1948 at the call of their leaders. It still surfaces fairly often, although it looks set to fade away in the not too distant future, not because its adherents are convinced that it is unfounded, but mainly because of age taking its toll.

After 1948, generations of Americans perceived Israel to be an enlightened, democratic and humane country. Blaming the Palestinians for their own exile and dispossession was necessary to preserve that image. The essential vindication of the Palestinians' own accounts of 1948 over the past 30 or so years has occurred while Israel has increasingly embraced the most racist, nationalistic forms of [Zionism](#) without any pretense of liberalism or enlightened values. Israel's current political leaders are less inclined to worry about denying Israel's responsibility for the mass expulsion of Palestinians in 1948 than their predecessors. According to a 2016 Pew poll, nearly half of Israeli Jews openly wish that the rest had been expelled and express the desire that the Palestinians might still be removed, one way or another. How is it possible to support Israel today without endorsing or at least enabling the policies to which such outlooks give rise?

Yet some propaganda themes have already bitten the dust. I was reminded of this while sorting through some old papers from the 1960s. Some capitalized on Westerners' general lack of knowledge of the Middle East. We were told that Israelis greet each other with the

word *shalom*, peace, and this showed the value they attached to that concept. The fact that Arabs greeted each other with *salaam 'alaykum*, translated into English as “peace be unto you,” was not mentioned, although it could equally well be cited as evidence of their appreciation of peace.

In 1967, Israel could still rely on Westerners’ ignorance of the Palestinians and their history. When addressing U.S. audiences, Israel’s proponents used maps that showed all the lands of the Arab countries; by comparison, Israel looked very small. “The Arabs have all this territory, and the Jews only want this tiny scrap of land as a state,” was the accompanying description, with minor variations. The size of the Arab world was actually irrelevant: the territory in contention was the land of Palestine, home to a people who were not Egyptians, Algerians or Iraqis, but Palestinians. Denying the national identity and history of the Palestinian people and subsuming them into “the Arabs” not only obscured the nature of the conflict, but reinforced the Zionist contention that the “Arab refugees” should be resettled in Arab countries. It’s rather as if an invader of say, Peru or Costa Rica, had offered the justification for displacing their people by pointing to a map of Latin America and saying, “Look at all the land these Latinos have!”

News commentaries on Israelis killed in the late 1960s would sometimes say that the loss of life was deeply felt at a national level because the population of Israel was small. By implication, the more numerous Arabs did not feel the loss of life as deeply, as if numbers diluted grief. Few people outside the region would have made a comparison with the Palestinians and realized that the size of the Palestinian population was comparable to Israel’s. Why would Palestinians not deeply feel the loss of their fellow nationals in conflict? In fact, any reporter who bothered to visit Palestinian communities was able to confirm that they did.

One story that rapidly evaporated was that of the boots. Just after the Israeli attack on Egypt in June 1967, photographs appeared in some Western newspapers and magazines (including *Life*) showing lots of military boots scattered upon the ground. It was reported that they had been discarded by Egyptian soldiers who, as simple peasant farmers, were not used to wearing boots and had taken them off so that they could run away more easily.

There were problems with this story from the start: more perceptive observers might have wondered whether people who knew how hot a desert could get underfoot would actually have done this. The story suggested that the Egyptian soldiers were easily vanquished and put to rout. Over the following months, a fuller picture emerged of what happened.

Under assault by a well-prepared and strong adversary who took total command of the skies through a surprise attack, the Egyptian forces in the Gaza Strip and Sinai took heavy losses but initially fought determinedly. Their cohesion broke down when their panicky high command ordered them to retreat, at a time when their communications were badly disrupted. Those retreating in the area of the Mitla Pass in central Sinai were sitting ducks for Israeli air strikes.

Israeli tanks and soldiers encountered thousands of demoralized Egyptian soldiers. Around 5,000 were taken prisoner. Scattered reports told of soldiers who’d abandoned their weapons being shot down by Israeli soldiers when they approached and pleaded for water. While some Israeli soldiers acted humanely, others simply saw the taking of prisoners who would need to be guarded, given water and fed as a burden that they should not bear.

Weaponless and disorganized, the Egyptians could be left to try to walk back toward the Suez Canal or die of thirst in the desert. Some Arab sources later claimed that Israeli troops forced Egyptian soldiers to take off their boots before turning them loose: it diminished both their ability to resume fighting and, in some cases, their chances of survival.

Stories of Egyptian incompetence and unmartial qualities ultimately backfired on Israel. Such stories encouraged the Israeli soldiers to assume that Israel enjoyed military superiority over Egypt and to underestimate the determination and ability of the Egyptian army to rebuild its strength and recover its lost territory. They were shocked by the initial successes of the Egyptian armed forces in October 1973, which crossed the Suez Canal under heavy bombardment and drove Israeli soldiers from their well-fortified positions. Disparaging the courage and fighting ability of Egyptian troops no longer seemed like a good idea to Israeli publicists.

Some old Zionist myths have lost their utility to their makers and others have been so badly discredited that they have ceased to be reiterated. New ones are brought into service, old themes given a new coat of paint, but they are, if anything, even less credible than the preceding ones and will meet the same fate. It is no wonder that present-day Israel and its supporters put great effort into shutting down arguments over Palestine through the accusation of “anti-Semitism.” They don’t have a case that can be validated by logical arguments based on facts, international law and basic principles of humanity.

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Featured image: Israeli warplanes attacked hundreds of towers and civilian ‘targets’ in the Gaza Strip. (Photo: Mahmoud Ajjour, The Palestine Chronicle)

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