

PASSIA welcomed former head of the Middle East program at Chatham House and University professor Dr. Rosemary Hollis, to a roundtable discussion on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2019. Entitled *National Narratives and the Occupation*, the event invited Dr Hollis to present the findings of her latest book, *Surviving the Story: The Narrative Trap in Israel and Palestine*.

The book draws on observations and lessons learned through the Olive Tree Scholarship Program, a cross-conflict dialogue exercise held at City, University of London, which Dr Hollis directed from 2008 to 2016. The program provided scholarships to Israelis and Palestinians aged 20 to 26, to study for undergraduate degrees in the disciplines of their choice at City University, while engaging in weekly group dialogue with each other. The discussions tackled questions of national identities and narratives as drivers of the conflict, and enabled Israelis and Palestinians to compare and contrast their stories of key episodes in the conflict since 1948.

During the roundtable, Dr Hollis outlined the distinct value of knowledge generated through group interaction, as opposed to more conventional research. The findings illustrated the important role that identity narratives have in shaping life choices and values. She also highlighted the benefits of the program as an educational endeavor that gave the participants some distance and detachment from the day-to-day aspects of the conflict. This enabled them to consider how much of their respective national narratives they wanted to embrace, and in turn, which elements they might wish to reconsider – at least for themselves.

Crucially, however, as Dr Hollis explained, grass-roots dialogue does not produce agreement and very often increases animosity. So-called People-to-People (P2P) Dialogue cannot be used to mobilize whole populations to an extent that would exert enough pressure on political leaders to sign a formal deal. What happens to a person in a group encounter cannot be generalized to wider society. However, interactive dialogue may help participating individuals in developing their personal understanding of the situation, of the other, and of themselves. As Hollis writes: “Far more significant was the discovery that the competing Israeli and Palestinian narratives are so ingrained and firmly held as to defy major reconsideration through contact with the enemy” (Hollis, 2020: 6).

The roundtable discussion illustrated how difficult it would be to change Palestinian and Israeli narratives towards more positive views of the ‘other’, so long as the Occupation shapes the narratives and identities of both. Built into both narratives is a negative depiction of the ‘other’. This binary aspect of narratives is especially poignant in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as the national and cultural environments in which individuals exist have a significant impact on who they are, and, who they are *not*. As such, the question of victimhood and the influence of historical narratives were also tackled, with respect to how these might hinder the process of redefining what it means to be Israeli, and Palestinian. The interactive dialogue provided by the Olive Tree Scholarship Program did, however, oblige the Israeli participants to recognize the advantages they took for granted, but are denied to Palestinians.

Indeed some have reservations with regards to the application of historical truths to the contemporary situation. In these early days of a new decade, the defining characteristics of the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict have little in common with their 20<sup>th</sup> century ancestors. At the time, P2P and track II diplomacy in peace talks reflected a strong hope of a two state solution and the right of return. Today, Palestinian youths are skeptical. There is no more trust in mainstream political channels, in institutions, in third party negotiators, or in Israelis. The Gaza strip has become one of the most uninhabitable places in the world, and in this reality, historically and culturally influential ideals of martyrdom and revolution can be dangerous. Palestinians should not be condemned for trying to escape their circumstances and wanting to pursue their professional and personal lives elsewhere, given the chance.

This does not mean that preserving and teaching the history of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and the previous narratives that have characterized Palestinian resistance isn't important. But younger generations also have the right to define their own story, to change their perspective and to own the contemporary Palestinian culture. In that regard, perhaps the real trap lies in the historical narratives of the conflict that are imposed on young Palestinians and Israelis and labeled as heritage.

However, what remains clear is that identities do not exist in a bubble. They evolve and are in constant interaction with one another, and they are a driving yet at times overlooked force in the trajectory of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its fragmented peace process. The Olive Tree Scholarship Program has been praised for its educational value, but for some of its participants it was also a bitter reminder of the depth of the occupation, of how cross-conflict dialogue can lead to its normalization, and of the dire future that many individuals face. But Palestinians are not passive, and so long as their future is at stake, they will continue on the same path: Resist to exist in dignity, for freedom.

*This article draws on the opinions and statements that were expressed by participants of the Roundtable and on chapters of Dr Rosemary Hollis's Book.*