Author chronicles 'catastrophe' of displaced in Middle East

By Timothy Gillis
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The following is an email exchange with Jo Roberts, author of "Contested Land, Contested Memory: Israel's Jews and Arabs and the Ghosts of Catastrophe." She will appear at Longfellow Books in Portland on Monday, Aug. 11, at 7 p.m.

Timothy Gillis: Your book, "Contested Land, Contested Memory" shows the Middle East conflict through the dual lens of Nakba and Holocaust. What are your expectations for reader response?

JR: My book looks at the conflict through the lens of social suffering. It examines the separate yet entwined burdens of traumatic collective memory that both Israelis and Palestinians carry.

Zionism — the vision of a new Jewish society in Palestine — arose in response to the state-sponsored anti-Semitism and violence faced by Eastern European Jews in the late nineteenth century, and the collective memory of many centuries of persecution in Europe. This persecution eventually culminated in the Holocaust (Shoah). The Jewish settlers and the Holocaust survivors who fought side by side in Palestine in 1948 saw themselves as fighting a War of Independence. They wanted a state of their own that would offer them a safe haven at last.

But for Palestinians, 1948 was the year of the Nakba. Some three-quarters of a million people fled, or were driven out of, the territory that became Israel, losing their homes, their land, their whole way of life. Over a million first, second, and third-generation refugees still live in refugee camps in neighbouring territories. Instead of the nation-state they too had been promised by the UN's 1947 Partition Plan, the land was divided between the new state of Israel, Jordan, and Egypt.

So Jewish Israelis and Palestinians both remember the land as their own, but their memories, individual and collective, are utterly different. My book explores the two competing narratives of historical suffering that frame the conflict between them. Both Nakba (in Arabic) and Shoah (in Hebrew) mean the same thing: Catastrophe. For Israelis and for Palestinians, the remembered history of a traumatic past has moulded their common understanding of who they are as a people. These catastrophes continue to mark the generations who follow.

My hope would be that a reader would gain what I gained from researching and writing the book: a deeper understanding of what drives the conflict, and thus a deeper compassion for people on both sides who are caught in it.

TG: Discuss the existing climate in Gaza. Do you think the current 72-hour ceasefire will work?

JR: To be honest, I don't feel qualified to make predictions about the ceasefire. My research focuses on Jewish and Palestinian Israelis (some 20 percent of Israeli citizens are Palestinian), rather than on Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. Also, I'm not a political analyst, and the details of military and diplomatic strategy aren't my area of expertise.

That having been said, if we step back and look at the big picture, I do think that the situation in Gaza is powerfully shaped by the forces of collective trauma described above. To sketch it in broad strokes: the trauma of the Shoah has left many Jewish Israelis frozen in the absolute imperative of "Never again," which means that any act of military aggression against Israel triggers a deeply-rooted fear of annihilation.

One powerful example: During Operation Cast Lead in 2008, in which 1,387 Gaza Palestinians and 13 Israelis lost their lives, Lieutenant Colonel Yeohar Gal stated in a radio debate: "I think we should go at it more strongly. Dresden, Dresden. Devastate a city... I tell you that we, as sons of Holocaust survivors, must know that this is the essence of our lives, coming from there... No one will throw a stone at us for being Jews... Make it crystal clear: no one is going to fire at us... I will not agree to a single bullet shot at us by the enemy. As soon as the enemy opens fire on me my survival instinct tells me to destroy the enemy."

I believe that this kind of fear is largely responsible for the overwhelming percentage of Israelis that support the attacks on Gaza, despite the enormous discrepancy in numbers of Israeli and Palestinian casualties.

Meanwhile, the mounting death toll in Gaza heaps further trauma on Palestinians, further entrenching the sense of injustice and rage that gave rise to the firing of rockets into Israel in the first place.

TG: How can the average American come to understand the conflict better?

JR: Opinions in the U.S. are often polarized between two extremes. Many people perceive Israel as a bastion of democracy in the Middle East and Palestinians as supporters of terrorism; other people perceive Israel as a colonial settler state.

Yet each of these perspectives lacks an understanding of the history of suffering underpinning current political events. People who grew up believing the motto "A land without people for a people without land" may be reluctant to acknowledge that the 1948 War permanently displaced three-quarters of a million Palestinians, or the fact that Palestinians remaining in the new state of Israel were held under martial law for 18 years, or the dramatic power imbalance that continues to exist. And people who simply equate the founding of Israel with European colonialism are failing to recognize the centuries of European Christian anti-Semitism, of pogroms and expulsions, which were the driving force behind Zionism, and which found their most horrific expression in the Holocaust.

These events may be in the past, but the effects of these historic traumas are very much with us today. I would encourage any of us seeking a better understanding of the conflict to read widely, to consider the legacy of the past with care, and to listen with an open mind to points of view that may differ from our own.

TG: How has meeting Dahoud, Miki, Hazneh, Tamar and others (discussed in the book) influenced your perceptions of place and the importance of personal narratives?

JR: The voices of the many Jewish and Palestinian Israelis I met while researching the book (historians, writers, and activists; community leaders, diplomats and politicians; Palestinian Israelis displaced during the Nakba and Jewish Israelis who fought in the 1948 War) carry the narrative of my story. I did a great deal of research beforehand, and, as one does, I started the interviews with a particular analysis in my head. Over and over, I found that analysis reworked and reformed by what I was hearing. It made the book much more nuanced and multi-faceted.

One section of the book is about how collective memory shapes our understanding of the landscape we see around us. As we know, history is written by the victors. After the 1948 War, the founding story of the state that took shape in Jewish Israeli collective memory didn't include the disquieting narrative of the Palestinian Arabs and their removal. Most Israelis had lost friends or family members in the Holocaust or the War, or been damaged themselves. Their new state was shelter from that traumatic past and security against a similar future, and there was no room for anything that might threaten that - including the story of the Palestinian catastrophe.

Many traces of longtime Arab presence in the land were erased: empty Arab villages were demolished, and forested parks established over their ruins. Maps were rewritten, and place names translated into Hebrew.

This process became very real to me the day I travelled across the Galilee with Dahoud Badr. We were driving by red-roofed villages, and highway signs gave their names: Ben Ammi, Kibbutz Kabri. But as we passed by, Dahoud was alerting me to a different, hidden landscape. "That used to be al-Nahr," he said, pointing towards the fields off to the right. "And over there, there was the village of al-Kabri."

Eventually we reached a deserted hilltop, covered in grass, trees, and rubble, with no buildings in sight other than a derelict mosque behind rolls of barbed wire. Dahoud pointed at something. It turned out to be a few piles of stones, almost lost in the tall grass. "Here," he said. "Here, this is where my home was."

So, the landscape and geography of Israel hold two conflicting histories of 1948, one of a world that ended and one of the state that was born. The story of the Palestinian Nakba is still not widely accepted in Israel. In fact, in 2011, the Knesset passed a law penalizing commemoration of the Nakba. Yet until the histories of both peoples are fully acknowledged, it's hard to see how there can be a genuine and lasting peace.

Event Details:

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