

Challenging Israel's Myths

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A carefully cultivated mythology sustains Israel's territorial claims to Palestine and rationalizes Israel's ethnic cleansing of millions of Palestinians from the land. Challenges to those myths are typically met with fierce counterattacks.

Soon after my Nov. 4 analysis, ["In Defense of Richard Falk"](#) was published by [Media with a Conscience](#) (MWC), the site editor forwarded to me an unusual chastising response.

Unusual because it came from a relatively well-known scholar and writer by the name of Fred Skolnik.

Mr. Skolnik is the editor in chief of a 22-volume Encyclopedia Judaica (second edition), a work that won the Dartmouth Medal in 2007. He is also the author of numerous works of fiction all concerning life in Israel. It is not rare for Zionists to take me to task, and Skolnik is most certainly a Zionist. Yet it is rare that those who chastise are of Skolnik's stature. And so, a reply is in order.

Mr. Skolnik does not like Dr. Falk who, the reader might remember, is the present United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Palestinian Territories. And, because I defend Falk, he does not like me either. Indeed, as far as Skolnik is concerned I am part of "an army of Israel haters ... churning out endless ... venomous half truths" about the Land of Israel.

Nonetheless, Skolnik has taken the time to write a three-page commentary to set me and my readers straight.

He says, "I will state Israel's case in as few words as possible, though you of course may not choose to publish this in order not to lose the effect you are aiming at." Well, that is silly. I have no objection to my readers seeing Mr. Skolnik's response. Here is how you can do so: go to the MWC site; search for Davidson; go to "In Defense of Robert Falk;" and scroll down to Skolnik's comment.

That being said, here is my analysis of elements of Mr. Skolnik's case for Israel.

1. Skolnik: "There is no historic Palestine that has anything to do with the Arabs, nor is there an 'indigenous' or native Muslim population there." Skolnik's assertion is a very old fantasy or myth that has been developed over the years to allow radical Zionists and violent settlers to rationalize their historical absorption of Palestinian land.

Quoting from the [Wikipedia entry](#) for Palestinian People, an entry which reflects the latest research into this subject of who was where and when, including genetic analysis, we find that Palestinians are the "modern descendants of those who have lived in Palestine over the centuries and today are largely culturally and linguistically Arab. ... Genetic analysis suggests that a majority of the Muslims of Palestine, inclusive of the Arab citizens of Israel,

are descendants of Christians, Jews and other inhabitants of the southern Levant whose core reaches back to prehistoric times.”

Furthermore, “a study of high-resolution haplotypes [DNA sequences] demonstrated that a substantial portion of Y chromosomes of Israeli Jews (70%) and of Palestinian Muslim Arabs (82%) belong to the same chromosome pool.”

What all this means is that the ancestors of those Palestinians who are now culturally and linguistically Arab have been in Palestine for time immemorial. Over the ages, the population fragmented, acquired differing religious, linguistic and cultural traits. Indeed, those indigenous Palestinians, Jews and local Christians as well, are basically the same people gone in somewhat separate cultural ways.

Poor Mr. Skolnik. It is a shock that he is so ardently supporting the ethnic cleansing of his own cousins.

2. Skolnik: “Most of the Arabs with ‘roots’ in the Land of Israel migrated there from other parts of the Arab world in the 19th and early 20th centuries while the Jews have been continuously present in the Land of Israel for well over 3000 years.”

This is another myth that was most prominently put forth in a book by Joan Peters, published in 1984, and entitled [From Time Immemorial](#). Her argument and evidence were meticulously taken apart and shown to be false by [Norman Finkelstein](#) in his *Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (1995).

3. Skolnik: “The displacement of the Arabs in the Land of Israel during Israel’s war of Independence ... was paralleled by the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Jews living in Arab lands at the time whose lives were made unbearable under vindictive Arab rule.” Subsequently, the Israelis “received their Jewish brethren with open arms” while the Arab countries that received Arab refugees “herded them into camps and treated them like animals.”

For an editor of a 22-volume encyclopedia Skolnik shows a deplorable tendency to slip into generalizing, stereotyping and lumping together multiple events with multiple outcomes. Here are some counterpoints:

-Actually, the exodus of Arab Jews from their countries of residence went on over an extended period of time and in some cases, such as Algeria, had nothing to do with the events in Palestine. In other cases where the Arab country found itself at war with Israel, as with Egypt, Jewish immigration was a direct result of the Zionist expulsion of Arabs. And in the case of Morocco, the government tried hard to assure the Jews safety and prosperity to counter Zionist propaganda urging them to leave.

-Sometimes the “displacement” was hastened, as in Iraq, by Zionist agents committing violent acts of sabotage against local Jewish communities.

-The reception the Arab Jews got in Israel wasn’t quite the “open arms” picture Skolnik paints. They were received by their European Jewish “brethren” with racial prejudice. Even today, Ashkenazi and Sephardic/Mizrachi relations in Israel are strained.

-As for the Arab refugees who were allegedly “treated like animals” by their fellow Arabs,

this is an exaggeration. The situation differed country to country. For instance, treatment in Lebanon was bad; in Jordan it was good. In none of the refugee camps in Arab countries were conditions worse than those in the tent cities and “development towns” in the Negev Desert into which the Israelis herded 80 percent of the Arab Jewish refugees.

4. Mr. Skolnik has other points which time and space do not allow me to address. The interested reader can find them in his response to my essay on Dr. Falk. If you read and consider them please take the time to follow up with other sources of information, such as the works of the Israeli historians Ilan Pappé and Benny Morris as well as the journalistic pieces of Amira Hass and Gideon Levy (both of whom work for the Israeli newspaper Haaretz), and the reports of Israel’s human rights group B’Tselem. These are all Israeli sources, but they tell a very different story than does Skolnik.

From Skolnik to Gaza

As Mr. Skolnik so aptly demonstrates, we all live within our own world. These are usually constructed for us by our upbringing: our families, our peers, our schools, our friends and the level of attachment we develop to the community. This attachment is usually sustained and deepened by the reinforcing information environment that the community provides for us.

These environments at once transform us into “good” citizens and simultaneously narrow our views of the world so they conform to acceptable political and cultural paradigms. The process usually works quite well. Nevertheless, it is still true that in any community you get a continuum of acceptance and devotion ranging from the skeptic to the true believer. For the latter, the community can do no wrong and its behavior can always be rationalized. When it comes to Israel, Skolnik is a true believer.

In a country like Israel, one that has armed itself to the teeth yet feels perennially insecure, and where the true believers are in charge, the situation is made dangerous in the extreme. Over the years Israeli leaders, generally believing the same things that Fred Skolnik believes, have dispossessed and ethnically cleansed the Palestinians, pushing them into ever smaller areas of concentration.

Gaza is the worst example of these cases. It is a virtual “open air prison” of a million and half people squeezed into 139 square miles, the most densely populated place on earth. There, with the compliance of the United States and the European Union, the Israelis have proceeded to reduce most of the Gazans to abject poverty.

When, periodically, these people strike out at their tormenters, usually in ineffective ways, they are labeled terrorists and, again with Western blessing, attacked furiously and disproportionately by the Israelis. You can now witness the latest onslaught live on the web.

Under these circumstances Skolnik’s assertions that the Jews were in Palestine first and the Arabs only came later as interlopers is really besides the point. Let us say, just for the sake of argument, that he is correct, that the Jews, even in their European guise, are the real indigenous Palestinians, having come back to the homeland after an extended absence of a couple of thousand years.

Even granted this fiction, does any of that give today’s Israeli Jews the right to treat the Palestinians as they do? Does it justify the creation of an apartheid environment in the

occupied West Bank? Does it give them the right to reduce a million and half Gazans to a calculated impoverishment and then provoke them until they respond, whereupon Israelis indulge themselves in self-righteous mass murder?

I don't believe any of Skolnik's pseudo-history. I also don't give a damn who lived in or controlled Palestine 3,000 years ago. The ones who control it now are, by their actions, no better than barbarians. And the leaders in the West who back them have Palestinian blood on their hands.

When it comes to behaviors like ethnic cleansing and cultural genocide, the claim of self-defense is ludicrous. Nor can the fantasies of Fred Skolnik justify such on-going crimes.

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of [*Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest*](#); [*America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*](#); and [*Islamic Fundamentalism*](#).

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