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The Tyranny of Narrative: History, Heritage, and Hatred in the Modern Middle East

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From the very beginning of modern heritage commemoration, the celebration of every nation's historical destiny has been a central motif of its identity (Connerton 1989). More than that, the drama of the nation's rise (or rebirth) and fervent belief in the unchanging "essence" of the particular nation have been primarily communicated in the form of a narrative, a story told—as we will see—in many media, extending from the dawn of history to the modern era, highlighting the distinctive talents, events, and leaders that have made the country great (Silberman 1995). Benedict Anderson has highlighted the process by which these "imagined" national communities have played a decisive role in modern political life (2006) and in a pioneering work on this subject, Bernard Lewis has described this process as "History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented" (1987) suggesting that these national narratives are the result of contemporary social contexts with a wide range of contemporary political and cultural results.

Indeed when the formulation of the national narrative is seen not only as a commonplace internal function of modern state building, but a global phenomenon of conflicting narratives of rival states, the negative impact of traditional heritages practices becomes clearer. The teleological vision of history that sees a particular modern nation as the coherent and

inevitable endpoint of a millennia-long story of genius, perseverance, and territorial possession is almost certain to be mobilized in contemporary conflicts between rival nations, as justification for purely contemporary territorial or military goals. Although the narratives may be reported to be based on sound historical method and/or systematic archaeological excavations, the selective use of the past as a rationale for modern policy is a “romantic” literary creation (Lowenthal 1996). It is a meaningful arrangement of arbitrarily chosen arguments or evidence for a particular ideology. Claims of precedence should be viewed as assertions rather than facts. For as in the case of Israel and Palestine, the two competing monolithic narratives that claim to express the essential “truth” of an embattled territory’s history cannot both exclusively be true (e.g. Benvenisti 2000).

Geo-political changes can also occasion new narratives that symbolize national rebirth with the calls for repatriation of significant archaeological artifacts from former colonial powers (Cuno 2008). In this case the historical narrative is materially enacted in the mass media and in political fora, through the calls for—or actual return of—nationally symbolic artifacts. Also important in this respect are the increasingly numerous claims of indigenous peoples for repatriation of human remains and religious objects as well as recognition of their rights both to interpret and to control their own heritage (Fforde et. al. 2002). These claims represent yet another class of historical narratives of vindication and empowerment, repairing the historical rupture of displacement, colonization, and attempted genocide.

In view of this widespread use of heritage narratives for contemporary purposes, it is perhaps useful to consider more closely what the term “heritage” implies. The work of David Lowenthal (1985, 1996) has explored this question in detail and has highlighted the main distinguishing differences of contemporary approaches to the Past rather than defining a single unambiguous thing. The literarily constructed nature of academic historiography

was long ago analyzed by Hayden White (1987) and subsequently by Keith Jenkins (2003), but what I would like to stress here is the constructed nature of public heritage interpretation, and its enormous political influence. In the sections that follow I will attempt to show that public heritage narratives in various forms and media have become the most common—indeed the primary—means of historical expression in the 21st century and that they have a decidedly negative influence on the possibility of contemporary political compromise and cultural coexistence in the Middle East.

Heritage Narratives in a Globalized and Tribalized World

Heritage narratives must be clearly distinguished from historical or historiographical in the sense that they serve clear public (rather than academic research) purposes and they come in a variety of media and forms. While the work of White (1987) and Jenkins (2003) surely applies to the literary formation of basic historical stories, they fail to deal with the aspect of public communication and performance that heritage narratives necessarily entail (Beck and Cable 2002). In that sense they represent something akin to the “powerful speech” of oral cultures, where professional bards elaborate tales from the past to challenge or flatter the powers-that-be (Niles 1999). In these narratives there is no question of an objective, scientific presentation of the Past as entirely separate from the Present. The primary point of the exercise is to utilize traditional narratives of creation or heroic events to make far-reaching statements about the behaviors and events of the present day.

In oral cultures, the changes to epic narratives are incremental; innovation (just within limits) is testimony to the narrator’s skill. But when we come to consider the role of the narrator or interpreter within modern heritage practice, the issue of “change” becomes

an especially contentious one. From the beginning of the modern Heritage movement in Western Europe and the United States in the 19th century, the conservation and public display of historical monuments and archaeological sites was an essentially romantic, conservative one, tracing the essentialized history of a nation and its people through a series of political, artistic, and technological stages of development, each illustrated by a particular group of monuments (Lowenthal 1985). At the same time, a brand of “imperial” archaeology was developed by those same nations, concentrating on the Mediterranean and—especially important for the subject of this paper—in the Middle East (Silberman 1982). Its main narrative was a universalized history of civilization, symbolized by a progressive chain of great monuments and artworks that culminated in the rise of “the West.”

These two approaches to official heritage commemoration (and by extension, to the narratives that underlay them) informed international policy and legal frameworks throughout the 19th and most of the 20th century. Yet with the rise of systematic social history, interest in indigenous and non-European, non-monumental, heritage, and Intangible Cultural Heritage, the perceived locus of significance began to shift. (Araoz 2007). Basic question began to be asked about heritage monuments and the narratives on which they were based: Is/should be heritage stable or frozen? Is it exceptional? Is it typical? Is it global? Does unite communities and nations or does it inevitably create tensions between those identified as “us” against those culturally branded as “them”? The narratives told about the past were increasingly seen as not merely as popular syntheses or resumes of historical scholarship, but as a type of public discourse with enormous influence on, and influence from contemporary ideologies (Kohl and Fawcett 1995).

The general scholarly recognition of the contemporary political subtexts of traditional western heritage narratives gradually revolutionized the theoretical orientation of archae-

ology (Trigger 1984), museology (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), and of public heritage practice itself (Smith 2006), resulting in the creation of counter-narratives and the commemoration of silenced or overlooked voices through non-elite material culture, intangible traditions, and oral histories. Yet the basic form of the narrative (if not its specific contents) remained largely unchanged. Sites, objects, and behaviors continued to be seen, pars pro toto, as symbolic representations of a story that linked the present with the past. Whether it was family values, technological innovation, ethnic traditions, indigenous cosmologies, or historical tragedies, the narrative arc was meant to enshrine the nobility of the contemporary subject as essentially timeless, eternal, and inevitable.

As mentioned above, the power of heritage narratives is magnified by their diversity of narratives styles and media (Dicks 2003, Silberman 2004) and it is integrated into the flow of contemporary life by a striking uniformity of physical form. In the design and construction of heritage sites all over the world, the heritage narrative has become embodied—a public ritual performance that is a narrative “meant to be read primarily with the visitors’ emotions and feet” (Silberman 2007: 183). The visit to an historic monument or archaeological site has its own sequential structure: from the parking lot, through the ticket booth, along a carefully marked path of interpretation, out through the gift shop and cafeteria, and back to the parking lot again. This ritual superimposes a personal story of (presumably) memorable experience on the “official” narrative of the site. And whether it is in Europe, the U.S. or the warring nations of the Middle East, the modern heritage site cements the seemingly inevitable and unbreakable connection between a carefully selected starting point in the Past and the consciousness of the individual visitor in the present. As such, it is often a celebration of historical essentialism that impedes the possibility of change.

A Basic Typology of Historical Narratives

The uniformity of heritage frameworks should not blind us to the distinctive messages and morals that various heritage narratives express. As will be seen in the following section, their recombination in distinctive and conflicting patterns in Middle Eastern heritage sites and presentations exerts a powerful effect on contemporary conflicts.

1.) The “Decline” Narrative (Fig. 1): Expressed in antiquity in the Garden of Eden story in the biblical Book of Genesis (2:8-24) and in the declining “Ages of Man” in Hesiod’s Works and Days, this basic narrative for sees time as a cause of progressive decay and moral deterioration. It looks back to an idealized Golden Age which the transcendent forces of history have destroyed.

2.) The “Progress” Narrative (Fig. 2): In this alternative unidirectional narrative, human existence has steadily improved from a state of barbarism or ignorance. The evolving cosmogonies and revelations of many major religions (e.g. to Moses, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad) and the Enlightenment belief in steady improvement through rationality (Nisbet 1980) typify rather unnuanced narrative line.

3.) The “Suffering” Narrative (Fig 3.): This compound narrative form expresses both a nostalgic longing and the pain of current suffering, often used by diasporic or exiled peoples to underline their identity. It may contain an element of moral condemnation or be ascribed to forces beyond the people’s control. It is the narrative of collective martyrdom.

4.) The “Restoration” Narrative (Fig. 4): Finally, we have the full theological statement, in which a historical catastrophe is reversed. A people or community, having experienced both triumph and tragedy is restored to its rightful station—a mirror image of the

former Golden Age. It is the fulfillment of a self-contained historical drama, in which history, in effect, comes to an end.

From Ancient Myth to Modern Story

What is the relevance of these narrative types to contemporary Middle Eastern heritage presentations and the Arab-Israeli conflict? As I will suggest in this section, the traditional narratives of decline, progress, suffering, and restoration have been updated through the influence of the archaeology of the proto-historic periods and combined with modern political ideologies. The effect, I would argue, has been to intensify the zero-sum conflict in the region by proposing that there is only one true inheritor of the land and the contending party has been the source of national misfortune. Drawing on the basic story types and logic of inevitable, unchanging heritage linkage between past and present, the tyranny of narrative is to demand complete victory for one side or the other and to insist that history has a preordained plan that can never change.

The legendary and biblical stories of human creation were gradually supplanted through the later 19th and especially the twentieth century, the discoveries of paleontologists gave new garb to the stories of the exile from a primeval Eden. Yet the narratives of both “decline” and “progress” remained (Landau 1991). Likewise the rise and fall of the great ancient Near Eastern Empires, as discovered and elaborated by modern European antiquarians and archaeologists, followed the narrative patterns of progress and decline with an important divergence from the legendary tales. The imperial nations of the West now assumed for themselves the status of true “inheritors,” leaving the modern nations of the Middle East entirely out of the picture and suggesting a parallel between themselves and the

great imperial civilizations of Antiquity and their periods of glory with their own modern golden age (Larsen 1994, Kuklick 1996, Reid 2002). A universalized narrative of western inheritance of ancient Near Eastern civilization was thereby enshrined (Figure 6).

The rise of modern nationalist movements in the region began to contest this imperial vision, with modern Egyptians, Lebanese, Syrians, and Zionists claiming a particular ancient civilization (and maximal territory) for themselves. The same secular pattern of inheritance was particularized and politicized to justify 20th-century sovereignty claims. Most clearly defined through archaeological excavations and elaborate heritage presentations was the Zionist and later Israeli narrative of Jewish national rebirth (Fig. 7). Taking the literal historicity of the biblical birth of the People of Israel for granted, the Jewish community of Palestine-Israel saw its Golden Age in the era of ancient political independence, followed by a period of exile and desolation, and finally reversed with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. At every major heritage site (e.g. Hazor, Megiddo, Masada, Qumran, and Jerusalem) the presentation and interpretation of ancient Israelite or Jewish remains embodied this central narrative rationale (Silberman 1993).

With the political crystallization of a Palestinian national movement, archaeology was never an important factor, but folklore, memory, and historical geography were woven into a clear counter-narrative (Khalidi 1998). Yet this narrative was one of exile and suffering, closely following the traditional tale (Fig. 8). What makes the interaction of these two narratives so explosive is that, when seen together, they are inextricably intertwined (Fig. 9). The Golden Age of one narrative is the Period of Desolation of the other, with no possibility of ever coming to reconciliation in a history that is portrayed in exactly opposing black and white. Thus the tyranny of narrative in the current Arab-Israeli conflict transforms every historical discovery into a reason for hostility and intransigence in off and on struggle to reach a

politically acceptable partition of this twice-promised land. As long as the narrative link continues to be made between idealized, ethnically homogeneous Golden Ages and rival modern national movements, the warring peoples of Israel and Palestine will be unable to learn anything constructive from the Past.

A New Narrative that “Remembers” Forward

The fruit of such competing narratives is inevitably bitter. A new approach to heritage in the Middle East, as elsewhere, must somehow avoid offering the impression of historical inevitability and the exclusive triumph or humiliation of specific communities. Such an approach was sought in the course of the visionary PUSH Project, a combined effort of Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian working groups (PUSH 2007). Beginning with attempts to craft multiple narratives at single contested sites, as well as unifying narratives that linked several sites across the disputed territories, the team members produced publications, training programs, and practical field manuals that attempted to redefine heritage not as dead or dying things that need “protection” from deterioration but rather objects of reflection that could serve as foci of discussion about what a common future could be.

It became clear during the course of the project (2006-2008) that the link between past and present was inherently conflictual, essentializing historical processes and rigidly separating “us” vs. “them.” The key to breaking through the traditional heritage narrative, it seemed, may be the recognition that the culmination of history did not lie in the violent, intolerant here and now. The making of historical and heritage narratives, on the other hand, was understood as entirely a product of the present; it would therefore be necessary to analyze the process of narrative construction rather than the product of seeming heritage “fact.”

These included further research on the dynamics of tradition—namely how certain narrative patterns are adapted through time to serve changing political identities and ideologies. Likewise it will be important to document and better understand the social role of historic monuments and cultural traditions as “vessels of significance” whose emotion-laden contents are dynamic and differ in various social contexts.

Most important of all, the work of the PUSH Project showed that it is essential to integrate conserved traditions and sites with an evolving social and political landscape that recognizes what a positive common future can be. Thus the link of the past to the present—such an intrinsic element of all traditional heritage narratives—needs to be reconceived to link the Past to a shared future that is with in the power of contemporary communities in Israel, Palestine (and elsewhere) to fashion for themselves (Fig. 10).

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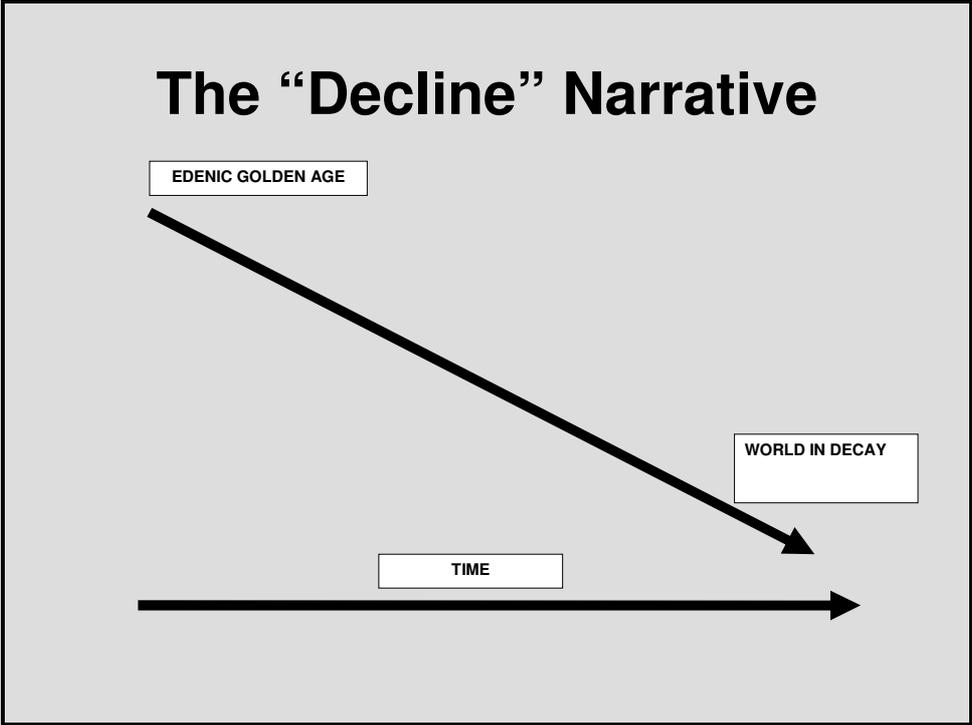


Figure 1: The “Decline” Narrative

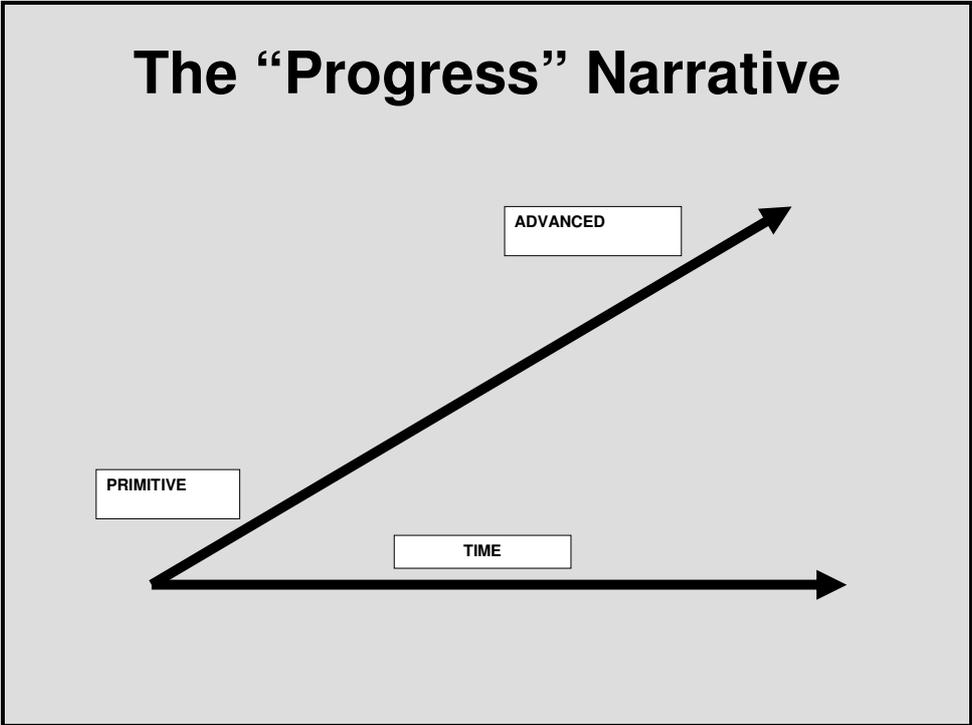


Figure 2: The “Progress” Narrative

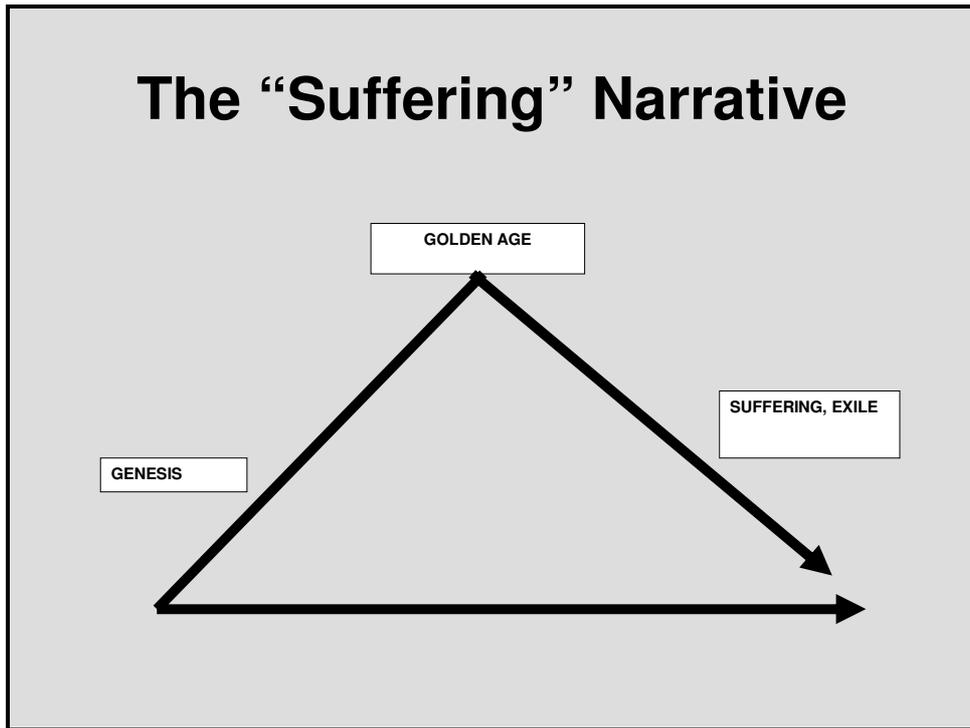


Figure 4: The “Suffering” Narrative

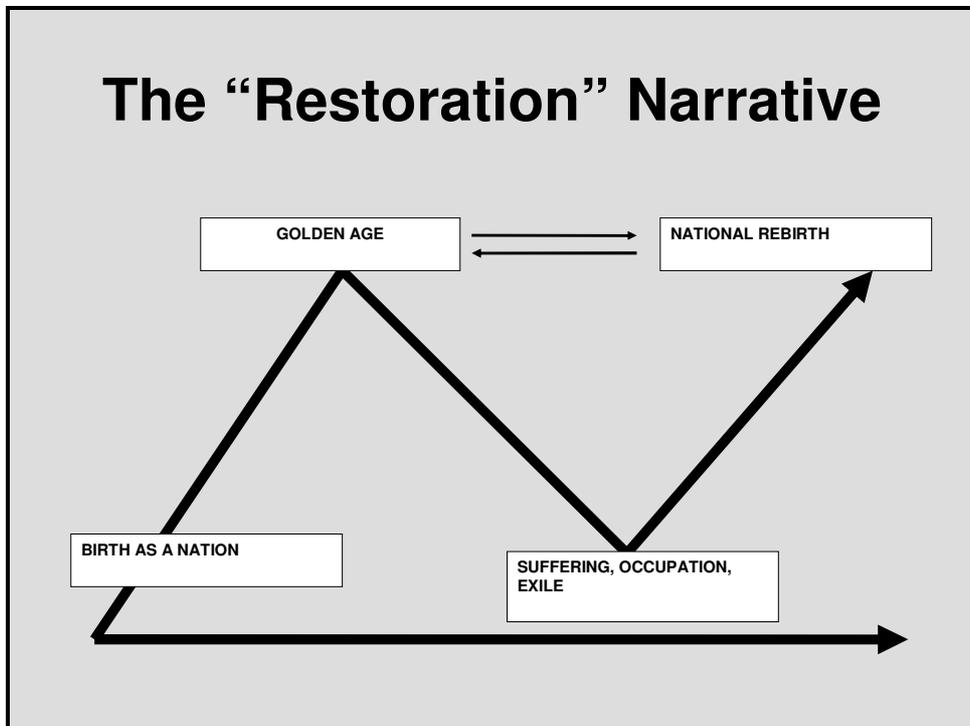


Figure 5: The “Restoration” Narrative

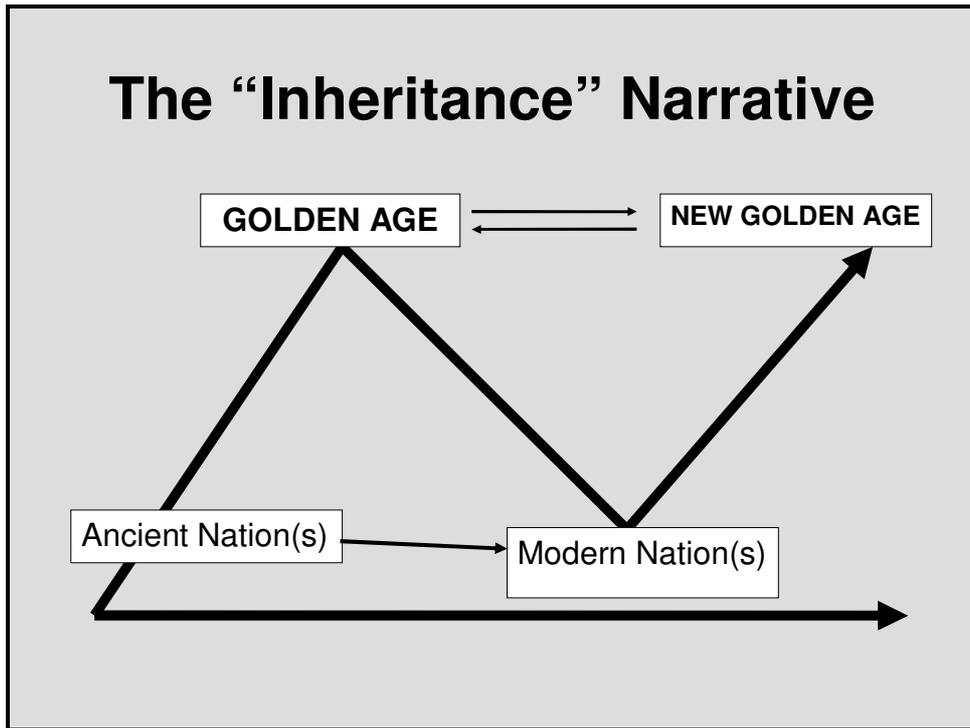


Figure 6: The “Inheritance” Narrative

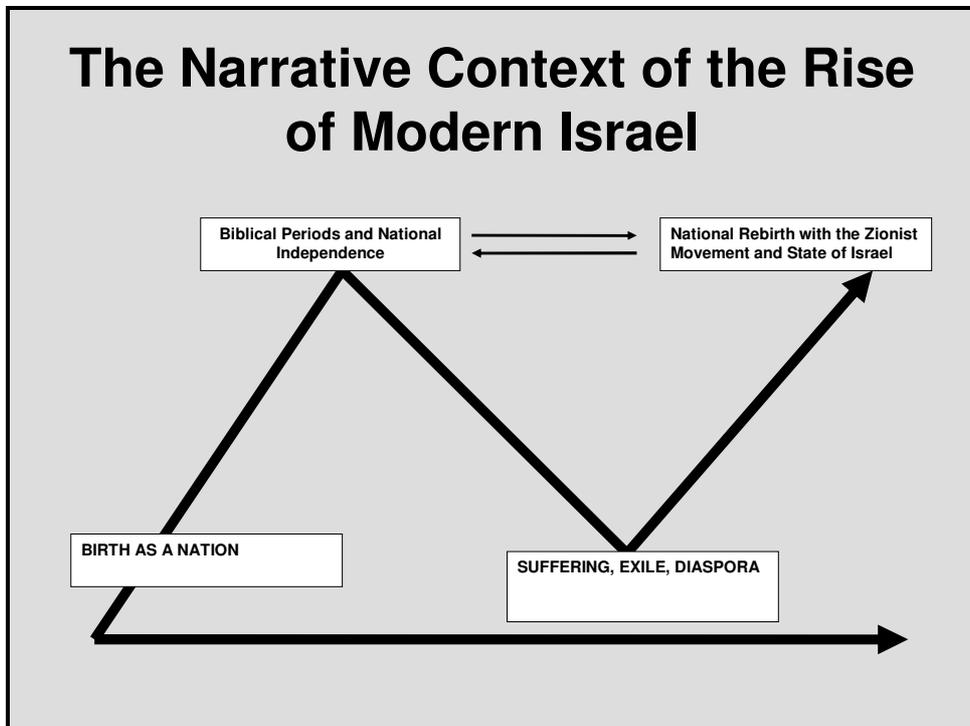


Figure 7: The Israeli Narrative

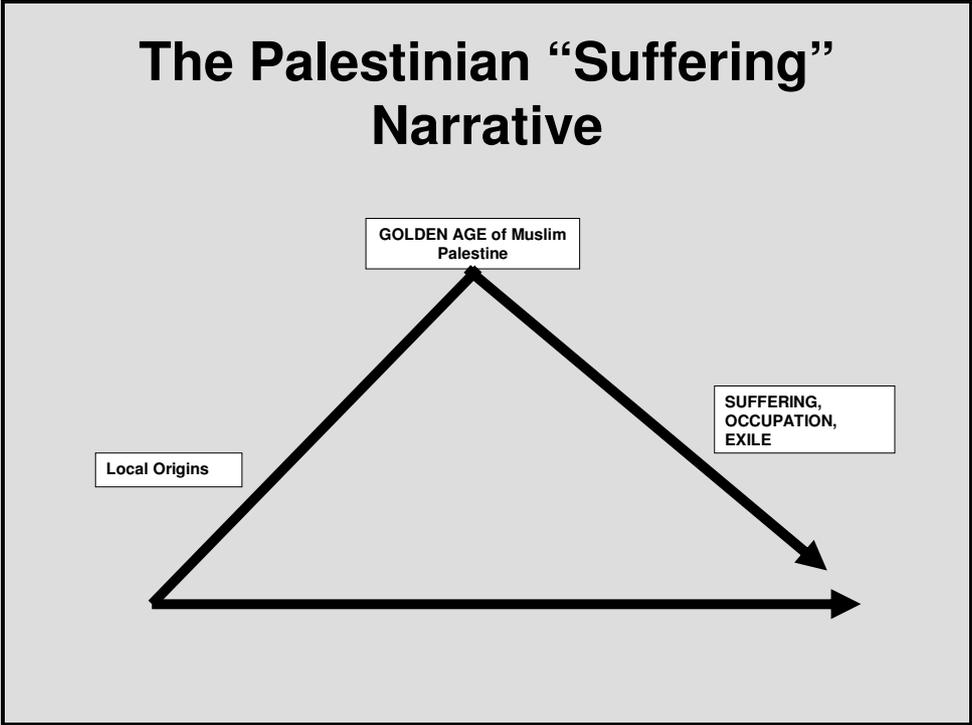


Figure 8: The Palestinian Narrative

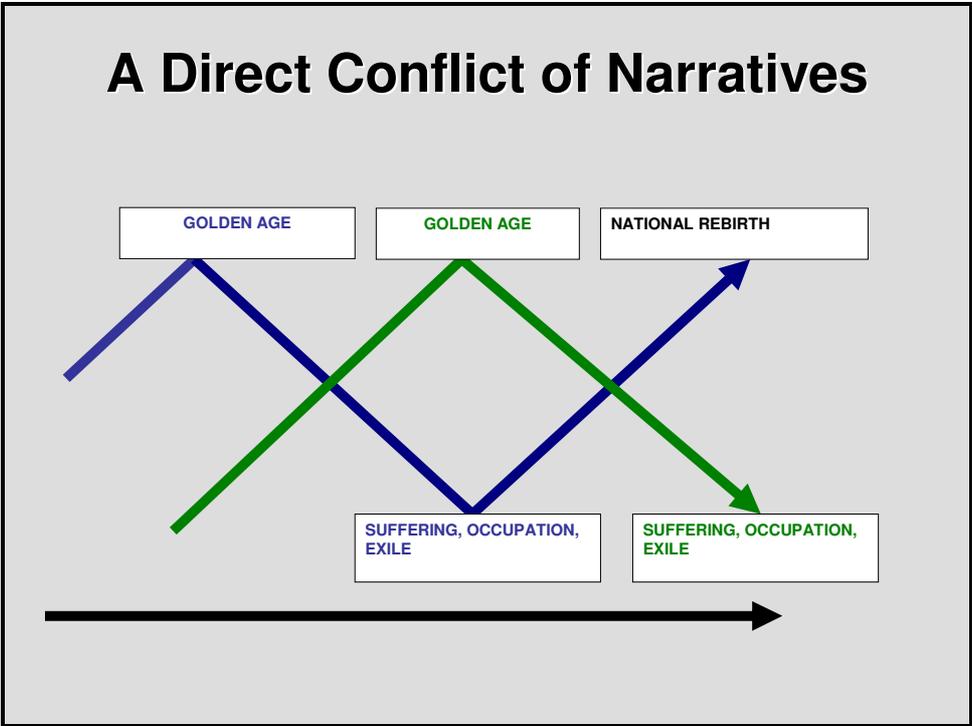


Figure 9: A Conflict of Narratives

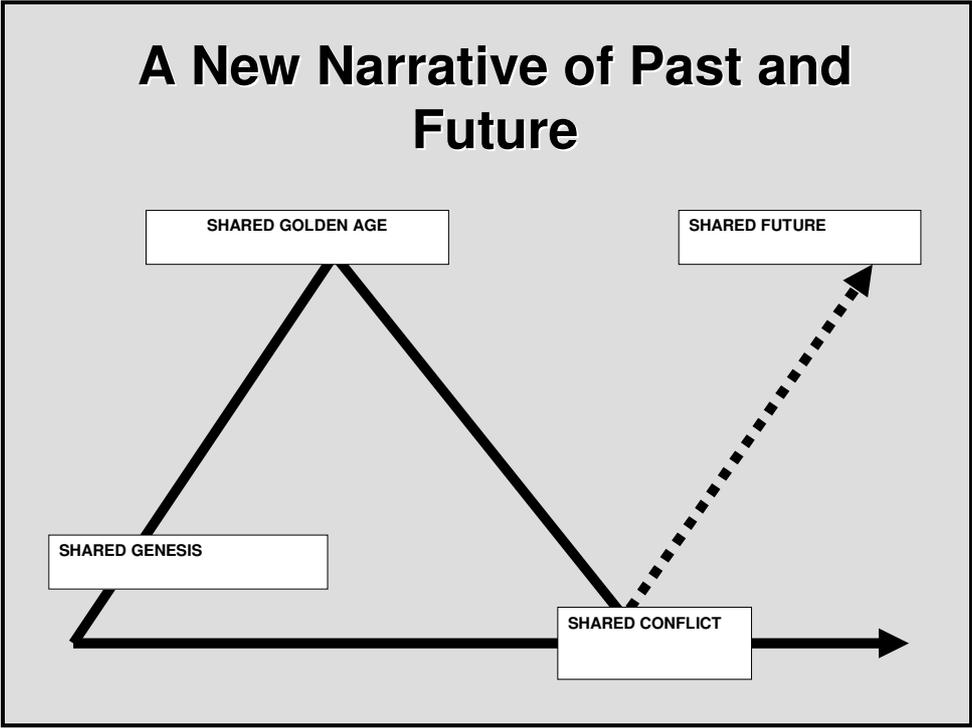


Figure 10: Toward a Shared Narrative