NARRATIVES ARE REAL and deserve attention regardless of the degree to which they are historically accurate. Whether or not they are historically accurate is also important. But the fact is that Israelis and Palestinians have narratives that tell different stories about what has happened in Palestine since the beginning of the modern Zionist project. From one perspective, it does not matter whether the stories are accurate. That they are authentic is enough. The Palestinians’ narrative is a product of their experience, just as the Zionists’ is a product of theirs. It reflects how they perceived, interpreted, and evaluated the events and circumstances of their lives. Put differently, it is a community’s own story—how the community understands and gives meaning to what it has endured. It is neither accurate nor inaccurate in a larger or more objective sense. It is simply one’s story, subjective but real in the sense that it is the version of life and times that one not only tells but also believes. And to those who doubt this rendering of history, it may be said: if you had experienced what this community has experienced, it would be your narrative as well.

In a situation of conflict, acknowledging not only the authenticity but also the validity, and indeed the legitimacy, of the other side’s narrative is important for at least two closely interrelated reasons. First, this acknowledgement humanizes the adversary. Such an acknowledgement is necessary for progress to be made toward resolving the conflict; it allows for the possibility, at least, of eventual reconciliation. Rather than demonizing one’s historic adversaries, and thus believing that they are driven by irrational or immoral principles, accepting their narrative makes them human. Their story and sentiments are not the product of some primordial, intrinsic, and hence unchangeable impulse that makes them untrustworthy and undeserving of consideration. Rather, they constitute a logical, reasonable, and ultimately human response to the lives that they have lived. Acknowledging their narrative makes dialogue possible and accommodation imaginable.

Second, accepting the validity of the other’s narrative has implications for the way a community understands its own narrative. More specifically, it leads to an appreciation of the fact that it is a narrative, authentic to be sure, and not necessarily inaccurate, but nonetheless a story rather than objective history. Recognizing the subjective character of the way people tell the story of their community’s experience, including the story of its relationship with adversaries, brings an understanding that this narrative is not the only reasonable account of events and circumstances. This acceptance is also a necessary condition for dialogue, accommodation, and eventual reconciliation. A community is not required to disavow its own narrative. But it does need to be receptive to compromise, and that necessitates an appreciation not only of the humanity of the adversary but also of the fact that it does not have a monopoly on morality and truth.

As important as it is to view narratives from this perspective, questions about the degree to which a narrative is consistent with historical facts, to the extent these can be known, are
certainly relevant and significant. One of the participants in the meetings on myth and narrative in Palestine/Israel sponsored by the Harvard University Program on Intrastate Conflict illustrated this question of reality by describing a man who told his psychiatrist that he was being chased by a woman with a knife. The sincerity of the man’s belief was not at issue, nor was the fact that his belief might be the product of some real-life experience. But it was also important to know whether there really was a woman with a knife. This example may not be entirely apt; narratives, while authentic, need not be pathological. They are not necessarily about imagined rather than experienced history. But if the subjective character of narratives is recognized, it will be understood that the perception of events from which they are derived has the potential to give rise to myths and stereotypes.

Narratives are about explanation as well as description; they address questions not only about what happened but also about why it happened and who or what was responsible. Add the human and perhaps inevitable tendency to justify one’s own actions and see others as largely responsible for one’s problems, and it becomes clear that narratives are likely to have heroes and villains and may easily become one-sided. But are the heroes of the narrative really heroes, and are the villains actually villains? This question needs to be asked if a narrative is to be understood as a story and not objective history. No matter how sincere the conviction that one’s story is true, sincerity and conviction cannot be the measures by which the accuracy of a narrative is judged.

Discussions a few years ago with several Israeli Jews of Moroccan origin helped me to appreciate the importance of inquiring into the accuracy of narratives. I asked these men and women why so many immigrants from Morocco were voting for the Likud party in Israel’s parliamentary elections. “Because Likud will be strong with the Arabs,” I was consistently told. “We came from Morocco and so we know what the Arabs are like. They don’t like the Jews and so you have to be strong with them.” This response was not unexpected. It appeared to be a widely held explanation for the partisan tendency of Israeli Jews of Afro-Asian origin. But I then told my interlocutors that I had lived for several years in North Africa, including Morocco, and had always thought that relations between Jews and Arabs in Morocco were largely harmonious. “Well, yes,” they agreed. “But Moroccans are not like other Arabs.”

My book, A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (1994), presents the conclusions of several Israeli and other scholars who have conducted research on Jews of Afro-Asian origin. There is at least a possible disjuncture between the facts of Jewish life in Morocco and the story that is told by many Jews of Moroccan origin. Are questions about whether such a disjuncture actually exists of no importance, presumably because Jews of Moroccan origin are entitled to their narrative and it must therefore be accepted as valid and legitimate? The answer is no. I do not believe that recognition of a narrative’s authenticity and validity makes a concern for the degree of its accuracy irrelevant.

The importance of determining the circumstances that brought approximately 200,000 Moroccan Jews to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s is illustrated by present-day debates about Israel’s responsibility for the Palestinian refugee problem. Some supporters of Israel claim that there actually was an exchange of Arab and Jewish refugees, with Jews being forced to leave the Arab world and abandon their property to approximately the same extent as Palestinians who left the territory that became the state of Israel. Palestinians understandably respond that, even if true, it does not relieve Israel of its responsibility for their plight. If there is a debt to the Jews, it
should be paid by the Arab states that are responsible, not by the Palestinians. But is there, in
fact, such a debt, and, if so, to what extent? This is an important question, and one that cannot be
answered adequately by referring only to the narrative of Jews of Afro-Asian origin. Based on my
admittedly incomplete examination of the Moroccan case, I suspect that careful historical study
will indeed reveal a gap between the facts of the Jewish exodus and the story told today by many
Israeli Jews of Moroccan origin.\textsuperscript{2}

It is against such a background that this chapter examines the Arabs’ attitude toward
peace with Israel. The story many Israelis tell, as do others who support Israel, is that Zionist
leaders have consistently pursued peace, whereas Arabs have always been determined to destroy
to the Jewish state. President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt vowed to throw the Jews into the
sea, we are told, and there is no more convincing illustration of Arab intransigence than the
“Three No’s” of the Khartoum Arab Summit that followed the June 1967 war: no to peace, no to
recognition, no to negotiation. This story is a significant part of the Zionist narrative and is not
necessarily inaccurate. On the other hand, it is not necessarily accurate. It is important to
determine where, between these two poles, reality is situated. It is unreasonable to expect Israel
to accept the principle of territorial compromise if the Arab world really is as intransigent as
some Zionists insist. Alternatively, Israel should be condemned for rejecting compromise to the
extent that this part of the Zionist narrative—Arab intransigence—is in substantial measure a
myth.

The Decades following Israeli Independence

During the 1960s and 1970s, as well as earlier, many supporters of Israel insisted that the Arab
world was determined to destroy the Jewish state. They pictured Israel as a small and beleaguered
country, eager for peace with its Arab neighbors. The Arabs, by contrast, were portrayed as
consumed with hate for the Zionist state and resolute in their opposition to Israel’s existence.
Although not all Israelis and supporters of Israel embraced this view, clearly it was the dominant
Zionist narrative at the time. The following quotations are taken from works in which this
narrative finds expression. In each quote, the emphasis is mine.

- “The record abounds with expressions of the Israelis’ readiness to submit their
differences with the Arabs to negotiation, and with affirmations of their hopes for the
establishment of normal relationships which would promote the . . . development of their
common area. That record is remarkable for the frequency of Israeli overtures, and for the
totality of Arab rejection.”\textsuperscript{3}

- “The annihilation of Israel and of its people has . . . become a self-understood purpose
demanded by the Arab future no less than by Arab history, by Arab honor and pride no
less than by Arab pragmatic interest. It has become basic to all Arab thinking, and it is not
kept secret. No Arab politician and—with the exception of one or two notable exiles—no
Arab intellectual has expressed contradictory opinions.”\textsuperscript{4}

- “The essence of the conflict between Israel and the Arab states has been the refusal of
those states to acknowledge the existence and legitimacy of the State of Israel and to
accept it as a member of the family of nations in the Middle East. The major outstanding
political problems of occupied territory and of displaced Arabs have resulted from that refusal."5.

- “Extreme Arab opinion invariably begins that Israel has no right to exist as a sovereign Jewish state.”6

Although not without merit, this version of the Arabs’ position has for many years been incomplete and oversimplified; the closer one gets to the present, the more this account is false. With respect to early post-1948 history, there were possibilities for peace with Israel’s most important neighbors, Jordan and Egypt. Jordan’s early interest in an accommodation with Israel is fairly well known. Late in 1949, King Abdullah of what at the time was Transjordan participated in secret talks with Zionist leaders in order to explore the possibility of a separate peace between his country and Israel. Moreover, when it became clear that those talks would not produce a final settlement, he proposed a five-year nonaggression pact between the two states.7

The case of Egypt under Nasser is probably less familiar. Although documented in the scholarly literature, Nasser tends to be remembered among many supporters of Israel only for his bellicose speeches and policies leading up to and following the war of 1967. Forgotten is his regime’s commitment to Egyptian development and his willingness to discuss peace with Israel in order that the energies and resources of the state might be devoted to domestic needs. In fact, however, there were secret negotiations between Israeli and Egyptian representatives in 1954, motivated primarily, in the judgment of a British politician with pro-Zionist tendencies, by Nasser’s belief that “Israel ought not to distract him from the problems of Egypt, those of the social revolution.”8 Israeli analysts concur in this assessment, noting, in the words of one cautious observer, that it is “just possible that he [Nasser] was interested in reaching a more permanent peace with Israel.”9 Nasser’s efforts did not produce any lasting results, and indeed Israel and Egypt went on to fight four wars. Israel is at least partly responsible for losing this opportunity, especially because of the provocative actions associated with what became known as the Lavon affair.10

Yet another important case, noted above, is the “Three No’s” issued by Arab leaders in Khartoum in 1967. From the perspective of many Israelis and supporters of Israel, the Khartoum declaration is as compelling an indication of Arab intransigence as can be found. The actual story, however, although too complex to be readily summarized here, is, in fact, much less straightforward. The conference was dominated by more moderate Arab leaders and was boycotted by the more militant Arab states, including Syria and Algeria. The leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) did attend but boycotted the concluding session because of the conference participants’ calls for a political rather than a military solution to the conflict, and also because of the proposal that Jordan and Saudi Arabia use their ties to the United States to pursue a diplomatic solution. The Arab assessment of Khartoum thus emphasizes not a militant rejection of Israel’s right to exist but, rather, a desire to deny Israel a political victory and, therefore, the need for efforts at the international and diplomatic level to “ensure withdrawal from Arab lands which have been occupied since the aggression of 5 June [emphasis added].”11

This assessment is consistent with the response of most Arab states to UN Resolution 242, adopted by the Security Council in November 1967. Although disappointed that the
resolution only called upon Israel to withdraw from “territory” captured in the June war, rather than “all territory” or at least “the territory,” as they had sought, most Arab states, including the confrontational states, endorsed the land-for-peace formula set forth in the resolution. They insisted that Israel’s withdrawal from Arab territory captured in the war be complete and that this withdrawal come before their recognition of Israel. Israel also accepted that formula, although it insisted that recognition and peace should come first, and also that its withdrawal, while significant, need not necessarily involve a complete return to the borders that existed before the war. Again, space does not permit a full account of the diplomatic negotiations that followed passage of UN 242. The point is, however, that accounts which stress abiding Arab intransigence and a militant commitment to the annihilation of the Jewish state are incomplete, simplistic, and in many ways false.

This is not to argue that there was no Arab rejectionism during this period or that Israel bears sole or even primary responsibility for the perpetuation and routinization of the conflict in the years after 1948. There is no shortage of provocative statements and actions by both Arabs and Israelis during this period. Each sees the other as the root cause of the problem, and some on both sides see a false and unjustified symmetry in judgments, such as the preceding, that Israelis and Arabs both are both responsible for the failure of early diplomatic efforts to make progress toward peace. Apportioning responsibility is not the purpose of this chapter, and readers wishing a fuller treatment can consult my A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. The purpose of the present discussion is simply to show that there is as much myth as reality, and probably even more myth than reality, in a Zionist narrative that emphasizes “the totality of Arab rejection” and an unshakeable Arab commitment to “the annihilation of Israel and of its people.”

The Present Situation

Anti-Israeli sentiment has been strong and widespread in the Arab world during the last few years. It has been fueled most recently by the U.S.-led war against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq and the subsequent American occupation of that country. Moreover, there has been much debate about the motives of the American administration’s project in Iraq, especially as its claims that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction and was connected to al Qaeda have become less and less credible; critics have alleged that the real objective of the American invasion was the desire to remove an Arab regime willing and perhaps able to challenge Israel. Partly for this reason, Israeli as well as American flags were burned when 200,000 Moroccans demonstrated in Rabat, in 2003, against the “imperialist aggression” of the American-led coalition.

More generally, anti-Israeli sentiment has been growing among Arabs since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada in 2000. For example, a survey carried out in seven Arab countries by Zogby International in late 2002, by which time the number of fatalities among both Palestinians and Israelis had risen dramatically, found that the vast majority of respondents in every country had a “very unfavorable” impression of Israel. In Saudi Arabia, the Zogby data indicate that the percentage was about 95 percent. It was roughly the same in the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, and the figures were only slightly lower in Jordan and Egypt, two countries that have peace treaties with Israel. In Jordan, 85 percent of those interviewed had a “very unfavorable” impression of Israel, and another 6 percent had a “somewhat unfavorable” view. In Egypt, 80
percent had a “very unfavorable” view, and another 4 percent reported a “somewhat unfavorable” impression of Israel.\textsuperscript{17}

It is essential to put these observations into perspective, however. To do so it is necessary to ask two interrelated questions: Are Arab attitudes toward Israel enduring, or do they vary according to circumstances and events? Do these attitudes reflect opposition to Israel’s right to exist or to the actions and policies of the Israeli government? Addressing the first of these questions, it is instructive to examine the reception that Israel received in many Arab states following the Israel–PLO accord of 1993. The second question, and to some extent the first as well, may be explored with public opinion data from the Arab world. These data may be examined to learn not only about the nature and distribution of relevant Arab attitudes but also about the factors that shape these views.

The previous observations about Jordan, Nasser’s Egypt, the Khartoum conference, and UN 242 suggest that Arab attitudes during the two decades following Israeli independence were not invariably and uncompromisingly opposed to an accommodation with the Jewish state. There were also expressions of a willingness to make peace, or at least to explore the possibilities for peace, from a number of other important Arab states, including Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia. Finally, moving into the 1970s and 1980s, there was the 1977 peace initiative of President Anwar Sadat of Egypt. It resulted in a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt which many believe would have led to an accommodation with other Arab countries had Israel’s Likud-led government not refused to negotiate a withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. There also was the 1981 peace initiative of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi plan, supported by many, though not all, Arab states, called for the creation of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and in Gaza, with its capital in East Jerusalem, and for that state and other Arab states to live in peace with Israel.

These initiatives lead to the conclusion that Arab hostility toward Israel in the post-1967 period was perpetuated in very large measure by continuing Palestinian statelessness, and that if the Palestinians had been given a state alongside Israel in a portion of historic Palestine there would no longer have been any basis for opposing peace with the Jewish state. This was not the position of all Arab states, of course. Moreover, some supporters of Israel argue that Arab initiatives and peace proposals were neither serious nor sincere, apart from that of Sadat. Yet developments associated with and following the 1993 Israel–PLO accord make it impossible for all but the most ideologically oriented of Israel’s supporters to speak about an unshakable Arab insistence on the destruction of the state of Israel.

In signing the Oslo Declaration of Principles and agreeing to participate in a peace process that presumably would involve withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, Israelis expected, and had the right to expect, that Israel would be accepted by the Arab world and have normal relations with Arab states. Despite continuing rejectionism in some quarters, normal concourse did occur to a degree that was revolutionary. This development demonstrated, as noted, that once there was an agreement endorsed by the PLO, with provisions for Palestinian statehood, leaders and elites in a growing number of Arab countries concluded that there was no longer any reason to oppose peace with Israel. The Arab case against Israel, in other words, was based on the dispossession and statelessness of the Palestinians. With the establishment of a Palestinian state, under terms agreed to by the PLO, many and very probably most were ready—and in some cases even eager—to make peace with Israel and establish normal relations with the Jewish state.
Unprecedented Arab–Israeli contact and cooperation blossomed on an individual, bilateral, and multilateral basis in the wake of the 1993 accord. In Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, in Arab capitals, and in Europe, Arab and Israeli businessmen and others met to discuss a wide range of joint ventures and other collaborations. A sense of the new momentum and its revolutionary character is given in the following excerpt from an *International Herald Tribune* article, written only eight months after the Israel–PLO accord was signed. The article is entitled “When Former Enemies Turn Business Partners.”

Israel’s transition from pariah to potential partner is most evident in the overtures to Israel by Arab governments and businessmen seeking potentially lucrative deals. Since September, Israeli officials have received VIP treatment in Qatar, Oman, Tunisia, and Morocco. Qatar is studying how to supply Israel with natural gas. Egypt has launched discussions on a joint oil refinery, and officials talk of eventually linking Arab and Israeli electricity grids. . . . Millionaire businessmen from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain [are] jetting off to London, Paris, and Cairo to meet Israelis, while Jordanians, Egyptians and Lebanese are rushing to Jerusalem for similar contacts.  

This account notes the expanding network of Arab–Israeli contacts and relationships after September 1993. Other examples include Israeli assistance to Oman on drip irrigation and desalination, the signing of an Israeli–Jordanian peace treaty, the opening of an Israeli “Bureau de Liaison” in Morocco, Israeli–Tunisian cooperation on tourism, and an Egyptian–Jordanian–Israeli plan, with Saudi support, to deal with pollution in the Gulf of Aqaba. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries ended their secondary and tertiary boycott of Israel at this time, and Arab states ceased their practice of challenging Israeli credentials at the United Nations. It is also noteworthy that Sheikh Abdel-Aziz ibn Baaz, Saudi Arabia’s highest theological authority, issued a *fatwa* in late 1994 affirming the right of Saudi rulers to pursue normal relations with Israel. He cited a verse from the Qur’an: “If thy enemy moves toward peace, you shall too, placing your dependence on God.”

Still another tangible expression of the new era in Arab–Israeli relations was the convening of a series of international conferences to promote development in the context of peace. In 1994 King Hassan II of Morocco hosted the first of these conferences in Casablanca, with the goal of further normalizing Arab–Israeli relations clearly understood by all. The conference was attended by representatives of 61 countries and 1,114 business leaders. Its leaders issued a declaration stating that they were “united behind the vision . . . of a comprehensive peace and a new partnership of business and government dedicated to furthering peace between Arabs and Israelis.” Follow-up conferences were held in Jordan and Cairo in 1995 and 1996, respectively.

Not all Arab states followed suit, and the heady optimism of this period may seem naïve when viewed from the vantage point of 2005, after four years of fighting between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and the Israeli flag being burned in several Arab capitals. The Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in the summer of 2005 should set in motion a new dynamic— or perhaps it will not. But the point that Arab attitudes toward Israel are contextual, with a strong instrumental dimension, should nonetheless be clear. During a period when it seemed that Israelis and Palestinians had agreed on a two-state solution and were prepared to end their century-old conflict, large and growing numbers of Arab leaders and elites concluded that they no longer had any reason to oppose peace and normal relations with Israel. On the contrary, many rushed to
take advantage of what they regarded as an important opportunity to obtain benefits for
themselves and their countries.

The eventual failure of the Oslo peace process has spawned competing narratives about
responsibility for the breakdown of negotiations and the violence associated with the al-Aqsa
intifada. Each side sees the other as bearing primary responsibility, even though the reality is
much more complex and provides ample basis for criticism of both Palestinian and Israeli
actions. The problem, however, is that many Israelis and Palestinians mistake their narratives
for fact; they find in the failed peace process a confirmation of their own inaccurate views of the
other side’s character and motivation. Israelis and Palestinians each began the Oslo process with
doubts about the other’s intentions, and each went forward, often reluctantly, with the idea that
doing so would test whether the other side was really prepared for significant and perhaps painful
compromise. After 2000 the general view on each side was that the other side had failed the test
and thereby revealed its true purpose. This fact was demonstrated, in Palestinian eyes, by the
continued growth of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. In Israeli eyes, it was
demonstrated by continuing Palestinian violence against Israelis, including civilians inside the
Green Line.

A recent analysis by an Israeli scholar summarizes the official narrative of his
government regarding Palestinian responsibility for the failure of the peace process. It
emphasizes the alleged rejectionism of Yasser Arafat and, more generally, “the ultimate violation
and failure of the agreements by turning to violence and terrorism.” He adds that, “as we move
along the [Israeli political] continuum from left to right, these explanations become more
emphatic and paramount as the official Israeli narrative.” The point here is not that Israel has an
official narrative or that it is one-sided. That is to be expected and applies equally to the
Palestinians. Rather, at issue is that this narrative does not present itself and gain credibility as a
narrative, as a legitimate and understandable story regarding a series of events. Instead, to the
extent that it appears to confirm myths and stereotypes about the Palestinians and other Arabs, it
is taken as history and its accuracy is seen as self-evident.

Against this background, this chapter has posed two questions: First, are Arab attitudes
toward Israel enduring, or do they vary in accordance with events? And, second, do anti-Israeli
sentiments express opposition to the existence of a Jewish state in the Middle East or, rather, to
the actions and policies of Israeli governments? Developments in the years following the Oslo
Accords strongly suggest that Arab attitudes are indeed contextual and that for the most part
Arabs seek territorial compromise and not the liquidation of the Jewish state. This observation
has been reaffirmed even after the breakdown of the peace process, such as in the call by Saudi
Arabia in 2002 not only for peace but also for normal relations between Israel and the Arab
world. The conditions posed in the Saudi statement were that Israel should withdraw from all
Arab territory captured in June 1967, including the Golan Heights, and that a Palestinian state
should be established in the West Bank and Gaza, with its capital in East Jerusalem. The Saudis
introduced a proposal to this effect at the 2002 Arab League Summit meeting in Beirut, and their
call for peace and normalization in return for territorial compromise was endorsed unanimously
by those at the summit.

With the death of Arafat, Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza, and Palestinian parliamentary
elections, there was talk in 2005 about a revival of the peace process. This talk continued as the
Gaza pull-out was completed on schedule in late summer. Optimism, even cautious optimism,
was probably premature. But if there is eventually to be renewed progress toward peace, it will be important for Israel and its supporters to have an accurate and balanced view of Palestinians and other Arabs, and toward this end to eschew one-dimensional characterizations that see only enduring and unshakeable opposition to Israel’s existence.

The Attitudes of Ordinary Citizens

The preceding assessment is based on the actions of Arab states and their leaders, leaving open the question of whether very different views might be held by ordinary men and women. Perhaps, despite the apparent “moderation” of many Arab leaders, most ordinary citizens in the Arab world are implacably opposed to Israel’s existence. This argument will certainly be made, especially since opinion polls carried out in a number of Arab countries in 2002 and 2003 revealed that negative attitudes about Israel were widespread. Even in the country with the least unfavorable attitudes, Morocco, 66 percent had a “very unfavorable” impression of Israel, and another 24 percent had a “somewhat unfavorable” impression.

The data needed to probe deeper are limited, making it hard to advance conclusions that will be accepted by all, regardless of their political tendencies. Nevertheless, the available data strongly suggest that the attitudes of ordinary Arab citizens, like those of Arab leaders, are highly sensitive to context, meaning that they are not primordial, and reflect judgments about Israeli policy rather than an enduring opposition to Israel’s existence.

The bulk of the most reliable information about ordinary Palestinians’ attitudes toward Israel comes from polls conducted by Palestinian research centers in the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestine Center for Research and Studies, reorganized as the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, and the Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre are among the most important, although not the only, Palestinian institutions carrying out systematic public opinion research. Between them, they have conducted hundreds of polls since 1993. With excellent sampling procedures and a corps of trained interviewers, both centers, and to a lesser extent others as well, provide a wealth of data to gauge the attitudes of ordinary Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and to assess the factors shaping those attitudes.

Data from the West Bank and Gaza are clear and consistent: despite some minor fluctuation in response to particular events, roughly two-thirds to three-quarters of the respondents in representative national surveys supported peace with Israel. The questions asked about peace in general, sometimes the peace process and reconciliation in particular, but the findings are strikingly consistent both over time and across surveys conducted by different research centers, which contributes to one’s confidence in the results. A selection of these findings is shown in table 7.1, which presents the results of surveys conducted in 1995, 1998, 2001, and 2002.23

It should be added that support for the principle of peace and reconciliation does not mean that Palestinians necessarily have confidence in Israel or the peace process. From their perspective, the period following the 1993 Israel–PLO accord did not see a reduction or even a freezing of Israel’s presence in the Occupied Territories. On the contrary, it appeared to many Palestinians that Israel was using the peace process to buy time to expand the number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza (and East Jerusalem) and thus make it increasingly unlikely that the question of borders and other final status issues would be resolved in a way that gave
Palestinians meaningful statehood. But while this disappointment and distrust are also reflected in survey findings, it was all the more significant that support for peace and reconciliation remained high.

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All of the studies reflected in table 7.1 performed bivariate and multivariate statistical analyses of the data in order to determine the effects of different variables, or factors, on attitudes. Thus, although the table presents only univariate frequency distributions that indicate general tendencies, the scholarly publications that reported on these surveys also examined the various factors that may be correlated with, and account for variance on, Palestinian attitudes toward peace with Israel. Two general conclusions emerged from these more sophisticated analyses, both of which support this chapter’s thesis that context and instrumental calculations significantly affect attitudes.

First, orientations and attachments associated with Islam have at most only limited explanatory power; there is no empirical support for the proposition that Muslim Palestinians with a stronger attachment to or involvement in their religion are less likely than other Palestinians to have a favorable attitude toward Israeli–Palestinian peace and reconciliation. That truth is illustrated by the bivariate pattern shown in table 7.2, which compares the attitudes of more and less religious West Bank and Gaza Palestinians interviewed in 2001. The published analyses of the Palestinian data employed various survey questions and standard scaling techniques to measure religious orientation. They also employed multivariate statistical techniques in order to examine the relationship between attitudes toward peace and religious orientations with other factors held constant. In all cases, the findings are consistent with the pattern illustrated in table 7.2. Contrary to what is suggested by the “clash of civilizations” thesis and other assertions that Islam promotes hostility toward non-Muslims, the data clearly show, at least at the individual level of analysis, that Islam does not encourage opposition to peace with Israel.

<table>
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<th>Table 7.2. Attitudes toward Peace with Israel among West Bank and Gaza Palestinians Surveyed in 2001 and Grouped by Degree of Religiousity (in percents)</th>
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<tr>
<td>supports or strongly supports</td>
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<tr>
<td>very religious</td>
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Relevant public opinion data from other Arab societies are rare. Systematic and rigorous research of political attitudes has been scarce in the Arab world, and this is particularly the case
concerning research that investigates attitudes toward Israel. But two older studies, from 1988 and 1994, provide usable data; findings from four Arab nations—Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Kuwait—are presented in table 7.3. The data show that support for peace ranges from 85 percent among Egyptians surveyed in 1988 to about 55 percent among Jordanians and Kuwaitis interviewed in 1994 and 1988, respectively. Just slightly more than 60 percent of Lebanese respondents interviewed in 1994 also expressed support for peace. A more recent study carried out in Jordan in 2002 asked respondents whether they favored strengthening Jordanian–Israeli relations. The study found that 27 percent favored it, another 26 percent preferred to keep relations at their present level, based on the 1994 Israel–Jordan peace treaty, and 47 percent wanted relations with Israel to be weakened.

Table 7.3. Attitudes toward Peace with Israel among Lebanese and Jordanians Surveyed in 1994 and Egyptians and Kuwaitis Surveyed in 1988 (in percents)

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<tr>
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<th>very or somewhat favorable</th>
<th>very or somewhat unfavorable</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>45</td>
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</table>

These findings not only show that there is considerable variation with respect to attitudes about Israel, they also lend additional support to the view that opposition to peace is neither universal nor enduring. Moreover, and of particular relevance for the present discussion, in none of the surveys is attitude affected by religious orientation. As with the Palestinian data, individuals who are more religious or otherwise have strong Islamic attachments are no less likely than others to be among those who favor peace with Israel.26 Thus, again, it would be incorrect, at least at the individual level of analysis, to assume that the practice of Islam is an obstacle to Arab–Israeli peace.

The second general conclusion to emerge from a more sophisticated analysis of the survey data is that considerations of political economy, in contrast to considerations of religion and culture, do play an important role in shaping Arab attitudes toward Israel. This factor has been explored in detail in a number of different Palestinian data sets; the results consistently show that attitudes toward economic well-being and toward political leadership are important influences on relevant political attitudes.27 To illustrate, table 7.4 shows that West Bank and Gaza Palestinians who believe that peace with Israel will bring economic benefits are more likely than others to favor reconciliation after a Palestinian state has been established. Table 7.4 uses responses to a question about economic benefits for the respondent and his or her family, but the pattern is the same when using an item that asks about benefits for the Palestinian people in general. Judgments about the performance of the Palestinian Authority are similarly related to attitudes about reconciliation with Israel, and all of those political and economic assessments are also related in the same way to survey questions that ask about personal interaction with Israelis under conditions of peace. Each of these relationships is strong and statistically significant, and each remains so when examined with other factors held constant. Thus, again, it is clear that Palestinian and Arab
attitudes toward Israel are neither unvarying nor uniformly hostile but, rather, are shaped in significant measure by contextual factors and instrumental considerations.

Table 7.4. Attitudes toward Reconciliation with Israel among West Bank and Gaza Palestinians Surveyed in 2001 and Grouped by Views about the Economic Consequences of Peace (in percents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supports or Strongly Supports</th>
<th>Opposes or Strongly Opposes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peace will be economically beneficial</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace will have no economic impact</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace will be economically harmful</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recent data from a coordinated study by Khalil Shikaki, a Palestinian scholar, and Yaacov Shamir, an Israeli scholar, provide additional support for this chapter’s thesis. These data, from parallel opinion surveys carried out in the West Bank and Gaza and in Israel in December 2004 and January 2005, illustrate particularly well the centrality of myths and misperceptions in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, among Palestinians as well as among Israelis and their supporters. Data from the Palestinian territories show that most Palestinians continue to support peace and, more specifically, that they accept Israel’s existence as a Jewish state. The survey in Israel showed, however, that most Israelis believe that Palestinians think otherwise—that most Palestinians do not support peace or recognize Israel’s existence as a Jewish state. Interestingly, this misconception is also common among Palestinians; many respondents told the interviewers, in contrast to what the surveys show to be the case, that they believe that their own acceptance of Israel is the position of only a minority of Palestinians. In commenting on the obstacles to peace posed by such misconceptions, Shikaki and Shamir conclude their analysis by emphasizing the need to translate the individual attitudes elicited by polls into genuine public opinion, into a clear and recognized collective consensus based on fact rather than myth.

Conclusion

Arab states and ordinary citizens in the Arab world have often challenged Israel’s right to exist. This was a prominent theme in Arab political discourse in the years following Israel’s independence, and, even today anti-Israeli sentiment in the Arab world is sometimes expressed in ways that suggest opposition to more than Israeli policy. This hostility is only part of the story, however, and frequently, and more recently, it is not the most important part. A unidimensional narrative with Zionist peace seekers as heroes and Arab rejectionists as villains is just that, a narrative. Unending Arab intransigence is, therefore, as much myth as reality.

This narrative nonetheless remains current among at least some Israelis and supporters of Israel. Here, for example, are excerpts from several books and articles published in 2002, 2003, and 2004. This is just a sample. Those seeking more need only search the Internet for such topics as “Arab intransigence” and “destruction of Israel.”

- “Arab leaders have repeatedly made ample use of the lowest common denominator among the region’s masses: hatred toward the ‘taboo’ that the Jews and Israel are.”29
“The attempt to destroy the Jewish state has gone on since it came into existence in 1948. For over a half century, the majority of Arabs have persisted in seeing the state of Israel as a temporary condition, an enemy they eventually expect to dispense with.”30

“Arafat is less interested in the liberation of the West Bank and Gaza, or even the establishment of a Palestinian state, than in the PLO’s historic goal of Israel’s destruction.”31

“The war against the Jews goes on. Jewish children are shot in their beds, and the shooters are celebrated as heroes . . . And across the Arab world, from Pakistan to Morocco, hundreds of millions have nothing better to do than to chant for death to the Jews.”32

“The attempted de-legitimization of Israel is the ideological expression of Palestinian and Arab refusal to accept the Jewish state in the Middle East . . . In the Arab Muslim world, the culture of hatred of Jews permeates all forms of public communications . . . The intensity of the anti-Jewish invective surpasses that of Nazi Germany in its heyday.”33

“The racism and denial of legitimacy characteristic of apartheid are actually applicable to Arab and Islamic rejection of Jewish rights. In the Middle East, Jews are a tiny and oppressed minority, struggling to maintain cultural identity and survive in a hostile and violent environment.”34

It is difficult to know for sure how seriously these works are taken—or should be taken. Some who tell these stories may be aware that they are unfairly one-sided and do not do justice to a much more complex reality. In this case, presumably, these individuals have concluded that a measure of distortion is in Israel’s strategic interest and hence justifiable. Alternatively, and perhaps more likely, many believe the narrative that they are putting forward. After all, sincerity and conviction are an essential part of what defines a narrative. Belief and conviction are not the measure of a narrative’s accuracy, however. Events and circumstances can give rise to more than one story. A narrative is not objective history. Indeed, the distance between narrative and myth can be short. In the case considered here, narratives that assign a central role in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to relentless, unchanging, and unconditional Arab opposition to Israel’s existence, whether self-serving or sincere, travel a considerable portion of that distance.

NOTES

1. These quotations are paraphrased summaries of personal conversations between the author and various Israelis of Afro-Asian origin.


10. The Lavon affair involved a secret Israeli plot to blow up the U.S. Information Agency Library and other public buildings in Cairo and Alexandria in an attempt to foster anti-Egyptian sentiment in the United States at a time when Egypt was seeking American assistance and negotiating with the British over their bases in the Suez Canal Zone. The plot was uncovered, and most of its participants were captured and tried. For additional information, see Tessler, *History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 341–342.


13. See notes 3–6, above.

14. For a broader assessment of the impact on popular attitudes of America’s strong and frequently uncritical support for Israel, see “The Pew Global Attitudes Project,” The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, December 19, 2001. The Pew report states, “Not surprisingly, public dissatisfaction with America’s Middle East policy is perceived to be highest in largely Islamic countries. In particular, citizens of those countries . . . have a strongly unfavorable view of U.S. policy toward Israel.”


16. Fatality and casualty figures for this period are provided by Btselem. See http://www.btselem.org/English/statistics/.


