**Taub, aren’t you tired of recycling unoriginal myths?**

*Shaul Arieli, Haaretz, March 26, 2021*

Gadi Taub’s debate with Menny Mautner in the pages of “Haaretz” (“Mautner, this is what the debate should have been about,” “Haaretz,” March 19, 2021), demonstrated that he has not learned or forgotten anything since the line of reasoning he presented in an article he published titled “The Fairy Tale of Everything Depends on Us” (“Haaretz,” July 6, 2018): He wields what seems to him to be the “winning cards” in the debate as to who is responsible for the prolonged continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These “winning cards” are nothing but myths straight from the revised Israeli historiography of the conflict that darken the standards of the debate and cast a long and heavy shadow on the factual basis upon which Taub builds his claims. As with any myth, Taub spins the truth together with the lie to paint the complex reality in black and white. He states that “Palestinian refusal is responsible for its continued existence” (S.A. of the occupation), and that this approach helps mobilize support for the perpetuation of the conflict and the occupation amongst the population that does not know the history. I will address some of the prominent claims.

*A desolate and empty land.* Taub claims that “it is worth mentioning that a considerable number of the Arabs who were in the Land of Israel in 1948 immigrated here following the development drive brought on by Jewish pioneers and the British Mandate.” Or, in the familiar words attributed to Israel Zangwill, “a land without a people for a people without a land.” In making this claim, Taub joins Benjamin Netanyahu, who said at a conference in September 2017 that “until not so many years ago this land was desolate, it was deserted,” and Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, student of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, who wrote in January 2009 that most Palestinians are “newcomers who came here from nearby around the time of the War of Independence.”

First to the numbers: According to a census carried out by the British at the beginning of the Mandate in 1922, there were around 700,000 Arabs in the land. Not only was Mandatory Palestine/the Land of Israel not empty, it had a population density of 27 people per square kilometer. It was one of the most densely populated of all Arab countries, second only to Lebanon. Today, one hundred years later, even though the global population has increased ninefold, population density in countries such as Canada, Australia, Iceland, Libya, and Mongolia is less than four people per square kilometer, and no one in the world would claim that they are empty countries.

During the 25 years of the British Mandate, the Arab population grew to 1.3 million. According to a 1947 publication by Yaacov Shimoni, who coordinated the Arab bureau in the Haganah organization, only 15-20% of the growth in the Arab population was due to immigration, which translates to 70,000-100,000 people. According to a report made by the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in 1945, between the years 1922-1945 the Muslim population in the land grew from 589,000 to 1,116,000, of which only 4% was attributed to immigration. Most of this increase was a result of natural population growth, which was among the highest in the world, in part due to a drastic increase in life expectancy.

Second, from a values perspective. During the periods of Zionist immigration (1881-1948), the Arab population increased by 170%, a rate lower than the average in other Arab countries, and mostly due to natural growth. During this same period, the Jewish population increased by 3,090%, mostly due to immigration. Why were Jews permitted to immigrate to the Land of Israel while Arab immigration was considered unacceptable?

The Zionist leadership understood the reality well. In 1905, Israel Zangwill wrote: “The Land of Israel itself is already populated.” In 1908, David Ben-Gurion wrote: “The Land of Israel is not empty…in the West Bank alone there are around three quarters of a million (people).” In 1919, Yosef Haim Brenner wrote: “Our young people around the world must know the truth about the Land of Israel. They need to know that the land is poor and inhabited by others in every place where it is possible to do something.” In 1921, Yosef Eliyahu Chelouche, the son of one of the leaders of the Sephardic community in Jaffa, wrote: “We will tell here the bitter and terrible truth…Zionist propaganda described the land as a wasteland without inhabitants.” In 1969, Moshe Dayan wrote: “We came here to a land inhabited by Arabs, and we are establishing a Hebrew-Jewish state. There is not a single place that was not built on what was previously an Arab settlement.”

*Only the Jews brought progress.* The geographer David Grossman claims that from a commercial standpoint, the Land of Israel underwent considerable development in the 30 years that preceded the first wave of Jewish immigration due to a dramatic increase in the number of pilgrims following the agreements that ended the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the opening of the Suez Canal. The pilgrimage industry brought capital to the land and generated pressure on the Ottoman authorities to improve roads and transportation, make bureaucratic mechanisms more streamlined and efficient, and ensure personal security. As a result, the road from Jaffa to Jerusalem was paved in 1869, and a railroad track was laid in 1892. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 improved export capacity and provided a significant boost to the citrus crops industry in the decade that preceded the first wave of Jewish immigration.

Until the end of World War I, the land remained an area of primitive agriculture and meager industry. Out of a huge wave of millions of Jewish immigrants from all over Europe, only around 100,000 arrived in the Land of Israel (and most of them did not remain). Most of those who arrived settled in mixed cities where there was work for Jews. During the Mandate period the British authorities provided most of the employment through large public infrastructure initiatives, which were planned and carried out after the war. These initiatives elicited sharp criticism from Arabs living in the land, who claimed that their taxes were being wasted on “solving the Jewish unemployment problem.”

At this stage therefore, the Jews were considered mainly as those who were causing a burden on the country’s economy, and not as a factor in its recovery. In the years that followed, the reality was not much different. Following the global economic downturn in the early 1920s – which was a kind of forerunner before the great crisis of 1929 – the General Organization of Workers in Israel (Histadrut) organized in the summer of 1927 to find a practical solution to the unemployment crisis: Several new factories were opened with the help of national funds and government loans from the Mandatory Government, and a variety of jobs were offered to the unemployed. An improvement in the situation could be felt a year later, but it was still a treatment of symptoms, not a revolution and not even a dramatic change.

The contribution of the Hebrew Yishuv only began with the arrival of the Fifth Aliyah (1930-1939) and the development of industry, the Tel Aviv Port, and more, but most of the contribution was concentrated towards the development of the economy, and on this point Taub is correct, that it was provided by the British war machine.

*There is no Palestinian people.* Taub asks, rhetorically from his perspective, “what nation has lived here for ‘hundreds of years,’ if the Palestinian national consciousness was born only as a response to Zionism?” In so doing, he joins Golda Meir, who said in 1969 that: “When I immigrated to Israel there was no Palestinian people,” and Betzalel Smotrich, who declared in 2015 that: “There is no such thing as the Palestinian people, period,” and Yehuda Harel, who wrote one year afterwards: “I declare: ‘There is no Palestinian people.’”

Yehoshua (Shuke) Porath, an expert in Middle Eastern affairs, did insist that the national consciousness of Palestinian Israeli Arabs developed in response to the Balfour Declaration. But the question of which people lived here for hundreds of years has a clear answer: In the last 1,300 years, since the conquest of the land in the seventh century, the Arab people lived here. This was rightly noted in a statement given to Winston Churchill during his visit to the land in March 1921: “Historical continuity since 634, and governmental continuity (except for the Crusader and Ottoman periods) alongside the dominance of the [Arabic] language and culture without the mention of other cultures.”

The British promise made in 1915 to the King of the Hejaz, Hussein bin Ali, which was taken into consideration in the political-legal status of the Balfour Declaration and stated that at the end of the war an Arab kingdom would be established in the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire, was not fulfilled. The Arab territories were divided up into mandates and given to states according to British and French interests at the end of the First World War. This is how Mandatory Palestine/the Land of Israel was established, exactly like the other countries in the region. And if this is so, then indeed the (correct) claim of Golda Meir, that there was no Palestinian people until the Balfour Declaration, needs to be reconciled with, and Taub should be asked if he recognizes a Jordanian, Lebanese, Iraqi, Tunisian, or Algerian people, all of which developed significant and separate national consciousnesses before the end of the First World War. Indeed, all these peoples were likewise forced to respond to the colonial division. But while these "peoples" achieved self-determination, the Arab people of Palestine were deliberately deprived of such, even though they represented a 90% majority of the country's population and owned 90% of its private lands. The partition report explicitly stated that "the principle of self-determination was not applied to Palestine when the Mandate was created in 1922, due to the aspiration to enable the establishment of the Jewish national home."

The Third Palestine Arab Congress, which convened in Haifa in December 1920, adopted a decision that demanded that the British government "form a government of the country that will assume responsibility through a representative council, which the Arab-speaking people living in Palestine until the beginning of the war will elect, as in Iraq and Transjordan." That is to say, self-determination on the basis of Western civic nationalism, which sees as a member of the nation any legal resident of the country whose borders have been determined. It is important to emphasize that the "Arabic-speaking people" included Muslims, Christians, Jews, and other communities.

*Israel gave everything, the Palestinians always refused.* Taub writes that "one can also argue with the perception of nationalism as the negation of the other, which ignores the fact that Zionism accepted the partition proposals that were presented in 1937 and 1947, and intermittently between 1993 and the Trump plan." Here as well, Taub makes notes of the seed of truth within the myth: The Palestinians indeed said no to the 1937 Peel Commission proposal (which was not supposed to lead to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, but rather to Transjordanian annexation of the Arab parts of the land), and they also said no to the 1947 partition decision. But in one breath, he combines Palestinian refusal of the Oslo process with Palestinian refusal of Donald Trump’s initiative.

We will, therefore, refresh our historical knowledge. In 1988, for the first time, the PLO recognized Partition Resolution 181, which stipulated that a Jewish state would be established in the Land of Israel, and Resolution 242, which left only 22% of Mandatory Palestine for the Palestinian state after King Hussein of Jordan relinquished the West Bank in July of that year. Taub and his ilk ignore the dramatic change that occurred in the Palestinian position at the time, against the background of geopolitical changes in the region and around the world.

The Palestinians, who since the Balfour Declaration have clung to a discourse based on fundamental rights and claim to have been deprived of the right to self-determination, have realized that this position, which is unacceptable to the international community, led them to the Nakba and continual refugee status. They were forced against their will to transition to a discourse based on international legitimacy and decisions. As Mahmoud Abbas said (in an interview with Al-Arabiya in 2008): "We do not want to lose another opportunity. Therefore, we accepted the 1948 and 1967 partitions, which do not include more than 22% of historic Palestine." This position led to mutual recognition and the Palestinian declaration (1993) that "the PLO recognizes Israel's right to exist in peace and security and recognizes UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338."

This change did not stem from the love of Mordechai, and the use of the term "historic Palestine" indicates that in their approach, they gave up the homeland in exchange for a state of Palestine in an area that is 22% of their homeland. Historical fairness must note however, that the proposals and willingness of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel to divide the land also did not stem from love of Ishmael, but from the understanding that the Arab majority between the sea and Jordan would not allow for the existence of a democratic and Jewish state according to the Zionist vision.

In practice, the first to negotiate on a permanent status agreement was Ehud Barak, at Camp David in 2000 and at Taba in 2001. At these two conferences, even though the Palestinians agreed to the demilitarization of their state, extensive security arrangements, and the non-realization of the "right of return," Barak rejected the Palestinian position and demanded the annexation of 8-13% of the land without any exchange of territories, and that East Jerusalem (Al-Quds) and even the Temple Mount remain under Israeli sovereignty.

In 2008, during the Annapolis process, Abbas and Ehud Olmert narrowed the gaps, but did not manage to close them before Olmert was forced to resign. Unlike Barak, who coined the destructive claim "there is no partner," Olmert reiterated and emphasized in a 2012 interview that "the Palestinians never rejected my proposals."

Donald Trump's vision of peace from January 2020 is a farce of an attempt to redefine the two-state solution – Israel and Palestine. The former US president clearly adopted the Israeli right's narrative, prioritizing Israeli positions on security issues, Jerusalem, settlements, and refugees. He offered an interpretation different than the accepted view of Security Council Resolution 242, in contradiction to other UN resolutions, and ignored what had been achieved in previous rounds of negotiations. For example, the Trump initiative leaves 93% of a united Jerusalem, including 20 Arab neighborhoods, the Temple Mount, and all the holy places, under Israeli sovereignty. The Palestinians, according to his plan, will establish their capital in the refugee camps and in the three villages located outside of the Israeli security fence, and will even be required to proclaim them "Al-Quds."

Taub is correct when he declares: "My focus on the occupation is not obsessive enough to earn me a certificate of integrity from the enlightened camp. And indeed, I do not need such a certificate of integrity." But he transgresses by surrendering to the tyranny of the contemporary and the superficial, which characterizes the Israeli discourse that suffers from a lack of historical honesty when examining processes and positions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As someone who claims to be an intellectual mouthpiece of the right, he should have based his arguments more on the seeds of truth in the myths, rather than on the elements of fiction in them.

The historian, as the Tunisian Muhammad Talbi recalls, is obligated to carry out credible historical analysis, which "may revolutionize our mentality...because it is like the work of pruning dry and ugly branches that inhibit growth...only then can we reshape our present-day personality, and increase its vitality, without breaking away from our past." In our case, one can adopt the words written two decades ago by the historian Mordechai (Morl'e) Bar-On, who passed away recently: "Today, Israelis have the ability, and it is even desirable and worthy for them, to investigate the affairs and tell them in full, without distortions, concealments, or denial. Correcting the versions of the mobilized historiography of the first generation, not only is this possible, but it is also necessary...it also enables the new generation to better understand the nature of the conflict between the State of Israel and the Arabs."

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