

The New York Times

Enter the historians, finally - Opinion

Timothy W. Ryback NOV. 23, 2006

JERUSALEM —

Last week, Kofi Annan gave the Middle East a history assignment. Speaking in Istanbul, the UN secretary general identified the competing historical narratives of Palestinians and Israelis as central to the Middle East crisis and the alleged clash of civilizations between Muslim and Western worlds.

"In the 21st century, we remain hostage to our sense of grievances, and to feelings of entitlement," Annan said. "Our narratives have become our prison, paralyzing discourse and hindering understanding."

Annan cribbed his script from a strategy paper he commissioned last year in response to the growing religious rift between East and West. The report concluded that political interests rather than religious fanaticism lay at the heart of the conflict, and recommended grounded historical research as an antidote.

"Of prime importance in this regard is the mutual recognition of the competing narratives that emerged following the establishment of the state of Israel," the report notes. "In the eyes of most Jews and Israelis this event was the result of a long-standing aspiration to build a Jewish homeland and was immediately followed by an attack from neighboring Arab countries. For Palestinians and a majority of people in the Muslim world, however, the establishment of Israel was experienced as an act of aggression that led to the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and to the occupation of their lands."

To bridge this gap in public perceptions, the report recommends the drafting of a white paper analyzing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict dispassionately and objectively, giving voice to competing narratives on both sides. In recommending historical research as a precondition to political dialogue, the UN report has identified a core problem that dates back to the spring of 1919 when three politicians, Woodrow Wilson, Lloyd George and Georges Clemenceau, disregarded history in favor of political expediency. Since then, political leaders have grappled vainly with the consequences of this "peace to end all peace" in the Middle East.

By acknowledging the importance of history and seeking to engage historians in the peace process, Annan is creating an opportunity for new approaches to resolving this seemingly intractable conflict. It is also something that some Palestinians and Israelis have long recognized. Since September 2000 when the second intifada sidelined political efforts at peace, leading Palestinian and Israeli historians have worked dispassionately and objectively to give voice to their competing narratives in the belief that historical truth is the most effective means

at dispelling the public myths that have poisoned the region's political discourse.

In 2004, more than two dozen prominent Palestinian and Israeli historians met in Istanbul for a conference that resulted in a joint publication called "Shared Histories: A Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue" that explores the competing narratives from the Napoleonic era to the 1948 war. Last spring, the scholars reconvened for a follow-up meeting.

In addition, the Arab Thought Forum in Jerusalem and the Peres Center for Peace in Tel Aviv are currently preparing, with support from my institute, a joint Palestinian-Israeli atlas of the 1948 war. During the last two years, I have attended several meetings of such groups. There is little discussion of peace or reconciliation but frequent reference to historical truth. Both sides have been willing to sacrifice their own myths and to accept uncomfortable facts in their search for something that approximates historical reality, in the belief that truth ultimately leads to justice and to meaningful and lasting peace. Similar joint Palestinian-Israeli projects are under way that will provide shared narratives of key holy sites and the Palestinian refugee situation.

The head of the Arab Thought Forum, Abdel Rahman Abu Arafah, notes that when respected Palestinian and Israeli historians reach consensus on any set of facts or events, no matter how modest, it becomes something that no bomb attack or military incursion or derailed peace process can undo. He describes these projects as the building blocks for future peace.

When the politicians in the key capitals of the West, as well as those in the Middle East, finally muster the political will and moral leadership for attempting to resolve the Middle East crisis yet again, they can be assured that this time history will be waiting for them, literally as well as figuratively.

A version of this article appears in print on November 23, 2006, in The International Herald Tribune.

For more information, contact Dr. Timothy Ryback,
Ryback@ihjr.org