

A Different Angle



The [Zavit Acheret](#) (*A Different Angle*) website was launched in 2005 with the goal of bringing to the Israeli reader the voices of intellectuals from the Arab and Islamic world calling for change and reform, and dealing sharply and honestly with the problems of the Arab and Islamic societies.

As part of a joint effort with *Sharqiyya* every issue contains a translated article which also appears on the website along with the original text. In this issue we have chosen to bring an article, written by the Iraqi political analyst, Jāber Ḥabīb Jāber, who wants to distinguish between the past and history, between the truth and the historical narrative. He asks how a temporary political dispute becomes an irreversible rift protected by the historical truth, etches the line between politics and historical truth to other historical narratives, and how these influence the schisms in the Arab world today.

The Narratives of History and the Struggles of Today

Jāber Ḥabīb Jāber ([Al-Sharq Al-Awsat](#), May 31, 2009)
Based on Hebrew Translation by Roey Schurr*

The greatest lies are those that the most people believe in, and one of these is the lie called "history". Some of us treat history as an established fact, which should not be doubted – as though the historical narrative that we possess is the complete and honest truth. Anything else is a distortion, misstatement or forgery. In relation to this approach, there are those who believe in a different lie called "learning from history". Frequently we embellish our statements about the past with the saying that they are necessary to prevent us from making those same mistakes.

Yet we repeatedly make the same claim about what we argued that we should avoid. In fact, we are unable to separate two completely different

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things – history and the past. The first is a narrative that one or more people told or wrote down. It may be close to the actual events that occurred in the past or distant from them, or it may be challenged by another narrative presenting a different story. This is how the saying that "history is written by the victors" became popular. After all, at the end of the day, it does not really matter how reliable the various narratives are, only how they can become the "official history", which the social, religious and political authorities enforce and pass on from one generation to the next. This is what happened in the past, and what always happens. The more the process repeats itself the more we can imagine to ourselves how many historical narratives were sent to oblivion, and how many histories, which we believe in their truth can in fact be doubted, either partially or wholly.

This is how the science of history grew in the field of academy where it dug earnestly into the stories of the past, into its relics and the testimonies remaining from it, without any inclination to adopt in advance a particular narrative, or surrender to a particular ideological temptation. Since, the stories of history are usually laden with an ideological bias that deifies kings, crowns heroes, and presents enemies as the devil. Unfortunately, many of the achievements of the scientific-academic historical research conducted in authorized international universities do not reach the ears of the people. This is because they contain many discoveries that contradict myths which millions still believe, and some of them are still a central pillar of the cultural and social layout.

The past is separate from history in this aspect; it is all the things that took place previously – events, disasters, experiences, wars and achievements – and set the path for nations and peoples, trickling down into their consciousness and contributing towards designing their culture; and therefore, also their identity. The past is the history without a narrative. It is the yesterday that is done, the hour that has past. When you draw on a particular narrative from the past, you are writing history, and when you write you shove the past as you are grabbing it into the present to fill in it a permanent role. When the narrative is decided, keen, resolved and sacred you are chaining the present to the past in strong bonds, and this is the difficult problem.

We live in an area with a past that has deep roots, and are proud of the fact that the first civilization started in our area, where writing was invented, the first laws were established¹, and the prophets, representatives of God and the monotheistic religions appeared amongst us. This pride permeates all the levels of the social and spiritual structure, and thus provides us with an

¹ He is referring to the Sumerian culture that developed in Mesopotamia, the area where Iraq lies today. There are testimonies of its existence from approximately 5,000 B.C. The set of laws which king Ur-Nammu enacted are considered the first set of laws in the history of human culture.

exaggerated confidence, sometimes to the point of patronizing the other, who does not have the same hold on the truth as we do, and is not worthy of ruling over the land like us. The Arab identity is placed as a result in a difficult contradiction – between the feeling of superiority which is derived from what its past tells it, and the feeling of inferiority to the other who is currently superior. This is the reason why in the past two hundred years the struggle has become more excited between those who want to restore us to the past, as an only means for restoring the glory and the feeling of superiority, and those who want to distance themselves completely from that past, because they argue that it binds us and prevents us from catching up with the other. The problem is that our societies have failed to create a middle stream that combines authenticity with advancement and reaches an understanding with the mentality and culture of the society without becoming disconnected from the needs and demands of the period. Of course, there are those who will oppose this, claiming that most of us belong to those of the middle stream; however, there is a difference between such behavior by virtue of reality and need, and organizing our behavior in the framework of a cultural and ideological basis which will grant it legitimacy and allow it to strike roots. Therefore, the coat of modernism which many of us don hides a different interior controlled by a mentality held captive by the past and its stories.

The Shiite-Sunni struggle which erupted as a type of civil war in 2006 in Iraq, and is now dormant but may end up spewing molten lava everywhere, is now held temporarily, not permanently in check by the fragile constitutional and political balance in Lebanon. The entire region has been gradually dragged into this struggle in a frightening way and it threatens to destroy every good spot in the area if those who are held captive by the past become the policy makers. The conflict began, in reality, around the question of which historical narrative is the correct one and later evolved and became the narrative in its own right. This allowed the Sunni and the Shiite to hate each other as an axiom, and even kill each other as if there were no possibility that the two could both remain alive.

This struggle is an example of how the past has the ability to bind the present, our inability to doubt the historical stories, and even more, our insistence on sanctifying them when each side considers their own stories to be true and absolute and considers the others' stories as distortions, lies, or falsities. Each side may, in the same token, return to the legacy of the past to place its beliefs and to rewrite its narrative. Each side can convince everyone except the other side. Those who say: "Let us place history as a judge among us to reach the truth", are inadvertently helping to perpetuate the conflict because history itself has also become a captive of these struggles and was written under their weight. We have no reason to assume that whoever wrote the history in the past was any more neutral than us. Even if this was the case,

we can find in history testimonies to support both narratives, and if we delve deeper, we will find testimonies to overturn both of them. This is because the prevalent history, according to the most modern scientific methods, is the means by which we design the past, and is not necessarily the past itself. What we really need is to understand that the reason that led to the dispute does not necessarily require a struggle in the present, and does not even require an existential hatred. What seems today like a cold war between the Shiites and the Sunnites is in fact a struggle between political desires in an area which experiences changes, and centers of power move from place to place. And, perhaps this process of change is the only permanent thing throughout history.

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