Conspiracy narratives and Fear in Israel and Palestine

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Emotions, Power, Politics

Johannes Sauerland

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Abstract

Conspiracy narratives and Fear in Israel and Palestine - Emotions, Power, Politics

In recent years, scholars have increasingly studied the role played by conspiracy narratives in framing political discourse across the globe. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, however, the literature on the Middle East remains sparse and is often dominated by orientalist assumptions. Conspiracy narratives are closely associated with a paranoid political culture and are believed to fuel social paralysis, authoritarianism, and irrational hatred towards the United States and Israel. Furthermore, conspiracy narratives within Israel have received scant attention. Consequently, existing studies are limited, flawed, and fail to provide a comprehensive exploration of the role of conspiracy narratives in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies across the Middle East.

This thesis aims to address this gap by examining conspiracy narratives within the Israeli-Palestinian context. Drawing on existing literature on conspiracy narratives and emotions in international relations, the thesis develops a theoretical framework positing a close link between conspiracy narratives and emotions. It argues that Israeli and Palestinian conspiracy narratives are rooted in pervasive feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness, channelling these emotions into fears of specific enemies and their perceived plots.

By comparing conspiracy narratives within both societies, the thesis sheds light on their political functions. In Israel, right-wing ruling groups utilize conspiracy narratives to reinforce their political hegemony, leveraging fears invoked by conspiracy narratives to justify oppressive settler-colonial policies towards Palestinians and to marginalize left-wing voices. In the Palestinian West Bank, political actors employ the fear of conspiracies as an authoritarian tool to consolidate their power, resisting calls for democracy and shifting blame onto opponents. Yet, at the same time, conspiracy narratives serve as a counter-hegemonic tool for Palestinians to explain their oppression and to challenge those responsible and complicit.

This thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of conspiracy narratives in Israel and Palestine, highlighting their versatile role in political discourse beyond fostering paralysis and irrational hatred.

Keywords: Israel, Palestine, conspiracy theories, fear, emotions, political psychology

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Notes and Declaration

Note on Transliteration

For Arabic words, this thesis follows the transliteration guidelines of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES). For Hebrew words, this thesis follows the American Library Association-Library of Congress System. Where established English names of people, places, and institutions exist, English-language spelling is applied (e.g. Yassir Arafat or Regavim).

Note on Interviews

To protect the anonymity of all participants, no details (i.e. name or location) that might identify them are used. Annex I provides a list of all interviews with details as appropriate.

Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work. Material from the published or unpublished work of others which is used in the thesis is credited to the author in question.

List of Acronyms

BDS (movement)	Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement
DoP	Declaration of Principles (of the Oslo Accords)
Forum Kohelet	Kohelet Policy Forum, see also Annex II
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICJ	International Court of Justice
JCPA	Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, see Annex II.
KGB	Committee for State Security – The main intelligence agency for the Soviet Union
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OPT	Occupied Palestinian Territory
PA	Palestinian (National) Authority
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLC	Palestinian Legislative Council
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organisation
SIT	Social Identity Theory
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNLU	Unified National Leadership of the Uprising
US	United States of America
USSR	Soviet Union

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Introduction

In 2015, I moved to Jordan and lived there for more than a year. I often sat outside my flat in Jabal Amman, conversing with my Jordanian housemate and his friends. Occasionally, our discussions veered towards politics. I distinctly remember one conversation about ISIS, which was still a prominent topic at the time. My housemate strongly asserted that the United States of America (US) had founded ISIS to undermine the Syrian and Iraqi states. His theory sparked my interest in what are commonly referred to as conspiracy theories.

A year later, in 2016, Donald Trump won the US presidential election and became the 45th president of the United States. His campaign was partially built on conspiracy theories, which he continued to promote during and after his presidency. Among many other claims, Trump embraced the QAnon theory which essentially suggests that a cabal of high-profile Democrats and civil servants, running a child sex trafficking ring, conspired against the Trump Presidency. Trump also promotes the theory that the 2020 US presidential elections were stolen, with democrats orchestrating a systematic campaign of falsifying votes against Trump. In 2016, writer William Davies wrote for the *New York Times*: "The sense is widespread: We have entered an age of post-truth politics" (Davies, 2016). Conspiracy theories, a topic not discussed much previously, were suddenly everywhere. With the Covid-19 pandemic they started to receive even more attention.

Given this notable surge of conspiracy theories, it became apparent to me that they were not confined to the Middle East or the fringes of Western society but rather a mainstream phenomenon across different contexts. Matthew Gray (2010: 2) writes: "Conspiracy theorizing is in no way unique to the region." Further research supports this conclusion. According to polls, 60% of the population of the United Kingdom (UK) believe in at least one conspiracy theory (Addley, 2018). 55% of the Turkish population believes the US government was involved in the attacks on 9/11, while 61% of the Canadian population believes that Donald Trump knowingly worked with the Russian government to secure his election victory in 2016 (Ibbetson, 2021). Thus, studies confirm the prevalence of conspiracy theories in many different cultural contexts. However, when examining the literature on conspiracy theories in the Middle East, I encountered a different perspective.

The literature on conspiracy theories in the Middle East is limited, comprising roughly half a dozen academic sources. Much of this literature suggests that conspiracy theories are more prevalent in the Middle East compared to the West. For example, neo-conservative scholar Daniel Pipes (1998) states in the most detailed contribution on the subject that conspiracy theories, widely popular in the past, receded in the "rational West" (p. 9), but became widespread in the Middle East. Pipes goes on to state that trying

to understand the Middle East without understanding conspiracy theories would be like trying to understand Soviet history without reference to Marxism-Leninism (p. 2). Similarly, Röhl (2010: 45, own translation) comments that conspiracy theories are "transhistorical, transregional, and transcultural" before claiming that nevertheless there is a stronger tendency in the Middle East to embrace them. Or as Al-Azm (2011: 18) states: "I had always thought that the Arabs are the worst offenders around when it comes to the addiction to conspiracy theories, […] [until I was] corrected that this privilege belongs to Iran and the Iranians".

As I will argue in detail, this segment of the literature paints a picture of the Middle East that can be called Orientalist, depicting the region and its population as the mysterious and irrational other. The conceptualisation of the causes of Middle Eastern conspiracy "thinking" reinforces this narrative. They are seen as linked to "Arab-Iranian-Muslim" culture that is prone to paranoia-like assumptions (Zonis and Joseph, 1994) or as a Middle Eastern "mentality" (Brown, 1984: 233) or "mental condition" that makes it hard to deal with reality as it is (Pipes, 1998: 105). In this view, conspiracy theories have "harmful and delusionary effects" (Al-Azm, 2011: 18) that are devastating for the region and its inhabitants. Conspiracy theories are believed to foster anti-democratic, anti-moderate and anti-modern trends, a sense of hopelessness as well as passivity (Pipes, 1998: 26). Importantly, they are seen as creating irrational anti-Western, anti-Israeli sentiments that stoke conflict (Nyhan and Zeitzoff, 2018).

Fortunately, more recently scholars proposed a more nuanced understanding of Middle Eastern conspiracy theories. These scholars point to social-political dynamics that give rise to conspiracy theories in the Middle East in similar ways as they do elsewhere. For instance, Barbara de Poli (2018) and Matthew Gray (2010) argue that the involvement of foreign powers, coupled with the region's exposure to real conspiracies, is a significant driver for conspiracy theories. Furthermore, they emphasise specifically that the Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, along with Western support for Israel, form the "heart" of conspiracy discourse in the Middle East. This conspiracy discourse would then, according to scholars, turn frequently, if not predominantly, antisemitic. As Butter (2014: 25) summarises de Poli's research: "Especially the notorious Protocols of the Elders of Zion have since the 1950s become the centrepiece of conspiracy theorizing in the Arab world." Several scholars and commentators point towards antisemitic conspiracy theories among Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular as an important if not key obstacle to the peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian/Arab-Israeli conflict (Carmon, 2023; Diker, 2023; Küntzel, 2005; Salhani, 2019; Webman, 2013). Yet, to my knowledge, aside from a paper by Lori Allen (2016), no research covers conspiracy theories in Palestine comprehensively. Similarly, there is a notable absence of research on conspiracy theories within Israel.

All in all, the literature shows considerable gaps. Some portions of the literature rely on orientalist assumptions, while others heavily emphasise antisemitic conspiracy theories. Interestingly, the literature overlooks the two key cases — Palestine and Israel — that are purportedly at the core of conspiracy theories in the region. These gaps raise critical questions: How impactful are conspiracy theories in the region? Are they indeed impactful in perpetuating anti-Jewish hostility and hindering progress towards peace? If the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is central to Middle Eastern conspiracy theories, what are the prevailing conspiracy theories within Israel and Palestine? Are Palestinian theories predominantly antisemitic narratives about Jewish world domination? What themes do Israeli conspiracy theories encompass?

In essence, what are the specifics of conspiracy theories in Israel and Palestine and how can we think about and understand their effects? This thesis' significance lies in addressing and partially filling these significant theoretical and empirical gaps.

Research question – The function of conspiracy narratives in Israeli and Palestinian society

To phrase this in a concise scholarly manner, the project will answer the following research question:

What function do conspiracy narratives play in Israeli and Palestinian society?

With this question, I aim to shed light on Israeli and Palestinian conspiracy narratives and delineate their function. By "function" I aim to investigate what conspiracy narratives accomplish. I aim to explore when, how, and for what purposes political actors in Israeli and Palestinian society draw upon conspiracy narratives, and the impact this has on broader group dynamics, power dynamics, and the construction of reality for these political actors. Through this inquiry, I hope to substantiate whether conspiracy narratives in the specific context of Israel and Palestine are as negative and powerful as often suggested.

My aim is not to establish direct causal effects of conspiracy narratives. As I will argue, conspiracy theories are political narratives. What makes narratives impactful is not that they directly cause certain actions but rather that narratives explain and order reality. Most importantly, narratives bring a specific socially constructed reality into being which in turn might produce, sustain or challenge political ideologies, rule, and actions (Graef et al., 2020; Groth, 2019; Shenhav, 2006).

Such constructions via narratives, including conspiracy narratives, are inherently contextual and contingent upon how actors perceive and engage with their surroundings. To illuminate the function of conspiracy narratives in Israel and Palestine, contextualising these narratives will be crucial. For example, what kinds of threats do Israeli and Palestinian conspiracy theories suggest? How do these

narratives align with the broader Israeli and Palestinian worldview? How are conspiracy narratives related to other narratives that those groups share? Which political ideologies are they linked to and what rule and action do they legitimise or challenge? I will pick up such questions in Chapter 3 when developing a detailed set of subsidiary research questions. For now, I will briefly outline the concept of conspiracy narratives that this thesis relies upon.

The concept of conspiracy narratives

To study what I term conspiracy narratives in the Israeli-Palestinian context, it is necessary to develop a scientific concept that allows distinguishing conspiracy narratives that circulate in Israeli and Palestinian discourse from other discursive elements.

Concepts are of considerable significance as our fundamental "unit of thinking" (Sartori, 2009: 67; see also, Collier and Mahon, 1993; Gerring 1999: 395). They largely determine how we perceive the world and consequently how we describe it. Concepts, in this understanding, are ontological claims, that is theories about things that exist in the world. Thus, concepts have a referential function: "They refer to something, be it in the physical world of objects, the social world of norms and interaction, or the subjective world of emotion and cognition" (Schedler, 2011: 371). However, even if a description claims to be completely neutral, it still takes part, "wittingly or unwittingly, in an ongoing interpretative battle" (Gerring 1999: 359). As I will outline below, I am adopting an interpretivist perspective, that claims that, at least in the social world, absolute truths or facts do not exist because whatever we perceive of reality always requires interpretation via concepts. Yet, concepts help us by organising our thinking and guiding this interpretive process. However, we must acknowledge that our own interpretation and concepts in some ways produce the world we are attempting to only describe and explain, as part of a process that can be called "worldmaking" (Goodman, 2013: 22).

To develop an understanding of conspiracy *narratives*, I will begin by drawing on the broader literature on conspiracy *theories*. Historically, research on conspiracy theories is closely linked to the work of US historian Richard Hofstadter. In his influential work, Hofstadter (1964) contends that dangerous conspiratorial fantasies exist on the fringes of US society, characterised by a paranoid and irrational way of thinking. While Hofstadter used the term "paranoia" to describe a certain style of expression rather than a clinical diagnosis, his work implicitly established a dichotomy between irrational fringe beliefs and mainstream, rational views of political events.

Up until the late 1990s, Hofstadter's view of conspiracy theories as a paranoid mode of expression determined the direction of conspiracy theory research. Research suggested links between belief in

conspiracy theories to a variety of mental health issues such as paranoia (Darwin et al., 2011; Linden et al., 2021; Robins and Post, 1997), schizotypy (Darwin et al, 2011; Bruder et al., 2013), psychopathy (Hughes and Machan, 2021) or delusion (Bale, 2007; Dagnal et al., 2015). However, given the widespread acceptance of conspiracy theories within mainstream society, this approach falls short of providing a comprehensive understanding and explanation of conspiracy narratives and is implicated in stigmatizing people or groups that espouse such views.

Over the last two decades, scholars moved away from the notion of paranoia and began to view conspiracy theories as common and ordinary cultural, sociological, or social-psychological phenomena. For example, Uscinski and Parent (2014: 32) define conspiracy theories as an "explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their benefit against the common good". This minimalist definition constitutes a common starting point for researchers. Yet, most scholars extend this definition. According to common definitions, conspiracy theories allege the existence of a global conspiracy and refer only to non-existing imaginary plots. For example, Jeffrey Bale (2007: 45) writes that conspiracy theories "elaborate fantasies that purport to show that various sinister, powerful groups with evil intentions, operating behind the scenes, are secretly controlling the course of world events". In other words, conspiracy theories are explanations of world history drawing on the existence of a conspiracy unsupported by facts.

As we will see, such a view is problematic. When adopting such a concept, scholars maintain the negative connotation of conspiracy theories as the domain of lunatics, and often dangerous fanatics. The negative connotation might be partially warranted if indeed everything that is labelled conspiracy theory would follow the definition of theorising global plots. But this is not the case. Scholars often emphasise how conspiracy theories are widespread and an important part of political discourse. This makes sense if we consider that conspiratorial allegations come in fragments, suspicions, and conspiratorial rumours (Jordan, 2010; Mallampalli, 2017). These might allege that local authorities or national governments, specific foreign powers, or individuals, are up to something sinister, but do not necessarily point to a global cabal. Furthermore, such assertions might at times turn out to be true, after all real conspiracies do exist, even if often unsuccessful and rare. In other words, scholars cannot have it both ways: We can either focus on common assertions of conspiracy that apparently suffuse ordinary political discourse or focus on comprehensive conspiratorial ideologies that see a conspiracy at the centre of history.

As an alternative, I will advance the concept of conspiracy narratives in this thesis. By narrative, I understand the stories that people tell themselves or others to describe, order and connect what they

think happened or happens (Basten, 2015: 144). Hence, conspiracy narratives are any narrative that explains an "event or series of events to be the result of" a powerful group of people working in secret towards an evil goal (Birchall, 2006: 34). The concept captures a certain structure of discourse that relies on the combination of three narrative elements: a) the secret plans or actions, b) hedged by a powerful group of conspirators, c) based on malicious intents. The chapter highlights the main themes of conspiracy narratives, what feelings they draw on, and what threats they emotionally construct. This has two advantages: 1) The concept captures both the more common vague conspiratorial allegations, suspicions and rumours as well as coherent full-blown conspiracy theories. In conceptual terms, conspiracy narratives constitute a step up on the ladder of abstraction (Sartori, 2009: 118), and, thus, are a more comprehensive umbrella term that contains specific subtypes such as conspiracy theories, conspiracy ideologies and others. 2) The term conspiracy narrative leaves the pejorative association of the term conspiracy theory behind, including the automatic association of conspiracy theories with dangerous delusions.

The emotional function of Israeli and Palestinian conspiracy narratives

While understanding what constitutes a conspiracy narrative and distinguishing it from other forms of discourse will be a crucial first part for laying the conceptual groundwork of this thesis, another challenge will be to develop a model of how conspiracy narratives function within political discourse, how certain conspiracy narratives and not others become accepted, believed, embraced, and politically used or relied upon. For this, my argument will turn to the role of emotions.

I will do so, because the literature on conspiracy theories frequently invokes the concept of fear. Yablokov deems that "Russian history […] has been filled with fears of conspiracy" (Yablokov, 2018: 2), while Frankfurter (2006: 5) in his work on conspiracy theories describes "Roman fears of subversive cults", and Jordan (2010: 180-181) outlines how "set in motion by fears" the French revolutionaries assumed "that counterrevolutionaries acted together, that they plotted and conspired to destroy the Revolution".

In those accounts, it remains unclear if conspiracy narratives are based on fear, or if they produce fears, if they bring those fears into being. The recent psychological literature on conspiracy narratives argues the former. The literature shows that individuals and groups who experience anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness embrace conspiracy narratives as a way to explain such feelings (Goertzel, 1994).

Yet, some of the above quotes indicate that conspiracy narratives create fears, that they are narratives of fear. If conspiracy narratives are narratives of fear, my key suggestion in this thesis will be that we can

think about the effect of conspiracy narratives inside political discourse not only via their content, but via the emotion of fear they somehow carry and bring into being.

To advance this line of inquiry, it will be necessary to integrate the concepts of fear and conspiracy narratives in a more comprehensive manner than currently reflected in the literature. Drawing upon a wide range of scholarship on emotions from psychology, philosophy, and the social sciences, I will develop a detailed understanding of emotions and their political relevance and relationship to conspiracy narratives. This will entail a specific focus on anxiety and fear. Part of the argument then will be based on a distinction between those two feelings. I will argue that anxiety is a vague feeling, while fear is related to a specific, imminent threat.

What I will suggest and show in detail is that conspiracy narratives function as a versatile political tool that groups employ to either sustain or challenge political hegemony. They can do so, precisely because of the intimate connection between conspiracy narratives and anxiety and fear. I will argue that political actors use conspiracy narratives – instrumentally or not – to channel and shape vague group feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness into a coherent fearful image of a specific threat. In short, conspiracy narratives transform vague anxieties into specific fears of a conspiracy and construct a fearsome image of the alleged conspirator.

This is politically useful for two broad reasons. First, the creation of a fearsome image of the conspirators provides an emotional explanation for why a group may be experiencing hardship. In other words, vague feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness can be attributed to a tangible source—a group of actors who are deemed responsible for these emotions. Second, the emotionally charged portrayal of a fearful enemy serves as a mechanism to sustain or challenge political ideologies, governance, and actions on an emotional level. In essence, conspiracy narratives are significant because of their profound connection to emotions.

Before, outlining the argument for the Israeli and Palestinian side in detail, two clarifications are essential to avoid misinterpretation of my subsequent arguments. First, when I refer to conspiracy narratives as a "tool," I intend to highlight their political utility and significance for the actors involved. This characterisation does not imply that conspiracy narratives are always cynically employed, although this can certainly be the case. Rather, I emphasise that they serve as a practical resource that actors may rely upon within political discourse. Second, I underscore the critical role of emotions in both the genesis and function of conspiracy narratives. It is important to note that I do not uphold a strict dichotomy between "reason" and "emotions." Instead, I recognize that thinking and emotions are inherently

intertwined and inseparable. But this is precisely why we cannot to afford to ignore emotions and their role in social phenomena.

The emotional function of Israeli conspiracy narratives

On the Israeli side, I will argue that Israeli right-wing groups draw on conspiracy narratives to legitimise oppressive policies against Palestinians, as well as to delegitimize left-wing Israeli voices. In other words, conspiracy narratives serve as a hegemonic tool to sustain the right-wing political project.

Israeli-right wing conspiracy narratives allege that local Arabs, purposely claiming to be "Palestinians" seek the destruction of Israel but intentionally disguise their plans with moderate language of diplomacy or national liberation. Other narratives allege that Israeli left-wing groups intend to destroy Israel from the inside by fabricating and spreading lies paid for by hostile European states. Narratives also allege that left-wing liberal elites are organised as a deep state that works towards a globalist agenda of dejudaizing Israel.

I will show how those conspiracy narratives resonate due to the prevalent feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness many right-wing voters feel, due to Israel's history of conflict, challenges to the right-wing identity and the former hegemony of left-wing parties. Based on this, I will outline three specific functions of right-wing Israeli conspiracy narratives. First, Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives assist in shielding right-wing groups emotionally from acknowledging evidence showing the often-brutal practices of Israel and aid in denying responsibility. Second, conspiracy narratives channel vague anxieties into concrete fears that construct fearsome objects that pose a deep threat to Israel and the safety of its citizens. Third, conspiracy narratives, especially via the invoked fear and the fearsome image they create, justify and promote specific policies that target those constructed enemies.

The emotional function of Palestinian conspiracy narratives

On the Palestinian side, I will argue that conspiracy narratives in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are largely counterhegemonic tools that aim to explain and challenge the oppressive status-quo and the power exercised against them.

Palestinian conspiracy narratives allege that the US and UK colonial powers strategically founded and support Israel as a means to weaken the Arab world and control the Middle East, and continue to spread chaos, for example through the Arab Spring in 2011. Conspiracy narratives also allege that Israeli institutions all strategically work together to fulfil an expansionist agenda that goes beyond Palestine. Lastly, conspiracy narratives outline the secret collaboration between Palestinian leaders and parties with Israel.

Palestinian feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness stem from a history of violence and oppression, as well as attempts to deny and erase the Palestinian identity to the point where insecurity becomes part of what it is to be Palestinian. Based on this, I will outline three specific functions of Palestinian conspiracy narratives in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. First, Palestinian conspiracy narratives, stipulating a historic but ongoing conspiracy. This allows Palestinians to make sense of their oppression and the related feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness via a single overarching cause. Second, conspiracy narratives function as a crude but at times useful tool to hold actors accountable by (over-)emphasising the agency of actors that either intentionally harm Palestinians, carry historic responsibility or continue to be complicit in such events. I will also describe a third function of Palestinian conspiracy narratives. Political actors, such as the Palestinian Authority (PA) draw on conspiracy narratives as an authoritarian tool to sustain their position in power.

Thus, overall, I will show that Israeli and Palestinian conspiracy narratives are versatile political tools due to their ability to shape, and channel vague emotions into coherent fears of conspiracies.

Research design

The thesis follows an interpretivist approach and employs semi-structured interviews combined with an analysis of online material. I will discuss assumptions and methods in more detail in Chapter 3, but it is useful to briefly outline first my ontological and epistemological positions, second my specific methodological choices, and lastly my positionality.

Ontological and epistemological position

This PhD thesis is broadly anchored in an interpretivist framework. Behind this are two fundamental assumptions: First, on the level of ontology, interpretivism sees the world as socially constructed. Second, epistemologically, interpretivism sees knowledge and language as intrinsically connected and inseparable.

Ontologically, the interpretivist framework of this thesis approaches social realities as subjective and socially constructed. Interpretivism rejects the notion of an objective social reality that exists independently of human experience and interpretation. Instead, interpretivism broadly stipulates that social reality is diverse and varies across individuals and social contexts. This is because individuals and groups construct their social world through shared meanings and understandings that evolve and change over time. The most general reality that we can say exists are inter-subjective truths, those views of reality that are shared by groups (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012: 4).

Epistemologically, this thesis adopts the perspective that epistemology and ontology cannot be separated. The intersubjective constructed truths researchers aim to discover, can only be accessed "through interactions between researcher and researched" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012: 4). As Clifford Geertz (1973: 9) noted, "What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions". This is anchored in what I touched on when discussing concepts. We cannot access the external world without concepts and language, but language itself is never neutral but involved in shaping and creating realities. This is why, social science is not the neutral discovery of independently existing realities, but rather what Nelson Goodman (2013: 22) calls "worldmaking".

To summarise, I assume that there is not simply one social reality, but rather multiple ways to view the world. Even if there would be one single reality, there is no way to directly access it. The social world does not exist independently of our language and engagement with that very world through language. Consequently, research is always part of the creation, and not simply the discovery of worlds. This is why the positionality of the researcher matters.

Some critics, especially positivist scholars, believe that interpretivism fundamentally rejects all truth claims. However, this is not the case. Interpretivist research needs to demonstrate that truth claims are sufficiently contextualised through what Clifford Geertz (1973) referred to as "thick" descriptions. Only research that shows with sufficient and rigorously obtained observations, understood as method-driven, achieves validity and, thus, can be called scientific. In other words, this thesis derives validity not from any quantitative generalisability, but from its deep contextualisation. This then suggests adopting a method that allows the gathering of detailed qualitative data.

Method and participant selection

To investigate the perspectives of Israelis and Palestinians regarding political events through the lens of conspiracy narratives, I opted for semi-structured qualitative interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' political viewpoints while providing flexibility via follow-up questions. Follow-up questions seem particularly valuable for probing the sincerity of participants' beliefs in conspiracy narratives. Semi-structured interviews also allow for better comparisons across interviews. I narrowed this further down to qualitative semi-structured elite interviews. Elite interviews allow me to engage with influential segments of society that actively shape group discourse and emotions.

To determine which participants to recruit for the interviews, I analysed the structure of Israeli and Palestinian society based on political affiliation. As Israeli society is dominated by the political right and the associated right-wing network, I decided to only focus on Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives. I

conducted 14 interviews with senior right-wing individuals. I also conducted eight interviews with participants from the Israeli left to gain further context information.

Palestinian society is highly fragmented across various political contexts. To narrow down the analysis and guarantee some comparability across individual experiences, I decided to focus solely on the West Bank and East Jerusalem. As Palestinian society is split into three large segments, Fatah loyalists, Hamas supporters, and an independent civil society sector, I decided to include all three segments to generate a full picture of Palestinian conspiracy narratives in the context of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In total, I interviewed 24 Palestinian participants across those three segments of society.

As the interview data was not sufficient to fully contextualise conspiracy narratives, I also relied on a broader analysis of Israeli and Palestinian political discourse. I immersed myself in the Israeli right-wing, as well as in the official Fatah and Hamas discourse by reading hundreds of online newspaper articles, as well as consuming social media posts and videos. This contained not only textual data, but visual and audio clues which often signal more clearly than written texts how emotions are carried.

I conducted a thematic analysis for the interview data and subsequently refined it by drawing on my contextual knowledge from the immersion process.

Scope and limitations of the thesis

Before the reader dives into the thesis, I explicitly want to define the scope as well as the limitations of this thesis. It is important to understand what conclusions the design of the study as well as the evidence I will be presenting supports, as well as what conclusion ultimately cannot be sustained, as tempting as they might be.

This thesis is a piece of qualitative research. As stated, the aim is to determine what political function conspiracy narratives play in Israel and Palestine. Thus, I am establishing content and context of those narratives that play a political role. This means that this should not be read as a comprehensive list of conspiracy narratives that circulate in the two contexts. Furthermore, it is not a quantitative assessment of conspiracy narratives in both societies. While I am claiming that conspiracy narratives are politically relevant, I am not making any claim regarding how widespread such narratives are in the Israeli or Palestinian population.

Furthermore, I studied specific contexts inside Israeli and Palestinian society. On the Israeli side, I focused exclusively on right-wing conspiracy narratives. Thus, I will argue that conspiracy narratives are a part of right-wing politics in Israel today, while being agnostic about their role in other parts of Israeli society. However, it can by no means be concluded that conspiracy narratives are a uniquely

right-wing phenomenon in general, nor in Israel specifically. On the Palestinian side, I restricted my analysis to the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In both areas, I included three main groups, Fatah-elites, Hamas-elites, as well as independent voices, such as human rights activists and community leaders. Thus, I am not making any general claim about Palestinian conspiracy narratives in other parts of the Palestinian community, such as in Gaza or in the various diaspora settings.

The assessment I am making about Palestinian conspiracy narratives as largely counter-hegemonic and Israeli right-wing ones as hegemonic, might strike one as an uncritical assessment of Palestinian narratives. Yet, the counter-hegemonic character of Palestinian narratives should not be surprising. The Israeli right has been in political control of the country for over two decades and is able to exercise power and draw on conspiracy narratives for supporting its political ideology, rule and actions. Palestinians, in contrast, can exercise only very limited power, and thus, conspiracy narratives are drawn on to explain and challenge the situation rather than to sustain it. The exceptions are the conspiracy narratives Fatah and Hamas use to justify their rule over their respective territory. In other words, the function of conspiracy narratives reflects the power differential present between Israel and Palestine. Furthermore, deeming Israeli or Palestinian conspiracy narratives as exercising a counterhegemonic, or hegemonic functions is not a value judgement of those conspiracy narratives, but simply a description of their function visa-vis existing power structures.

As I will describe in Chapter 3 when outlining my methodology in detail, research for this thesis coincided with Hamas' attack on 7 October 2023 and the still unfolding Israeli war on Gaza. While the events exacerbated conspiratorial discourse quite dramatically, I decided against covering the war and related conspiracy narratives in this thesis. As the war is still ongoing, its impact is hard to foresee, even though it likely is producing shifts in both Israeli and Palestinian society. While at this point only speculation, atrocities that Israel suffered, I believe, will further push the country down the path described in Chapter 4, spiralling in politically directed anxieties that will produce (and already does) create further conspiracy narratives. Palestinian society in Gaza is at the edge of being wiped out, with South Africa alleging in front of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that this amounts to a genocide. What is clear as well is that the war already produces new conspiracy narratives, for example regarding the US-built port in Gaza. Overall, the war seems to – unfortunately – affirm the arguments of this thesis but constitute such a dramatic event that including it would have needed more space than I can provide. Hence, the time frame for the analysis of contemporary Israeli and Palestinian conspiracy narratives is limited from 2020 to 7 October 2023.

Lastly, this thesis is about conspiracy narratives in the Israeli-Palestinian context. I hope that the framework developed can be adopted for other cases and places. Specifically, it is likely that conspiracy narratives and the transported fear exercise similar functions in other contexts, however, I have no way of arguing that this is indeed the case. While my theoretical observations about conspiracy theories or rather conspiracy narratives are based on a broad literature review, I have not applied this to any data other than the data gathered on Israel and Palestine. Thus, I am not claiming that I developed a valid general theory of conspiracy narratives.

Plan of the thesis

In Chapters 1 and 2, I will detail the theoretical framework briefly sketched above. In Chapter 1, I will provide a detailed review of the literature on conspiracy theories in general and in the Middle East in particular. In this chapter, I will make three arguments. First, I will argue that instead of the loaded term conspiracy theory, we better adopt the concept of conspiracy narrative, as a more neutral term. The term focuses on the presence of three narrative elements that combined allege a conspiracy by referring to a) the secret plans or actions, b) hedged by a powerful group, c) based on malicious intents. All three elements must be present for a discourse to become conspiratorial. Second, I will argue that conspiracy narratives are mainly a group phenomenon, or at least to the extent that they matter from a sociological or political science perspective. Third, I will outline how anxiety and fear are critical factors in theorising both the emergence as well as the function of conspiracy narratives.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss in more detail the literature on emotions, covering various fields including psychology, philosophy and political science with a particular focus on anxiety and fear. I will draw on psychological constructivism to argue that emotions are involved in the emotional construction of the world, making objects appear to have certain properties and effects. While anxiety and fear are closely related phenomena, as both entail worrying about future harm, I will argue that anxiety is more generalised feeling that lacks a clear object we assign our feeling to. On the contrary, fear is related to a specific object that we understand as the cause of our fear. Fear emotionally constructs this object to be fearsome. Connecting these insights to the concept of conspiracy narratives, the last section of chapter 2 argues that conspiracy narratives allow unspecific anxiety to be resolved by attaching it to a specific object. In other words, conspiracy narratives allow us to make sense out of anxiety and blame a certain object for these feelings. This is the mechanism via which conspiracy narratives become politically useful. They channel vague anxieties by emotionally constructing threats that then need to be urgently addressed, and thus, justify political actions towards these constructed threats.

In Chapter 3, I will specify my ontological and epistemological commitments that follow from choosing an interpretivist framework. In essence, I will argue that social phenomena like conspiracy narratives and emotional experiences must be studied from the perspective of those involved, while acknowledging that the researcher is unavoidably implicated in the creation of the social phenomena that are studied. Methodologically, this suggests adopting a qualitative method. I decided to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews with people who shape public discourse and emotions, whom I broadly label elite. Presenting an analysis of political affiliations in Israeli and Palestinian society, I argue for restricting the analysis to Israeli right-wing discourse and in the Palestinian case to the West Bank and East Jerusalem. I will close Chapter 3 with outlining my own positionality as someone who has a close relationship to both Israelis and Palestinians. While this constitutes a challenge as I will discuss, it forms the basis for empathy, towards both sides. I believe this to be a cornerstone of this thesis that systematically aims to understand Israeli and Palestinian emotions and the resulting conspiracy narratives.

In chapters 4-7, I will look at the two contexts of Israel and Palestine. I will dedicate two chapters to each context. First, I will show the prevalence of feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness in each society. I do so by tracing historically how those feelings developed and became related and embedded in Israeli and Palestinian identity. The development of those feelings closely relates to the evolving political context, but also to how emotions were created due to political desires, motives and needs. To show the logic of hegemony and counterhegemony behind conspiracy narratives of the respective sides, I will start with the Israeli side. As already mentioned, in Israel, some right-wing groups cement right-wing hegemony by using conspiracy narratives, amongst other narratives, to justify oppressive policies towards Palestinians and delegitimize left-wing voices.

In Chapter 4, I will trace Israeli feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness, focusing especially on how such feelings developed among right-wing voters. I will show that right-wing anxieties in Israel are driven by a history of conflict, socio-economic marginalisation, and challenges to the right-wing identity. The development of such feelings closely aligns with the ascent of Israel's political right from an initially marginalised position to political hegemony.

In Chapter 5, I will draw on the gathered data to show which conspiracy narratives are prevalent in the political discourse of Israel’s political right and relate them to the feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness of right-wing voters identified in Chapter 4. I will show that conspiracy narratives in the Israeli right are embedded in a meta theme about the alleged dangers of postmodernist ideology that allows Palestinians and left-wing forces to transform the supposed truth of Israel’s goodness into a view of Israel as evil. Embedded in this meta-theme are two main themes of Israeli right-wing conspiracy

narratives. The first theme revolves around the dangerous machinations of the Palestinians who engage in all sorts of plots to undermine and destroy Israel. The second theme revolves around the secret war of the Israeli left-wing deep state, left-wing human rights organisations and their European backers against Israel as a Jewish state.

In Chapter 6, I will turn towards the Palestinian context. Here I will trace the development of anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness in today's Palestinian society. Specifically, I will highlight three sources of such feelings. Palestinians experience significant insecurity around personal safety, social and economic matters. Palestinians also experience collective insecurities due to Israeli violence towards Palestinians as a collective, and lastly Palestinians feel anxiety embedded in the Palestinian identity.

In Chapter 7, I will outline the conspiracy narratives prevalent in Palestinian society in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and relate them to the feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness identified in Chapter 6. Palestinian conspiracy narratives in the West Bank are embedded in a meta-narrative that describes Western powers as unrelentingly pursuing power and self-interest at the total expense of other considerations, especially in the Middle East where this Western desire stretches back for centuries. I will then identify three themes of conspiracy narratives. The first theme revolves around the colonial schemes of the British and American governments to control and weaken the Middle East via the establishment of a satellite Israeli state. The second theme revolves around the coordinated and strategic actions of all Israeli institutions to steal Palestinian land and expel its inhabitants. The third theme revolves around the conspiracies developed by Palestinian actors, especially the Fatah-led PA and Hamas.

In Chapter 8, I will draw on the insights from the theoretical framework and the empirical chapters to establish the functions of conspiracy narratives in Israeli and Palestinian discourse. While conspiracy narratives always frame the political situation as stacked-against the ingroup, and thus are rhetorically counter-hegemonic, in reality, conspiracy narratives can function as hegemonic or counterhegemonic tools. Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives function as hegemonic tools via the following specific functions: 1) the emotional shielding of Israel's right, 2) the construction of fearsome threats, and 3) the justification of specific policies targeting the threats. On the other side, Palestinian conspiracy narratives challenge the power exercised against them and are largely counterhegemonic. This becomes clear especially via two functions: 1) A sense-making tool, 2) a crude accountability tool. Yet, sometimes the PA and Hamas also draw on conspiracy narratives to sustain their position and thus, support the status-quo.

In the final conclusion, I will briefly summarise the central arguments of the thesis, underlining once more how Israeli and Palestinian conspiracy narratives function as versatile political tools due to their ability to channel anxiety into fearful images of a group of conspirators.

Chapter 1 - Conspiracy Narratives: Causes and Function

As outlined in the introduction, this thesis will investigate the function of conspiracy narratives in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To determine that role, it is necessary to understand what conspiracy narratives are and how we can start thinking of what function they play in political life. To develop a useful conceptualisation, this chapter will proceed in three sections in which I will draw upon a wide range of different approaches to what the literature calls conspiracy theories.

First, I will give a brief overview of the history of conspiracy theory research and how it fragmented into different approaches. This will help in understanding the debates and problems around conspiracy theories that I will discuss in section two.

In section two, I will take a detailed look at the characteristics of conspiracy theories. We can ask various questions about conspiracy theories, but five debates appear frequently in the literature. First, how should conspiracy theories be defined? Second, under which conditions do they arise or what causes them to appear? Third, who believes in conspiracy theories? Fourth, what social and political function do conspiracy theories play? And finally, can conspiracy theories be true?

Specifically, I will argue that we are better off to adopt the concept of conspiracy narratives, instead of theories. I will define conspiracy narratives as any narrative that explains an "event or series of events to be the result of" a powerful group of people working in secret towards an evil goal (Birchall, 2006: 34). This definition includes the combination of three necessary narrative elements that describe a conspiracy by referring to a) the secret plans or actions, b) hedged by a powerful group, c) based on malicious intents. Furthermore, I will highlight the origins of conspiracy narratives and the function they play by arguing that conspiracy narratives draw on and carry emotions, specifically anxiety and fear. I will overall specify that conspiracy narratives are *emotional*, relating closely to anxiety and fear; *social* as they are a group phenomenon; *universal*, as they can be found across time and space; and *politically useful*, as they are involved in challenging or sustain political ideologies, rule and actions.

In section three, I will present the specific literature on conspiracy narratives in the Middle East, Israel, and Palestine. Using the insights generated in sections one and two, I will be able to put the literature on the Middle East in the larger context of conspiracy research and evaluate it. I will argue that - while partially illuminating - the research on the Middle East falls theoretical short, as it does not establish the political function of conspiracy narratives consequently.

1.1 The history of conspiracy research: From Hofstadter to critical conspiracy studies

US-historian Richard Hofstadter's seminal essay, "The paranoid style in American politics" (1964) is usually seen as the starting point of conspiracy theory research. It is referenced in almost every work on conspiracy theories.

In his essay, Hofstadter locates a dangerous "conspiratorial fantasy" (p. 77) at the fringes of US society. With his essay Hofstadter reacted to the contemporary political right associated with politicians like Joseph McCarthy and Barry Goldwater who promoted fears of a communist conspiracy targeting the US (Fenster, 2008: 24). What Hofstadter described as political paranoia was a certain – for him deluded and irrational – way of thinking about the workings of history, a way that sees the nation secretly threatened by evil forces. Hofstadter illustrates this with one of McCarthy's speeches:

> How can we account for our present situation unless we believe that men high in this government are concerting to deliver us to disaster? This must be the product of a great conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man (McCarthy, 1951, cited in Hofstadter, 1964: 77).

While he closely ties such thinking to the political right, Hofstadter makes clear that it is not restricted to any political orientation and that it stretches back for centuries into US-American history.

To repeat this point, Hofstadter saw this phenomenon as existing only on the political fringes. It is "a mentality more or less constantly affecting a modest minority" (Hofstadter, 1964: 86). He claims that the usage of the word "paranoid" is not meant clinically, but rather as an analogy: "I am borrowing a clinical term for other purposes […]. It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant." (Hofstadter, 1964: 77). Implicitly, however, he created a dichotomy between the irrational fringes of the political landscape and its rational centre. In fact, Hofstadter admits that the term purposely carries a pejorative connotation.

Interestingly, Hofstadter's view found a recent revival, especially in commentary and analysis of contemporary America (Young, 2020; Rhode, 2021). Contrary to political commentators, academic theorists have developed new approaches that rely less on Hofstadter's notion of paranoia. However, for quite a while he determined the direction of conspiracy theory research and up-until today exerts considerable influence over the field of conspiracy theory studies (Butter and Knight, 2018).

For several decades, not many scholars researched conspiracy theories. This might have been due to the perception that the topic is not for serious investigation. Another reason might have been that it did not seem to be an important political topic once McCarthyism faded away (Butter and Knight, 2018). From

1970 to 1990 barely any work deals with the topic of conspiracy theories on its own.[1] However, some literature exists that mentions conspiracy theories in specific contexts, such as research on antisemitism, fundamentalist Islamic movements, specific theories about Free Masons or the Illuminati.

This changed in the early 1990s. The first studies after Hofstadter focused heavily on psychological aspects of conspiracy theories, usually tying them to paranoid or delusional mindsets. As pointed out above, Hofstadter aimed to use the concept of paranoia analogously, but researchers tended towards a more clinical understanding. Consequently, belief in conspiracy theories was pathologised and linked to extremists and fanatics (Byford, 2011: 122; Knight, 2013: 14).

Since the 2000s, research on conspiracy theories slowly increased. Psychological studies diversified, focusing on various causes of belief in conspiracy theories beyond paranoia, such as cognitive biases and emotional motivations. At the same time, authors such as Peter Knight (2013), Michael Butter (2014) and Michael Barkun (2013) published studies describing conspiracy theories as a cultural phenomenon, adding to our understanding of conspiracy theories as deeply embedded in Western culture. Some cultural studies added a historic analysis, tracing conspiracy theories throughout time, while others connected conspiracy theories to modernity. Cultural studies took a more favourable stance on conspiracy theories, describing them as dangerous or "low-level paranoia" (Knight, 2002: 7) but distancing themselves from overly pathological language.

In opposition to most of that scholarship, a critical post-modernist strand of conspiracy theory studies developed. Authors of the critical tradition saw the label conspiracy theories as a derogatory term to delegitimize all sorts of narratives that ran counter to official explanations of events (Anton et al., 2014; Birchall, 2006; Bratich, 2008; Dean, 2000). Critical studies revealed little about conspiracy theories, their cause, and their content, but their important contribution lay in highlighting how the term conspiracy theory is intertwined with questions of power. Finally, in the last two years, 2019-2021 conspiracy theory research saw another boom. Historians, political scientists, ethnographers developed the field further, diversifying but also fragmenting our understanding of conspiracy narratives, as I will discuss below.

1.2 The concept of conspiracy theories vs. narratives

Conspiracy theory studies is a diverse field that gives diverging answers to basic questions concerning conspiracy theories. Numerous perspectives offer various insights and can be used to tackle different research puzzles. However, it is also clear that not all perspectives provide equal utility. In this section,

[1] For exceptions see Wood (1982), Davis (1971), Lidz (1978), and Mintz (1985).

I will discuss five basic aspects of what I will call conspiracy narratives. I will first discuss the value of the concept conspiracy narratives compared to conspiracy theories. In the following, I will discuss four other questions regarding conspiracy narratives: Who believes conspiracy narratives? Why do people engage in conspiracy narratives? What is their social and political function? And lastly, can conspiracy narratives be true? The outlined understanding of conspiracy narratives forms the conceptual basis for the remainder of the thesis.

1.2.1 What are conspiracy theories? Towards conspiracy narratives

Conspiracy theories have been defined in various ways. Nevertheless, some elements are consensual. In this section, I will argue that we can draw on those consensual elements. Nevertheless, we are better advised to adopt the term "conspiracy narrative" instead of "conspiracy theory". As I show in detail below, I understand a conspiracy narrative as any account about a potential conspiracy. This in turn relies on the combination of three narrative elements: a) the secret plans or actions, b) hedged by a powerful group, c) based on malicious intents. Most texts on conspiracy theories start with a definition of the term "conspiracy". A conspiracy according to the Cambridge Dictionary (2024) is "the activity of secretly planning with other people to do something bad or illegal". In the literal sense, a conspiracy theory is an explanation that revolves around a conspiracy. However, as the addition of "harmful" implies, conspiracy theories refer – both in the academic and the colloquial sense - to secret plans that have negative implications. Conspiracies are not about secret plans to save the world. Furthermore, conspiracy theories are not about locally confined events. Instead, conspiracy theories uncover plans that are large-scale and, thus, politically, socially or economically relevant. Thus, common conspiracy theories have addressed the assassination of John F. Kennedy, migration waves, the Covid 19 pandemic, and so forth (Butter, 2018: 21; Byford, 2011: 21).

However, the academic discussion around conspiracy theories usually narrows the term further down by making three additional assumptions. First, conspiracy theories are characterised by a Manichean worldview. As political scientist Michael Barkun (2013: 3) explains, conspiracy theories aim to locate and explain evil. They contain a sense of evil forces outside (that might have already infiltrated) the community aiming to harm their own, morally good community. David Frankfurter (2006: 5) adds that conspiracy theories explain "local malevolence" as "suddenly global in scope".

Second, many scholars point out that conspiracy theories picture the conspirators as a powerful, nearly omnipotent, and monolithic group (Bale, 2007: 52; Fathi, 2014: 63; Fenster, 2008: 1; Mancosu, 2017: 327). The group is thought to be so powerful that even evidence against the conspiracy must be fabricated by the group itself as a distraction. The conspirators are powerful enough that almost nothing

is outside their control. Thus, "nothing is as it seems" and "nothing happens by accident" (Barkun 2013: 3-4).

Thirdly, most authors define conspiracy theories as by default wrong. Conspiracy theories are about non-existent conspiracies (Butter, 2018: 42). However, because this is heavily contested by critical approaches, I will address this in detail later in this chapter.

These three elements, however, say little about what type of phenomenon conspiracy theories are. Corresponding to the different approaches outlined above, there are three main perspectives on how conspiracy theories should be understood.

Much of the psychological literature sees conspiracy theories as an expression of an individually held mindset or mentality, often denoted as conspiracism. Thus, conspiracism is not the belief in a single conspiracy theory, but rather a pattern of thought that understands conspiracies to be the driving force of history. This is labelled conspiracist ideation or conspiracy thinking as well (Brotherton and French, 2014; Bruder et al, 2013; Cichocka et al., 2016a; Douglas et al., 2019; Iqtidar, 2016). Other parts of the psychological and literature see conspiracy theories not as an individually held belief but rather as socially shared beliefs, as an intersubjective group understanding (Cichocka et al., 2016b; Bertin et al., 2022; van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018; Zonis and Joseph, 1994). In both cases, beliefs are said to be faulty, misinformed, or even paranoid. Focusing on beliefs firmly anchors studying conspiracy theories in the domain of psychology.

In parallel, cultural studies see conspiracy theories as group narratives, often as a form of sense-making in a complex world. Peter Knight (2002: 6) calls them “pop-sociologies”, or Anita Waters (1997) “ethnographical expressions”, that allow certain groups, usually minorities, to make sense out of misfortunes. Türkay Nefes (2014: 139) sees conspiracy theories as political narratives “par excellence” because conspiracy theories are essentially theories about power, about who controls what and for what purpose. Conspiracy theories are seen as more broadly anchored in societal dynamics. Because conspiracy theories often invoke an imagined glorious or better past, hoping this past can be restored, they also have been conceptualised as political myths (Giry, 2015), or political ideologies (CeMAS, 2021).

Lastly, critical approaches describe conspiracy theories as counter-narratives or as heterodox knowledge claims (Anton et al., 2014; Birchall, 2006; Bratich, 2008; Dean, 2000). The point is that conspiracy theories are opposing official accounts or bring forward explanations that are not endorsed by socially

accepted epistemic authorities. Scholars are usually sceptical of the term conspiracy theory, pointing towards its pejorative character.

Looking at the literature, it seems that the term conspiracy theory, even though it is firmly established, is misleading in two ways. First, conspiracy theories are usually not scientific theories. This is not to say they cannot in principle provide useful insights, but rather that it is a question of method and cohesion. While conspiracy theories sometimes emulate scientific methods, they mostly fall short of it. But more importantly, they are a much broader phenomenon than the word theory suggests. Much talk about conspiracies is not coherent. It comes in rumours, allegations and fragments that see a malicious group at work, but not necessarily a global cabal that directs the unfolding of history (Di Fonzo, 2018; Gray, 2010: 6, Hörner, 2011; Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019). In that sense, only in rare cases, does "talk of conspiracy" see everything as connected, everything be part of a conspiracy. Furthermore, some conspiratorial discourse comes as part of literature or movies, and thus cannot be called coherent either, as the term theory implies. Thus, when people voice their suspicion or fears of conspiracies, they do not evoke a coherent description of reality that we could label theory but simply produce a narrative. Accordingly, conspiracy narrative is a more reasonable umbrella term to refer to this wider phenomenon. With this concept, I am following most of the above-mentioned assumptions but qualify or reject some of them.

For this thesis, I will adopt the term conspiracy narrative to cover more broadly any narrative that suspects a conspiracy is at work. By narrative, I understand in this thesis the stories that individuals and group tell "to describe and explain what they think" happened or happens (Basten, 2015: 144). This entails giving events an order, a coherent shape beyond randomness (Berger and Quinney 2004, 3-5; Ochs and Capps, 2001: 2). I roughly follow Claire Birchall (2006: 34) and define a conspiracy narrative as any narrative that explains an "event or series of events to be the result of" a powerful group of people working in secret towards an evil goal. This definition includes the combination of three narrative elements: a) the secret plans or actions, b) hedged by a powerful group, c) based on malicious intents. For a conspiracy narrative to be present, all three elements need to be given.

The three elements provide a useful distinction to related, but essentially non-conspiratorial types of discourse. To delineate the boundary of my concept further, it is worth to emphasise three conceptual points. First and foremost, conspiracy narratives emphasise intention and agency. They are hyper-agent centric, meaning they focus heavily on the deliberate actions of individuals or groups. As Groh (1987: 3) notes, conspiracy narratives view events as "the undisturbed realization of intentions." In other words, actors do not merely allow evil things to happen or ignore them; they actively plan for these events to

occur. This also means conspiracy narratives leave little room for broader structures to influence actors' behaviour. Evil actors devise a plan and execute it. Therefore, outcomes are seen as corresponding directly to intentions. This distinguishes conspiracy narratives from discourses that simply accuse actors of benefiting from harmful outcomes. For example, economic data clearly shows that pharmaceutical companies profited from the Covid-19 pandemic. A conspiratorial perspective, however, would assert that pharmaceutical companies created the pandemic in order to profit. Similarly, we will see that certain Palestinian political figures have benefited from their positions within a Palestinian Authority that, in some ways, has become a tool of Israeli control over Palestinians. However, conspiracy narratives go further by alleging that these figures planned for this outcome from the start. Second, conspiracy narratives locate evil. They do not merely refer to an opponent or political rival but rather to group of malevolent actors, often depicted as a monolithic with significant power. This distinguishes conspiracy narratives from discourse that describes other actors as misguidedly proposing or implementing policies that have negative effects. For example, some in Israel describe Israeli NGOs as unintentionally undermining the country. Conspiracy narratives, however, claim that this harm is not accidental but intentional—the secret desire of these groups. In other words, they do not inadvertently harm Israel; they do so deliberately because of their evil nature. Third, secrecy is important as, from the view of conspiracy narratives, actors conceal their actions, intent, or character by perfidiously using deceptive techniques. Hence, conspiracy narratives often claim to unmask expose, uncover malicious actions and intentions.

Conspiracy narratives do not have to be coherent, nor outline a global plot in which “everything is connected”. This can be the case but is not necessary. Plots can simply be hatched by the national elite, potentially with some outside support, but do not have to extend towards a global project. In this way, the concept of conspiracy narratives is broader, but also includes the narrower concept of conspiracy theories. In other words, conspiracy theories a subset of the class of conspiracy narratives. Lastly, I hope to shed with the term conspiracy narrative some of the pejorative connotation that the word conspiracy theory inevitably seems to carry, and sidestep the question of truth, as I will discuss in 1.2.5.

In the next four sections, I will delineate in more detail how we can understand conspiracy narratives as a phenomenon better. This will importantly include that conspiracy narratives have powerful emotional properties. As I will argue, conspiracy narratives draw on feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness and channel them into fear.

1.2.2 Who believes in conspiracy narratives?

Research developed different interpretations of who embraces and narrates conspiracy narratives. The debate can be divided into two separate disputes. Scholars debate how widespread conspiracy narratives are and historically have been. Scholars also debate if conspiracy narratives are the property of individuals or groups. Summarising the debates and citing new insights, I will argue that conspiracy narratives are universal. They exist across time and different cultures. I will also argue that they are social, as they relate to and are told by groups.

Regarding the first debate, most scholars agree that conspiracy narratives are deeply embedded in contemporary Western culture. However, traditionally, following Hofstadter's analysis, conspiracy narratives were seen as a phenomenon among a small minority, usually of right- or left-wing extremists (Pipes, 1997; Barkun, 2013). However, according to Barkun, from the late 1990s conspiracy narratives began to move into the political mainstream. This analysis is widely shared. Peter Knight (2000: 2) concurs by writing that conspiracy narratives have become the "lingua franca of many ordinary Americans". According to other authors, conspiracy narratives have always been part of mainstream American thought (Pinsker, 1992; Walker, 2013: 12). For example, Bernard Bailyn argues that the "fear of a comprehensive conspiracy against liberty […] lay at the heart of the Revolutionary movement" (Bailyn, 1992: xiii).

Furthermore, while some academics claim that conspiracy *theories* are a uniquely modern phenomenon, mostly because they imitate social science (Seidler, 2016), conspiracy *narratives* as defined above have existed throughout history. Various studies show that conspiracy narratives previously existed in Ancient Greece and Rome, the Middle Ages, and the early modern period (Groh, 1987; Jordan, 2010; Pagan, 2012; Roisman, 2006).

While those different views seem contradictory, they can be reconciled when drawing on the work of Katharina Thalmann (2019). Thalmann shows that conspiratorial assertions used to be part of mainstream discourse, but by the late 1960s, they were fully stigmatised. Thalmann (ibid: 8) writes: "Throughout much of American history, it had been considered foolish not to believe in the existence of conspiracies […] but starting in the mid-1950s, it was increasingly considered foolish and ridiculous [...]."[2] In other words, while the frequency of conspiracy narratives might have varied to some extent throughout American history, what changed more was their epistemic status.

[2] See also Butter (2014: 283).

Much of the above discussion focuses on American or Western history. Indeed, a shortcoming of conspiracy research is the narrow focus on the US and the West. However, more and more studies show the prevalence of conspiracy narratives in other cultures. Studies look at the African (Clark, 2001; Fassin, 2011), Asian (Bouvier and Smith, 2006; Mallampalli, 2017; Mashuri et al., 2016; Swami, 2012) or former USSR contexts (Chayinska and Minescu, 2018; Golec de Zavala and Cichocka, 2012; Laruelle, 2012; Ortmann and Heathershaw, 2012). Thus, conspiracy narratives are universal. They are not peculiar to the Middle East.

The second debate discusses if conspiracy narratives are a property of individuals or groups. As discussed in the previous section, conspiracy narratives are often seen as beliefs. Beliefs are held by individuals. A group can only hold beliefs via its members. However, conspiracy narratives have a social dimension (Byford, 2011: 126; Uscinski and Parent, 2014: 15). People believing conspiracy narratives do not fear conspiracies against themselves as individuals but against their group (Schmid, 2014). They are always narratives about an outgroup vs. an ingroup. As van Prooijen (2018: 58) states, conspiracy narratives "are a suspicious feeling suggesting that one's own community is being threatened or deceived by a hostile outgroup."

Based on methodological individualism, one could argue that although the content of conspiracy narratives is social it remains an individual property. Group belief must be reduced to the sum of individual beliefs. But as Goldberg (2008a: 260) observes, public fears are not the sum of individual fears: "Rather than the sum of its paranoid parts, conspiracism is greater and more complex." Group members can theoretically all believe in the same thing and act on it. However, what usually makes shared beliefs significant is that they are interwoven with social practices and narratives (Wendt, 1999: 159-161). The term conspiracy narrative that I adopted, thus, implies a social dimension. Narratives not only exist in people's heads, but they confront individuals as a shared, intersubjective reality, and consequently become part of a group's culture. As social-constructivist Alexander Wendt points out (1999: 164): "In sum, culture is more than a summation of the shared ideas that individuals have in their heads, but a 'communally sustained' and thus inherently public phenomenon".

To summarise, I have pointed out that conspiracy narratives are universal. They have existed throughout time and across different cultures. They are not a fringe phenomenon but mainstream. Additionally, conspiracy narratives are social. They are inherently about groups.

1.2.3 Why do people engage in conspiracy narratives: The importance of anxiety and fear

Scholars suggest various reasons why people or groups embrace conspiracy narratives. I will review these but will argue that conspiracy narratives flourish when people feel anxious, insecure or powerless.

We can think of those feelings as the direct antecedents of conspiracy narratives. By providing an explanation for such feelings, conspiracy narratives become credible and become adopted by groups. In turn, feelings of anxiousness, insecurity and powerless result from various social settings that we can think of as structural conditions for conspiracy narratives to emerge. Such conditions include violent conflict, social change, challenges to identity or marginalisation and oppression.

Conspiracy narratives have been closely linked to various explanations. I will loosely follow, Douglas et al. (2017) in their classification of psychological reasons for engagement with conspiracy narratives. Douglas et al. differentiate between epistemic, existential, and social motives of individuals. However, I draw on those three categories more broadly, not restricting myself to the psychological literature that focuses mostly on individuals.

Epistemic reasons are based on individuals' ability to process information and need to understand their environment. Social psychologists see belief in conspiracy narratives based on common cognitive deficits or biases. (Brotherton and French, 2014; Stieger et al., 2013; Swami et al., 2011; van Prooijen, 2018; 2019). As Douglas et al. (2019: 65) summarise: "conspiracy theories appeal to individuals who seek accuracy and meaning (or both) but perhaps lack the cognitive tools […] that prevent them from finding these via other means". It should be added that such a need to make sense of one's environment is not only linked to individuals, but also to groups (Hufnagel, 2022; Rotella et al., 2015).

Existential reasons are linked to how individuals and groups react to and perceive threats and strive to feel safe and secure. Following Hofstadter, many academics connect conspiracy narratives to paranoia (Darwin et al., 2011; Linden et al., 2021; Robins and Post, 1997) or similar issues, such as schizotypy (Darwin et al, 2011; Bruder et al., 2013), psychopathy (Hughes and Machan, 2021) or delusion (Bale, 2007; Dagnall et al., 2015). However, with attempts to "de-pathologize" conspiracy narratives, research attributes the spread of conspiracy more broadly to common feelings of anxiety, insecurity, powerlessness. People experience such emotions are said to turn towards conspiracy narratives to explain those feelings, regain control and ultimately feel safe (Uscinski and Parent, 2014; van Prooijen, 2018).

Social reasons refer to people's need to maintain a positive self- and group image. Because conspiracy narratives are often linked to certain group beliefs, people adopt them as part of motivated reasoning (Miller et al., 2016; Prims, 2024; Radnitz, 2022). Motivated reasoning refers to the tendency of humans to protect their worldview by ignoring contrary evidence or adopting supportive justifications. Therefore, people adopt conspiracy narratives to defend their ideological positions (Uscinski and Parent,

2014). Similarly, people follow conspiracy narratives because they might be part or relate closely to group myths (Gray, 2010).

I have outlined various reasons the literature proposes for why people engage in conspiracy narratives. Many of them are useful and I believe can be unified in a more coherent framework. However, as highlighted before cognitive or mental deficits might explain the belief of some people; however, they cannot be squared with the pervasiveness of such beliefs and therefore, such research has been largely abandoned (Knight and Butter, 2015). Still all three, epistemic – the desire to understand one's environment, existential – the desire to feel safe and social – the desire to protect and be part of a group and its narratives are convincing.

Yet, if we look closely at those three areas what seems to be key is how conspiracy narratives relate to anxiety, powerlessness, and insecurity. The importance of emotions, however, is not restricted to existential reasons. Behind epistemic and social reasons often hide attempts to avoid anxiety. For example, motivated reasoning is used as a shield against the anxiety that would come with a threat to one's worldview. Searching for meaning in a complex environment is needed to avoid the anxiety that would otherwise result from uncertainty and opaqueness. Thus, as Uscinski and Parent (2014: 11) note, conspiracy narratives: "flourish when people feel anxiety, […] or loss of control. The implication is that stressful events promote anxiety and other uncomfortable feelings, which then leads to conspiratorial beliefs, the communication of those beliefs, and perhaps action."

The reason that such feelings result in conspiracy narratives is that conspiracy narratives can be a tool for people and groups to make sense out of such feelings. Van Prooijen (2018: 22) explains that "the more strongly people experience such aversive emotions, the more likely it is that they assign blame for distressing events to different groups." In other words, conspiracy narratives can function as a means to find a tangible source that can be blamed either directly for the threat or at least the feelings individuals or groups experience. What is important, however, is that conspiracy narratives while drawing on feelings of anxiety must not necessarily be about the source of such feelings (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017: 328).

This becomes clearer if when considering the interplay between structural conditions (social situations) and direct antecedents (feelings of anxiety) of conspiracy narratives (Bilewicz and Sedek, 2015). Many social conditions produce feelings of anxiety, insecurity, powerlessness among certain groups. Conspiracy narratives drawn on such feelings and blame them on a specific outgroup that is said to cause the feelings. What I will suggest in the next section, 1.2.4, and develop in more detail in Chapter 2, is that conspiracy narratives not only draw on such feelings, and blame them on a specific outgroup, but

by doing so, they channel vague feelings of anxiety into specific fears of specific outgroups and their plots, and by extension spread fear.

The literature identifies several conditions that can act as structural causes of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness, and commonly lead to conspiracy narratives. Scholars point towards rapid social changes (Melley, 2000) and the conditions of a modern, highly complex world where traditional identities are dissolving (Dean, 1998; Melley, 2000). Scholars also point towards war and intergroup conflict (Butter and Reinkowski, 2014; Jordan, 2010; van Prooijen, 2018), and international power shifts (Lee, 2011).

Three other key points are the historical experience of past conspiracies (Butter and Reinkowski, 2014; Gray, 2010; Fathi, 2014), the experience of power differentials, as for example discriminated minority groups experience (Fassin, 2011; Waters, 1997), and lastly oppressive or authoritarian state structures that create insecurity or limit transparency (Gray, 2010). Thus, in many ways, conspiracy narratives reflect genuine feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness, and a desire to explain such feelings.

To summarise, I detailed the various explanations for why people and groups engage in conspiracy narratives. I argued that most explanations are convincing, but that ultimately feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness are most important. Feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness usually stem from structural conditions. Such conditions can be intergroup conflict, threats to identity, or social and economic changes.

1.2.4 What is the function of conspiracy narratives? Hegemony and counterhegemony

Conspiracy narratives are said to play various functions. It often sounds as if they are powerful beyond imagination. In this section, I will argue that while we have good reasons to assume conspiracy narratives can play a critical role in politics, we lack studies that propose theoretical frameworks to study such a role. A particular weakness is that authors rarely discuss how conspiracy narratives play a role in politics. To address this, I will show that we can build on the emotional properties of conspiracy narratives. Specially, we should understand that conspiracy narratives spread fear by creating the image of a fearsome threat that needs to be addressed, and thus, linked to securitisation and threat perception. By doing so, conspiracy narratives are implicated in challenging or sustaining political ideologies, rule and policies.

The literature makes bold claims about the role conspiracy narratives play in political life. Uscinski and Parent (2014: 4) claim that conspiracy narratives "have been deeply entwined in revolutions, social movements, and public policy, and they have fueled political stalemate, alienation, witch-hunts, and worse." Robins and Post (1997: 2) equally state about the paranoia of conspiracy narratives:

> A paranoid worldview played a determinant role in the destructive policies of the most notorious mass murderers of this century, Adolf Hitler and Stalin. […] paranoid thinking has fueled the fires that have caused tens of thousands of ethnic murders in the Balkans, in India, and in Central Africa.

Eirikur Bergmann (2018: 7) adds other figures like Benito Mussolini and Saddam Hussain to this list. In other words, conspiracy narratives are seen as a key driver of genocide, revolutions, violence, and terrorism. However, little is said about how conspiracy narratives cause such outcomes.

The problem lies in moving from the presence of conspiracy narratives to violence. For instance, the mere existence of antisemitic conspiracy narratives did not directly result in the Holocaust. However, these narratives potentially laid the ground for it, with Hitler perceiving genocide as the sole resolution to what the Nazis euphemistically termed "the Jewish Question." Sociologist Türkay Nefes (2014: 139) astutely notes that while we can see linkages between conspiratorial views on Jews and antisemitic ideology and violence, we do not know how they link and what role conspiracy narratives play in creating those links. He then concludes: "the academic literature has not given much attention to the socio-political impacts of conspiracy" narratives.

In fact, only a few studies systematically look at the impact of conspiracy narratives (Goreis and Voracek, 2019). These studies often measure correlations and investigate the behaviour of individuals towards specific questions, such as public health policies, or social engagement (Oliver and Wood, 2014; Pummerer et al., 2021; Romer and Jamieson, 2020; Jolley and Douglas, 2014, Douglas, 2021). While illuminating, they rarely theorise how such effects come about.

What I want to suggest is that conspiracy narratives produce effects by virtue of their emotional properties, that allows them to assume political functions. As argued in section 1.2.3, conspiracy narratives are grounded in feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness. However, recent scholarship suggests that they are not only based on anxiety, but further reproduce such feelings (Liekefett et al., 2023; van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017).

To be more precise, however, conspiracy narratives seem not to reproduce anxiety, but fear. Chapter 2 will discuss the difference in detail. What matters for now is that conspiracy narratives draw on feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness, and produce feelings of fear. How conspiracy narratives produce fear is illustrated well by the works by Historians David Jordan (2010) and Fabian Thunemann (2019). Both detail how conspiracy narratives create an atmosphere of fear in which political actors feel surrounded by constant plots to the extent where politics:

> moves increasingly from real and tangible enemies towards a struggle against potentialities, creating in this very process motives for further enmity and projection. In this way, the plausible danger of conspiracies leads the rulers to perceive the world as a conspiracy and reveals how real conspiracies and conspiratorial anticipation may interlink. (Thunemann: 2019: 5, own translation)

Both cases might be extreme, as an entire system became infused by conspiratorial logic. However, it is clear that the role of emotions does not stop when conspiracy narratives become created. Rather, conspiracy narratives carry and produce fear.

As a vehicle for fear, conspiracy narratives are involved in the emotional construction of threats and enemies. They relate closely to processes of securitisation as described by Buzan et al. (1998). Securitisation theory describes how issues are not automatically considered security threats simply due to their existence, but rather how actors designate and construct objects, including other groups, as threats. Objects that successfully become framed as a security threat, receive disproportional attention, resources and are lifted "above politics" (ibid: 23). Not all attempts at securitisation succeed. Emotions certainly play a role here in convincing the audience of what really should be considered a threat compared to others (Ganz, 2024). Unlike Thunemann in the above quote suggests, this process can be instrumental, even though it does not have to be. Political elites can instrumentally use conspiracy narratives to emotionally frame objects as threats for their own political purposes. For example, Yablokov (2018) shows in detail how the Russian state in conjunction with public intellectuals draws on conspiracy narratives to control public discourse.

We can observe then that the instrumental or non-instrumental use of conspiracy narratives is intertwined with the exercise of power (Nera et al., 2022). As Matthew Gray (2010), for example, outlines, conspiracy narratives can sustain authoritarian rule as they divert public attention towards a supposedly outside threat. Regimes can draw on conspiracy narratives to gain legitimacy as defenders of the nation or to delegitimise opposition groups by constructing them as a dangerous threat working with outside powers (Butter and Reinkowski, 2014: 29-30; Gürpınar 2020; Sauerland, 2023). Once an issue or actor is labelled as a conspiratorial threat, urgent policies to tackle the threat become justified, and other policies, such as policies of accommodation become delegitimised. In such cases, conspiracy narratives essentially work as tools to sustain political rule and could be labelled hegemonic (Schmid, 2014).

The political usefulness of conspiracy narratives seems to be lying in their ability to emotionally construct something as a threat. Interestingly, conspiracy narratives can construct an outgroup as a threat even when it objects, or when the outgroup seems to be non-threatening. Because conspirators act in secret, and hide their malicious intent, such objections or non-threatening appearance might be an

intentionally created deception. We will see that for example in the case of Israeli right-wing groups that accuse left-wing organisations of secretly working towards the destruction of Israel, while they allegedly would disguise their work as protecting human rights.

Much scholarship highlights then the hegemonic functions of conspiracy narratives to maintain political power, grant legitimacy to ruling political actors and their policies. However, what should be stressed is that a handful of scholars also highlight the counterhegemonic functions of conspiracy narratives. As described above, conspiracy narratives are grounded in feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness. Because people use conspiracy narratives to make-sense out of such feelings, explain where such feelings come from, and who is responsible for them, conspiracy narratives can be important windows into social, political and economic grievances, especially of those social groups that do not hold much power (Waters, 1997; Fassin, 2011, Allen, 2016). This might apply to many Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.

Because conspiracy narratives are essentially theories about power (Nefes, 2014: 139), who controls it and for what purposes, conspiracy narratives can be a criticism of the way power is exercised, especially regarding complex political processes or environments that are characterised by little transparency. Conspiracy narratives might not always be accurate and overplay agency, but by doing so, they also do not allow political elites to get away with arguing they have no choice but adopting certain policies. Thus, Allen (2016: 709) notes, conspiracy narratives can constitute "productive political work" and Yablokov (2018: 8) notes that they "can become an important tool for the redistribution of power and an efficient political strategy to expose inequities within the political, economic and social order."

Importantly, however, such feelings and reality do not necessarily need to align. This is a critical point. Conspiracy narratives are not necessarily about powerlessness but about feeling anxious, insecure or powerless. During the Trump presidency, right-wing groups advanced countless conspiracy narratives, despite being in power (Butter, 2022; Hellinger, 2019). Yet, many republican voters clearly feel anxious and powerless in the face of structural changes the country is undergoing; anxieties which the republican political elite stoked and played on, but potentially felt as well (Jones et al., 2017; Fahey et al., 2020; Mutz, 2018). We will see that this is also the case for the Israeli political right. While dominating the political landscape now for decades, many on the Israeli right feel marginalised and powerlessness versus some vague liberal elite, while also perceiving Israel to be in a highly vulnerable geo-strategic position.

In many cases, conspiracy narratives are also not productive as some have the tendency emotionally construct the threat and enemy in ontological dimensions as the eternal evil. This is not to say that the

enemy referred is not a real or constitutes a real threat, but the enemy becomes distorted. Dogan Gürpınar (2020: 93) describes how Turkish President Erdogan used conspiracy narrative to create enemies "whose hostilities were not mundane or grounded on a conjectural realpolitik or national interests but, rather, on an ontological grounding". Brian Klug (2003: 124) details this in the case of conspiratorial antisemitism, where the "Jew" ceases to be a "mere mortal" and becomes a timeless agent, who is part of a "powerful, wealthy, cunning group" that "infiltrates society, pursuing its own selfish ends" across "the globe".

To take that thought further we can draw on Timothy Snyder's (2018: 8) concept of "politics of eternity". The politics of eternity sees history as a cycle that "endlessly returns the same threat of the past". Because threats keep repeating themselves, nobody is responsible for the threat because "the enemy is coming no matter what we do". Generally, conspiracy narratives can function as a shield to avoid responsibility for a political situation by blaming it on the secretly working conspirators.

To summarise, conspiracy narratives are said to play an influential role in politics. However, the literature does not establish how such a role is played and how the supposedly vast negative effects come about. To address this gap, I suggested drawing on the fearful properties of conspiracy narratives that allow for an emotional construction of threats and their securitisation. Importantly, because of their emotional aspects, conspiracy narratives can become deeply intertwined with power, either exercising it or challenging it. Thus, conspiracy narratives can be a hegemonic or counterhegemonic tool.

1.2.5 Are conspiracy narratives true?

Are conspiracy narratives true? Or rather can they be true? The literature overwhelmingly answers that question with either "no" or with "usually no". So far, I have bracketed that question. In this section, I will show that the question is a lot harder to answer than it seems. Because the line between truth and non-truth is at least partially socially constructed, and real conspiracies exist, we have little grounds to reject conspiracy narratives a-priori. Yet, trying to establish truth is an epistemological rabbit hole. Thus, I will argue that it is best to approach conspiracy narratives from an agnostic position. This is not to say that conspiracy narratives are true, but rather that the question is practically better be avoided, at least in the context of this thesis.

Much of the literature argues that by default conspiracy narratives are not true. For example, Daniel Pipes (1998: 10) states plainly that a conspiracy narrative is the "nonexistent version of a conspiracy". Others classify conspiracy narrative as misinformation (Miller et al., 2016), false beliefs (Swami and Furnham, 2014) or delusions (Bale, 2007), refer to "paranoid imagination" (Evans, 2020) or "fantasy" (Borenstein, 2019). All in all, the point is the same: conspiracy narratives do not refer to reality. While

many scholars admit, real conspiracies happen, and some conspiracy narratives turned out to be true, we can nevertheless reject them *a priori* (Clarke, 2002: 132).

In fact, while conspiracy narratives often carry assumptions that seem unlikely, many philosophers point out that we cannot reject conspiracy theories a priori as a class of theories on purely epistemic grounds (Basham, 2003; Hepfer, 2015; Keeley, 1999). However, as noted by Marcus (1999: 3) assumptions present in conspiracy narratives, such as the existence of hyper-rational and hyper-egoistic groups of conspirators are equally present in some social science models, such as game theory.

Furthermore, conspiracy narratives sometimes turn out to be true, or at least partially true (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009) This led Brian Keeley (1999) to develop the distinction between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy narratives. While maybe theoretically useful, because it sidesteps the question of truth in favour of reasonable evidence, in practice it simply moves the goalpost from distinguishing between reality and conspiracy narratives to distinguishing between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy narratives. This then turns towards the question of what evidence counts as evidence and so forth.

As some authors rightfully observe labelling some form of expression a "conspiracy *theory*" is then not necessarily a reflection of the truth value of a claim but rather of authority and power relations (Aistrope and Bleiker, 2018; Birchall, 2006). Narratives or knowledge claims often become called conspiracy *theories* because they contradict official knowledge, and the epistemic authorities attempt to delegitimise alternative knowledge claims. Thus, Anton et al. (2014: 13) deem conspiracy narratives heterodox knowledge as opposed to accepted, orthodox knowledge.

All in all, separating reality from non-reality is an epistemic rabbit hole, especially when we accept that knowledge is at least partially socially determined, intertwined with the exercise of authority. However, do I need to determine the truth value of a conspiracy narrative? Is this an important aspect in this thesis? I am mainly concerned with the political function of conspiracy narratives in Israeli and Palestinian society. The question of truth might matter. More importantly, however, is how Israelis and Palestinians narrate the world to be, and how such narratives become politically functional. Thus, instead of tying my definition of conspiracy narrative to the absence of truth, a better strategy would be to follow scholars like Harambam (2020) who adopt an agnostic approach towards conspiracy claims. Thus, by adopting the term conspiracy narratives as a neutral term simply referring to a certain form of narrative, I hope to also avoid the connotation that is commonly attached to conspiracy theories as baseless claims and their followers as deluded.

There is one caveat, however. It can be argued that when conspiracy narratives are not rebuked, they are implicitly legitimised (Harambam, 2020: 222). While my approach to conspiracy narratives adopts an agnostic perspective regarding their truth value, I am looking at their political function that as just outlined is closely related to the exercise of power. Thus, I will critically highlight what implications conspiracy narratives have, how they are used and abused for political goals, some of which we should morally oppose, such as authoritarian rule or oppressive policies.

To summarise, conspiracy *theories* are often thought as categorically false. However, this is a claim that is on epistemological grounds hard to maintain. It can get tricky to decide where the truth starts and where it ends. Furthermore, the line between truth and non-truth might not be simply somewhere out there but socially constructed. Therefore, it makes sense to approach conspiracy *theories* (and narratives) agnostically when it comes to their truth value, while judging them based on what political ideology they sustain or challenge. That the term conspiracy *theory* is so tightly connected to false claims is another reason to avoid the term. As argued in section 1.2.1, I use therefore the term conspiracy *narrative* instead.

1.3 Conspiracy narratives in the Middle East

This thesis is about conspiracy narratives and their function the Israeli and Palestinian society. So far, I have presented an abstract view on conspiracy narratives. In this chapter, I will present the literature about the Middle East. I do so because no noteworthy literature on Israeli and Palestinian conspiracy narrative exists. Potentially, the literature on the Middle East can specify the theoretical observations laid out above. I will organise the discussion into two sections, dividing the literature into two schools, a “traditional” school, presenting a highly simplistic picture, and a "modern" school that sees conspiracy narratives linked to complex political conditions.

1.3.1 The traditional school

The traditional school consists of only a handful of authors, neo-conservative historian Daniel Pipes prominently. Much of this work was written in the 1990s. However, their academic perspective is still echoed by political analysts and commentators today. To fully illustrate the claims of the traditional school and to compensate for the sparse literature, I will draw on non-academic pieces as well.

Non-academic writing on the Middle East and conspiracy narratives is ample. Thomas Friedman (2002) of the *New York Times* states that, in the region, the United States fights, together with some liberal forces, a “war between the future and the past, between development and underdevelopment, between authors of crazy conspiracy narratives versus those espousing rationality”. His colleague, Roger Cohen

(2010), shares a similar perspective in explaining how, allegedly, the "captive Arab mind" sees conspiracies everywhere and is not able to empower itself. Mehdi Hasan (2014) claims in *The New Statesman* that conspiracy narratives in the Middle East are a widespread "virus that feeds off insecurity" and Brian Frydenborg (2018) argues in *Small Wars Journal*:

> When I first came to the Middle East, I was amazed at how widespread and deep acceptance of conspiracy theories was among locals. People of all walks of life and backgrounds […] buy enthusiastically into various conspiracy theories […] the degree to which they are accepted in a massive manner in the Middle East sets the region apart.

Clearly, according to many analysts, conspiracy narratives in the Middle East are widespread. Furthermore, those narratives are said to stoke anti-Western or anti-Israel feelings, fuelling terrorism and underdevelopment. Micah Halpern (2017) for example writes in the *Observer*:

> Conspiracy theories run rampant throughout the Middle East […]. Not surprisingly, the result is an altered state of reality. It is that heightened sense of fear that paralyzed locals throughout the Middle East and catapulted terrorist groups, most notably ISIS and al Qaeda, into power.

However, beyond telling us that conspiracy narratives are widespread, irrational, dangerous and paralysing the region, we learn little. Such perspectives might have been based on the academic findings of what I dub the traditional school.

The first full study on conspiracy narratives in the region *The Hidden Hand – Middle East Fears of Conspiracy* (1998) is authored by the neoconservative historian Daniel Pipes. Pipes investigates the character, sources, and impact of conspiracy narratives. While he admits that real conspiracies occur and feed into the development of conspiracy narratives, the latter is a paranoid frame of mind that operates outside of reality, a mindset for which he adopts the term "conspiracism". This is echoed by Marvin Zonis and Craig Joseph (1994) in their article *Conspiracy Thinking in the Middle East*.

Pipes (1998: 1-2) claims that "conspiracism provides a key to understanding the political culture of the Middle East" as it "suffuses life, from the most private family conversations to the highest and most public levels of politics. […] In sum, conspiracism constitutes one of the region's most distinctive political features. […] Analysing the region without taking the hidden hand into account is comparable to studying […] Soviet politics without Marxism-Leninism." In other words, Pipes believes that conspiracy narratives are widespread and highly influential.

Pipes and others (Zonis and Joseph, 1994) describe how most conspiracy narratives in the Middle East revolve around "imperialist-Jewish", Zionist or American conspiracies (Abrahamian, 1993: 22). In the "distorting prism" (Pipes, 1998: 26) of conspiracy narratives, Zionism, Israel or the United States are seen as evil, omnipotent forces (ibid: 103-110.that secretly plot to gain power, wealth or humiliate Arabs,

Iranians or Islam itself (ibid: 29). In the language of conspiracy narratives, Jews and Zionist, and Imperialists often becomes conflated. In particular, antisemitic assumptions, that Jews control the United States are said to be common. It is here, where conspiracy narratives and antisemitism overlap or more precisely, where conspiracy narratives become an essential part of anti-Jewish and antisemitic narratives. In much of the literature, it seems as if the conspiratorial antisemitism of Arabs and Palestinians constitutes the root cause of the Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Carmon, 2023; Diker, 2023; Küntzel, 2005; Salhani, 2019; Webman, 2013).

In outlining reasons for the prevalence of conspiracy narratives, Pipes draws on historical and psychological explanations. Modern conspiracy narratives emerged around roughly 1800 in the Middle East and were, in their basic tenants, imported from Europe. This fact has been described elsewhere, especially when it comes to antisemitic narratives (De Poli, 2018; Bernhardt and Jaki, 2010). Conspiracy narratives, so the argument goes, fell on fertile ground when Muslim nations declined and eventually fell under European control. Pipes, thus, proposes that conspiracy narratives function as a psychological tool to blame others for the own shortcomings. Zonis and Joseph (1994) similarly see conspiracy narratives as the expression of an “ethnic psychosis” rooted in cultural and sociological factors of the Middle East, especially damaging child-rearing practices and a sexuality “shrouded in secrecy”.

Pipes details in numerous case studies the alleged impact of conspiracy narratives, ranging from suspicions over "Greater Israel" to the Islamic revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. As a result of those paranoid beliefs, the region is drawn towards extremism: “Normal ambitions disappear, replaced by fevered drives to dominate and fears of domination.” (Pipes, 1998: 27). Conspiracy narratives, according to traditional scholars, foster “anti-Western, anti-Israeli, anti-democratic, anti-moderate and antimodern actions” while also creating a sense of “passivity” towards their own responsibility and local governments (ibid: 26). Zonis and Joseph (1994: 458) write: “conspiracy thinking is conducive not to liberating action but to crippling passivity”. Therefore, they claim, it is no surprise that the Middle East remains dominated by foreign powers (Heggy, 2004).

Interestingly, Pipes claims that in Israel, Turkey, and the West only a small minority espouses conspiracy narratives (Pipes, 1998: 5). Zonis and Joseph (1994) are even more explicit, as they link conspiracy narratives specifically to what they call “Arab-Iranian-Muslim culture”. Similarly, Abrahamian (1993: 112, see also Al-Azm, 2011: 18) writes:

> the paranoid style […] is much more prevalent in modern Iran […]. In the West, they tend to be confined to fringe groups […]. In Iran, however, the paranoid style permeates society, the mainstream as much as the fringe, and cuts through all sectors of the political spectrum […].

Overall, the view of Pipes and others on conspiracy narratives in the Middle East found its way into the comment section on Middle Eastern politics. Pipes and others paint a highly simplistic and problematic picture. As early conspiracy research pathologized conspiracy narratives, Pipes and others pathologized the Middle East. Essentially, they frame Middle Easterners as being paranoid and detached from reality. As a result, so they claim, the region remains paralysed and consumed by (antisemitic) hostility towards Israel and the US. While research is highly detailed, it does not come in a robust theoretical and neutral framework. Somehow, the presence of conspiracy narratives in conflict situations and underdevelopment is taken as its self-evident cause. Ironically, conspiracy narratives become a nearly omnipotent force that alone determines the direction of the region.

1.3.2 The modern school

Parallel to the inception of new approaches in the field of conspiracy research, studies on the Middle East developed. However, compared to other regions, academic attention towards the Middle East remains scarce. The modern school consists of only a few authors, most notably Australian scholar Matthew Gray. In this section, I will present in detail the arguments of the modern school.

Matthew Gray (2010: 11) starts his book Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World by guarding against Pipes and others:

> "a book about conspiracism, […] could slide into a discussion of the Arab mindset or other such observations. Pipes arguably falls into this mode [of analysis]. […] Orientalist explanations such as these are not only pathological in orientation and thus analytically questionable, but also intellectually biased: in effect if not in intent, they usually incline towards a Western view of (or agenda for) the region rather than being about how the region actually is, in and of itself. As such, they commonly […] arrive at simplistic or essentialist conclusions of little real insight, or in some cases are discourses of domination".

As this is an important insight, I will briefly comment on the meaning of orientalism before coming back to Gray's analysis. Orientalism is a term going back to Palestinian-American intellectual Edward Said (2003). For Said, Orientalism is the construction of the Orient starting from the assumption of a fundamental difference, and explicit or implicit superiority of the West towards the East. Western-dominated discourse depicts the Orient as exotic, backwards, and inferior to Western culture and its liberal, enlightened values (ibid: 7). Western research did not discover the Orient in any objective way but rather created and continues to create "the Orient" and its characteristics. For Said, the Western discourse on the Middle East is closely tied to imperialism, justifying exploitation, colonial rule and foreign interference (ibid: 3-5; 12-14).

Tim Aistrope (2020) shows that orientalism in conspiracy studies cannot be simply brushed aside. Aistrope shows how simplistic analyses of conspiracy narratives in the Middle East have informed

American policymaking towards the region, leading to the assumption that opposition or hostility towards US policies must be grounded in delusion, not in valid objections. Thus, when analysing the region, the issue of orientalism must be kept in mind. It is this important, that modern scholars, such as Gray, are aware of the questionable assumption made by Pipes and others.

For Gray, conspiracy narratives, or what he calls "conspiracism" capture broader social and political dynamics. Gray (2010: 6) points towards a variety of actors who engage with conspiracy narratives: "the state, political elites, political leaderships, social forces, and marginalised or disenfranchised individuals and groups, among others." This lays the ground for a thorough analysis of what gives rise to conspiracy narratives, looking beyond reductionist explanations of the traditional school. Gray proposes three main reasons why conspiracy narratives are widespread in the Middle East.[3]

First, conspiracy narratives can function as counternarratives of minorities or the marginalised. Individuals or groups who are alienated and oppressed might feel hostility towards the political system. Gray asserts that (ibid: 32) "in light of the increased authoritarianism prevalent in the region's politics, coupled with (or arguably stemming from) the declining legitimacy of many states and leaders". Marginalisation constitutes a major source of conspiracy narratives in the region. A typical example is how various Islamist groups promote conspiracy narratives, accusing the government of secretly working with foreign powers, such as Israel or the United States, to control local societies, weaken Islamic movements or Islam in itself. However, other parts of society also embrace conspiracy narratives, possibly with a positive impact, when challenging state repression and corruption.

Second, Gray (ibid: 4-6) asserts that marginalisation cannot fully account for the widespread phenomenon of conspiracy narratives. He then draws together various socio-political arguments from the literature. As globalisation fractures traditional identities and diminishes individual and collective agency, individuals and groups look for stable identities to hold onto, for example by anchoring themselves in an imagined past. Gray (ibid: 37) writes, mythologies "seek to anchor the present in the past. […] Political myths dramatize the past, entangled in popular memory, so as to make the future apparent. […] Furthermore, it may include a conspiracy theory targeting alleged conspirators". Conspiracy narratives thus become part of - or a vehicle for – political myths. Despite many differences, various Islamist groups adopt political myths that easily lend themselves to conspiratorial interpretation. Thus, not only their vulnerable position is a source of conspiracy narratives, but also their ideology.

[3] Gray suggests a fourth reason I do not discuss, because it is less relevant. He proposes that conspiracy narratives are often a simple form of entertainment in popular culture and in that function are not believed but still narrated (2010: 27).

Connections to political myths are not confined to Islamists. Overall, conspiracy narratives in the region echo anti-colonial and anti-imperial language. It is typical for leftist or nationalist groups, however, became a general aspect of political myths in the Middle East. Claims say the US, Israel, or other Western powers conspire for their benefit at the costs of the local population. However, and this is a crucial addition to Pipes, conspiracy narratives are popular partially because the Middle East is a "highly penetrated" region where indeed foreign powers are often conspiring to advance their own goals (Gray, 2014: 13). This underscores how treating conspiracy narratives as paranoia falls short because based on the historic record, it can be reasonable to be wary of at least some conspiracies. While not explicitly shown by Gray, it underlines how conflict is a driver of conspiracy narratives, as conflicts produce fear and suspicion of further aggression, including conspiracies.

Third, Gray and others (Allen, 2016; Giry and Gürpınar; 2020; Röhl, 2010: 50-51) see a major source of conspiracy narratives in state-society relations. States in the Middle East are often authoritarian and repressive while failing to deliver on promises of economic development and good governance generally. Thus, they often suffer from weak legitimacy, a problem that is compounded where countries are led by minority or sectarian governments, such as in Syria or Lebanon. In such cases, the state is often the main source of conspiracy narratives. While sometimes feeling truly threatened by conspiratorial forces, states employ conspiracy narratives for specific purposes, or so Gray claims. He states (2010: 136):

> state conspiracism can directly divert public attention […] away from the weaknesses or failings of the state and its leadership and towards a constructed enemy, ideally an external one or otherwise an opaque internal one. […] state conspiracism usually has the effect, deliberately or not, of projecting the state as a source of protection against such a perceived enemy, enhancing state legitimacy [...].

In other words, Gray moves from detailing sources to functions of conspiracy narratives that would serve as instruments that are rationally employed by political actors. Butter und Reinkowski (2014: 29) describe that conspiracy narratives "serve as a powerful tool of political mobilization for the state or powerful state-like organizations (…) as a tool of state symbolism, legitimacy-building and control". Unfortunately, neither Gray nor Butter do offer more observations on the political function of conspiracy narratives. Lori Allen (2016: 715) in the only paper that addresses the Palestinian context, offers a more positive function of conspiracy narratives, arguing that "conspiracy tales […] encourages a constructive vigilance about political actors and political spin", deconstructing hypocritical discourse of those in power. Taken together, those observations affirm the arguments I made earlier (1.2.4), but do not take us further.

Overall, the modern literature develops a useful analysis of conspiracy narratives in the Middle East that highlights many important social and political conditions that lead to feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness and thus produce conspiracy narratives, even if the connection to emotions is not explicitly made. Gray also tells us about the predominately anti-colonial but not antisemitic nature of such theories. Unfortunately, the political function conspiracy narratives play in Middle Eastern settings is barely explored.

1.3.3 Lessons learned: Fear - thinking about causes and impact

The arguments and differences of the traditional and the modern approach help in establishing a clear point of departure for this thesis. Linking the region-specific to the general literature, I will make five points that will inform the remainder of the study.

First, research has so far ignored Israel and Palestine as contexts. While research has evolved, it is mostly stuck on investigating Arab countries or Iran. Turkey has garnered interest (Nefes, 2013; 2017; Nefes and Romeo-Reche, 2024; Gürpınar, 2020), but Israel has not. Furthermore, studies generally address the Middle East and less country or context specific cases. Thus, we also know nearly nothing about Palestinian conspiracy narratives, aside from the Lori Allen's work (2016) and those covered by research into antisemitism.

This should come as a surprise. Many conspiracy narratives in the region are related to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, even those that see the United States as the conspirator. As Butter and Reinkowski (2014: 24) state "No matter how one turns the kaleidoscope of U.S.-Arab relations, one always returns, or is returned to, the picture of Palestine". Because conspiracy narratives often revolve around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, studying conspiracy narratives in Israel and Palestine can create a significant contribution to our knowledge of both conspiracy narratives, as well as political dynamics in Israel, Palestine and between the two societies.

Second, the literature in the Middle East, particularly the modern school, provides important insights into structural conditions that can see as producing feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness and thus encourage conspiracy narration. The literature draws attention to marginalisation of groups by the state, the importance of identity shifts, and narratives and the role of authoritarian political projects. These sources are important because it helps establishing what produces anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness in the region, and potentially also in Israel and Palestine, but also helps us establish what content conspiracy narratives typically carry and thus, what to investigate when for example designing interview questions. As shown, conspiracy narratives heavily feature anti-colonial language, focusing on the US and Israel, but also in the Palestinian context on their own institutions and parties.

Third, Gray emphasises how conspiracy narratives relate to group myths. This point seems crucial, showing generally how conspiracy narratives must not only resonate emotionally by explaining anxiety, insecurity or powerlessness but also by feeding and fitting into a group's overall narrative outlook on the world.

Fourth, the research inadequately addresses the political function of conspiracy narratives. While Pipes and others argue that conspiracy narratives are highly influential by paralysing the region and stoking hatred, Gray and the modern school is relatively silent on the function conspiracy narratives play, aside from affirming that they can function either as hegemonic tools of the state (Gray, 2010) or counterhegemonic tools of those oppressed (Allen, 2016).

Fifth, the role of emotions is overall ignored, both in how conspiracy narratives seem to resonate because of their ability to draw on and explain feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness, but also in theorising the function of conspiracy narratives. Maybe it is not a surprise that the function of conspiracy narratives remains neglected, considering the absence of a solid theoretical framework that bridges the gap between conspiracy narratives and supposed function.

Overall, conspiracy narratives remain under-researched and under-theorised, especially in the Middle East context. Researchers such as Gray have skilfully conducted insightful research, but they missed placing conspiracy narratives in a robust framework that clearly connects them to both origins and effects. To counter this, I have placed emotions, anxiety to explain the origin of conspiracy narratives and fear to theorise their function, prominently in my conceptualisation.

1.4 Conclusion

Over the last decade, conspiracy narratives received increased academic attention. Various approaches offer many useful insights. At the same time, the field is caught up in some unproductive debates. Building and departing from the literature, in this chapter I have outlined my approach to conspiracy narratives. I will now tie together the various arguments.

I have argued that what the field mostly refers to as conspiracy *theories* are better understood as conspiracy *narratives*. Conspiracy *theorie*s are often less coherent and a broader phenomenon than the word theory suggests, and the concept conspiracy theory as usually defined captures. Mostly, we are dealing with vague claims that somehow explain events by referring to a conspiracy.

I understand conspiracy narratives as a broader term, defined broadly by following Claire Birchall, as any narrative that explains event or series of events to be the result of a powerful group of people working in secret to an evil goal. Importantly, conspiracy narratives are characterised by a combination

of three narrative elements that see a conspiracy at work based: a) the secret plans or actions, b) hedged by a powerful group of conspirators, c) based on malicious intents. I have further detailed that conspiracy narratives are hyper-agent centric, equating outcomes with intent, construct enemies seen as evil, powerful and relatively monolithic and centre on secrecy insofar they are concerned with unmasking, exposing or uncovering plots.

Additionally, choosing the concept of conspiracy narrative avoids the heavy normative connotation of conspiracy *theory.* The term conspiracy theory is too closely connected to false beliefs. This is tricky because drawing a line between truth and fiction is harder than it seems. While some conspiracy narratives are patently wrong, the thesis is not about investigating the truth value of certain conspiracy narratives. It is about their function in Israeli and Palestinian society. Thus, I will adopt an agnostic approach towards their epistemic status, while being critical of the function they play and how this function is linked to the exercise or challenge of power. I substantiated the concept further by answering four questions, the answers of which can be summarised in four key ideas.

Conspiracy narratives are emotional. I proposed that conspiracy narratives draw on feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness that in turn are rooted in structural conditions, such as conflict, challenges to group identity, and oppressive state structures. Conspiracy narratives offer a way for groups to make sense out of such feelings, attempt to find their causes and reduce such feelings. Furthermore, when drawing on feelings of anxiety, conspiracy narratives channel such feelings into the fearsome picture of an evil group of conspirators. Thus, far from reducing adverse feelings, they simply move them onto a new object, producing new fears.

Conspiracy narratives are politically useful. The literature on conspiracy narratives claims that conspiracy narratives are extremely impactful. Much of it is simply based on conjectures. I have argued we can conceptualise the political functions of conspiracy narratives in a more systematic way by looking at their emotional properties. By constructing the fearsome image of the group of conspirators, conspiracy narratives are linked to the exercise or challenge of power, as hegemonic or counterhegemonic tools. Via processes of securitisation, conspiracy narratives can legitimize political ideologies, rule and actions towards the outgroup emotionally constructed as a threat. In extreme forms of conspiracy narratives, such a threat becomes constructed along fatalistic lines: an eternal, ontological enemy. However, conspiracy narratives can also challenge political power by bundling action towards the conspirators and critiquing actors to intentionally bring about negative outcomes.

Conspiracy narratives are universal. People in various times and cultures, such as from ancient Rome, revolutionary France, Soviet Russia believed conspiracy narratives. Today, they can be found all over

the world. Equally, they should not be discarded as a minority phenomenon since large parts of all studied populations believe in some conspiracy narratives. Thus, we should treat them as ubiquitous phenomenon often part of political discourse.

Conspiracy narratives are social. Conspiracy narratives tell stories about groups and their enemies. Not the individual is targeted by the evil group of conspirators, but the ingroup. Additionally, what makes them relevant is that they act as group narratives. As I have shown in the section on the Middle East, conspiracy narratives are easily linked with group dynamics, such intergroup conflict, marginalisation, or group myths. Over time, conspiracy narratives can become an essential part of a group's worldview and culture.

While these points are general, context matters. Anxiety might be a universal antecedent of conspiracy narratives. However, how anxiety is produced, shaped and experiences is context specific. Furthermore, the exact content of conspiracy narratives varies depending on the context, and so does the way they come to exercise a political function. Thus, for this thesis the context of Israel-Palestine located in the Middle East is important.

To find an anchor point for considering context-specific factors of the Middle East, I presented the relevant literature by dividing it into two schools. I have sided with what I have dubbed the modern school, as the traditional school describes Middle Eastern dynamics in a highly simplistic and orientalist manner. The modern school aptly details three major sources for conspiracy narratives in the region. Conspiracy narratives are grounded in the marginalisation and oppression of certain parts of society, the fracturing of traditional identity elements across the region, and in state-society relations with the state using conspiracy narratives to sustain authoritarian structures.

Chapter 2 – Emotions: Anxiety, Fear and Social Structures

The previous chapter highlighted the importance of anxiety in creating conspiracy narratives, and the importance of fear in grasping the political functions of conspiracy narratives. However, the concepts of these emotions need further clarification. My aim in this chapter is to develop a detailed theoretical account of emotions, including anxiety and fear, and how they shape social life.

To establish how emotions do so, it is necessary to establish what emotions are. As I will show, the debate on the nature of emotions is dominated by two fundamentally conflicting approaches: essentialist approaches and constructivist approaches. Essentialist approaches see emotions as discrete, innate, universal responses to external stimuli. Emotions come from inside the body and move outwards. Constructivists disagree, describing emotions as social. They are socially learned and culturally specific reactions. Emotions then move from society, from outside our bodies into it, much as norms do.

In this thesis, I will mostly discuss the political relevance of emotions. I will discuss how anxiety and fear are collectively communicated experiences of Israeli and Palestinian society, how those emotions are attached to, transmitted, and transformed by conspiracy narratives, and how the emotional content of such narratives allows them to exercise a political function. Thus, I will mostly discuss emotions beyond the feelings of individuals. This would suggest adopting a constructivist perspective that focuses on the social aspects of emotions.

However, because emotions are a key concept of this thesis, it seems too much of an intellectual shortcut not to engage with the debate about the potential biological essence of emotions. To establish a firm theoretical basis, I see it as necessary to engage with arguments that challenge the idea that emotions can somehow be social and be determined by society. At the same time, to more forcefully show why emotions matter, we need to capture how emotions resonate in the individual, especially because they simply feel different than learned behaviour. Thus, I want to outline an understanding of emotions as socially constructed but assembled at the individual level. Using psychological constructivism, I will argue that emotions are a socially-guided sense-making process, where we try to understand our body and brain and relate it to the world. In that process, emotions become attached to the object we think of as "causing" our emotions and are not simply passive receivers of social structure but equally their creator. To be clear for the remainder of the chapter, objects are not necessarily inanimate things, but can equally be animate beings, such as a person, a group, or an animal. In conspiracy narratives, the object is the group of conspirators.

I will proceed in this chapter in three sections. First, I will present the main perspectives on emotions (2.1). After a short introduction to the modern field of emotions (2.1.1), I will describe the essentialist (2.1.2) and subsequently the constructivist perspective (2.1.3). I will argue in section 2.1.4 that both are not entirely convincing. Based on this, I will secondly develop my conception of emotions (2.2). I will do this by drawing on psychological constructivism and theories that look at emotions as part of social structure. Third (2.3), I will turn towards the importance and difference between the two important emotions for this thesis: anxiety and fear (2.3.1 and 2.3.2). Based on this I will describe how fear shapes social structures by becoming institutionalised (2.3.3) and link this to conspiracy narratives (2.3.4).

2.1 What are emotions?

When thinking of emotions, we usually think of how they "make" us feel. To love, to be fearful, or to hate feels a certain way. However, there is more to emotions than their phenomenological aspect.

Psychologists and philosophers contend that an emotional episode usually contains four different components: 1) Emotions include various physiological aspects, for example increased heart rate, or mental activity; 2) Emotions also include a subjective experience beyond mere bodily changes, called the phenomenological aspect; 3) Emotions are linked to certain behavioural tendencies, for example the urge to flee or attack; and 4) Emotions are linked to some form of cognitive evaluation, for example judging an object as dangerous (Coicaud, 2016: 26; Keltner and Lerner, 2010: 319).

However, because of those various aspects, emotions are not easily categorised nor understood. This is also reflected in the number of theories on emotions, which generally emphasise a different aspect of those four aspects above.

2.1.1 James-Lange theory of emotions and basic emotions theory

Thinkers have been theorising about emotions since at least antiquity. Most known philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Hobbes and Hume wrote at least cursorily on the topic of emotions, often using the term passions.[4]

Those theories suggested overwhelmingly that emotions are a certain type of (primitive) subjective experience based on some form of cognitive judgment and resulting in bodily expressions, with emotions usually being cast hindering proper rational judgement. In many ways, this view reflects the intuitive folk-psychology view, that emotions are “feelings” happening to us and resulting in certain

[4] The ancient Greek term pathos and Latin term passio roughly correspond to what we call emotions. For a longer discussion on ancient and medieval theories of emotions see Knuuttila (2004).

expressions. Put simply, some event causes our sadness which in turn makes us cry (Scarantino and de Sousa, 2021).

The first modern views on emotions were formulated, separately but in parallel, by William James and Carl Lange in the 1880s. Their works are frequently called "James-Lange-theory". They argued that certain bodily reactions are caused by the perception of some external stimulus, and it is the feeling of those bodily changes that constitute the emotion. Thus, "our feeling of [bodily] changes as they occur IS the emotion" (James, 1884: 190). James explains (1884: 191):

> we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be. Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colourless, destitute of emotional warmth. We might then see the bear, and judge it best to run, receive the insult and deem it right to strike, but we could not actually feel afraid or angry.

Thus, essentially, James and Lange reversed the intuitive order of causation. Emotions do not result in bodily expressions but are caused by them. Recently, the James-Lange ideas have witnessed a revival in the form of psychological constructivism. However, to fully understand this counterintuitive view, it is useful to briefly summarise the two main approaches to emotions that exist today.

2.1.2 The essentialist view on emotions: basic emotions and appraisal theory

Initially, James' and Lange's work was taken mostly to underline the idea that emotions have a distinct bodily signature. This view, which still dominates much of psychological research, understands emotions as natural kinds.[5] This means that we can clearly distinguish different emotions by their universal biological essence. In other words, each emotion would have a unique universal fingerprint. This is closely related to what is called *basic emotions theory.*

Basic emotions theory was advanced by psychologists Silvan Tomkins (1962; 1963), Paul Ekman (1992) and Carrol Izard (1977). The theory proposes that certain emotions are innate evolutionary responses that are universally shared and expressed in the same way across time and culture. While there exists some disagreement on which emotions are basic, happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, and surprise, are often thought as comprising the "default set" of basic emotions (Ortony, 2022: 43). While there also exists a debate on what makes an emotion basic, Barbalet and Demertzis summarise basic emotions as: (a) existing in other species; (b) innately anchored in the brain, (c) developing early in life, (d) not

[5] Natural kinds refer to a category that does not require human agreement to exist. For a detailed discussion see Tobin and Bird (2024).

composed of simpler emotions; and (e) expressed in a distinctive universal pattern (Barbalet and Demertzis, 2013: 168).

Because basic emotions theory proposes that emotions, or at least basic emotions, are automated, universal processes, researchers set out to confirm the uniqueness and innateness of basic emotions, by mapping specific physiological profiles, such as facial expressions. Recently, scholars attempted to find neural circuits dedicated to those basic emotions as well. For example, fear is generally thought to include this physiological profile: sweating, increased heart rate, dryness of mouth, trembling and high alertness (Barbalet and Demertzis, 2013: 167; Beckers et al., 2023; Steimer, 2002). Fear is also thought to be "made" by the amygdala, which is often called the brain's fear centre (Davies, 1992; LeDoux, 2015).

Understanding emotions, as natural kinds is closely linked to *appraisal theories*, that explain how emotions are caused and then automatically triggered. Appraisal theories stipulate that the evaluation of external stimuli, called appraisal, results in emotions (Arnold, 1960; Deonna and Teroni, 2012: 5, Lazarus, 1991, Pearlman, 2013). As Robert Solomon (1977: 47) puts it: "What constitutes the anger is my judging that I have been insulted […]". In a nutshell, specific appraisals cause certain emotions. For example, judging something to be good and currently present results in happiness, while judging something to be dangerous and imminently occurring in fear. Thus, discrete emotions are caused by different stimuli. Appraisal theories have been criticised as "hypercognizing" emotions (Solomon, 2000: 9). After all, animals show fear too, without being able to make conscious evaluations (Cochrane, 2018: 5). To account for this fact, models have been adapted to view appraisal as both conscious and unconscious mental processing (Keltner et al., 2014: 162). Still, emotions remain tightly linked to automatic evaluations that result inevitably in specific physiological responses and feelings, processed by specific parts of the brain.

To summarise, basic emotion and appraisal theories describe emotions as automated, innate, processes that are triggered by external stimuli. While culture matters in how emotions get evoked, biology matters more. As Evans states: "Emotions are not like words which differ from culture to culture; they are closer to breathing which is just part of human nature." (2003: 56). Thus, we can best describe them as an essentialist view on emotions.

2.1.3 The constructivist approach to emotion: Cultural and sociological theories

Various constructivist theories challenge this essentialist view on emotions. By pointing towards the strong cultural, and behavioural, historical variation of emotions, constructivists claim that emotions are not universal but rather socially constructed or at least significantly constrained by social norms. I will

briefly outline how such variation manifests itself and challenges the purported view on emotions as natural kinds. Then I will discuss the deeper assumptions of such constructivist approaches.

Scientists such as Batja Mesquita and Janxin Leu (2007) emphasise the strong cultural variation in emotions, thereby questioning their innate, universal character. Many emotions are not universal, but culturally specific (Evans, 2003). Examples include the Japanese emotion of amae (indulgent dependency, similarly to a child-parent relationship) or the Inuit Iktsuarpok, roughly denoting to anxiously wait for arriving guests (Behrens, 2004; Lomas, 2016; Ortony, 2022). Some scholars defend the notion of universality by claiming that while a culture might not have a word for a certain emotion, people can still experience it. Yet, some cultures do not even have words to reflect supposedly basic emotions, such as anger (Prinz, 2004).

Scholars also emphasise the behavioural variation of emotions. The seminal work of Arlie Hochschild (2012), on what she calls "feeling rules" revealed how emotions are shaped by social roles, and power relations. Feeling rules dictate who must or can feel what at which time, or whose feelings matter. For example, workers in the hospitality business (usually women) are expected to smile and be happy. Thus, emotions do not just happen to individuals, but are socially managed. This approach has been extended to emotional expressions in politics (Hall and Gustafsson, 2021; Lively and Weed, 2014). James Averill (1980) goes as far as claiming that actions under emotions are scripted behaviours that we learn, not reactions that involuntarily overcome us. An outburst of anger is then simply learned behaviour rather than an involuntary reaction of our body. According to Averill, we dupe ourselves into believing we lost control when in fact we simply respond to socially scripted behaviour.

Many historians of emotions emphasise how emotions or at least emotional practices are far from constant, even in the same cultural area. The way mourning, for example, is practised in American culture has changed significantly compared to the past. Today less time is spent on rituals of mourning and even employers give less time off work for bereavement (Stearns, 2016: 91). By extension most historians see emotions foremost as social practices, similar to Averill's social scripts.

From the above, it is possible to establish a rough line between a moderate and a radical version of constructivism. The former affirms that there is a biological basis to emotions but insists that they are socially shaped. As Kempner (2000: 45) says: "Given that the individual is the locus of emotion – we can measure emotion nowhere but in the individual – the containment of the individual in the social matrix determines *which emotions are likely to be expressed when and where, on what grounds and for what reasons, by what modes of expression, by whom"* (emphasis in the original).

Other scientists go further, subscribing to a more radical version of constructivism. While not denying that emotions play out in individuals, they point to the fact that many emotions do not have bodily reactions. Furthermore, most emotions rely on complex social interactions and behaviour. A typical example here is guilt or love (Prinz, 2004). As Edwards (1999: 279) puts it, “Emotion categories are […] discursive phenomena and need to be studied as such, as part of how talk performs social actions”.

Despite those differences, constructivism shares some underlying assumptions. Following Simon Koschut (2020) we can identify three basic assumptions. First, emotions are (mostly) the product of culture, not nature. Second, emotions are not (just) innate, but socially learned concepts and behaviour. And third, emotions are ways of relating and acting in a social environment and are a way of communicating shared meanings. Thus, emotions are not just private but can be described as "a reaching out to the world" (Solomon, 2003: 149). As Koschut (2020: 7) writes: “Rather than emotions being understood as coming from within the body and moving outwards to the social world, emotions instead come from without and move inward. […] Hence, what agents are feeling inside is to a significant extent predetermined by outside social structures.”

2.1.4 The shortcomings of emotional essentialism and constructivism

Both essentialists and constructivists put forward compelling arguments supported by a good amount of evidence. Different perspectives exist because different theories focus on different aspects related to emotions. Proponents of basic emotion theory focus on individuals, while constructivists focus on groups.

Both perspectives face problems. Basic emotions theory enjoys wide support; however, neuroscientists and psychologists were not able to confirm a unique bodily signature of any emotion.[6] For example, fear and anger often involve the same bodily reactions, but still feel different to us. Furthermore, dedicated emotional neural circuits have not (yet) been found (Feldman Barrett, 2015: 53). The amygdala while often involved in fear, is equally involved in other reactions, such as when humans detect novelty (Feldman Barret, 2017: 19; LeDoux and Pine, 2016). Crucially, fear can be experienced without the amygdala being active. Thus, basic emotion theory is unsatisfactory. Accepting emotions as discrete, externally triggered, short-lived phenomena leads us to study them in a narrow fashion. From the perspective of political science, it essentially means to limit any analysis to specific episodes when people “feel” emotional, and thus decide and behave a certain way. Consider, for example, Jacque

[6] Siegel et al. (2018) conduct a meta-analysis, concluding that over 2000 studies were not able to specify clear physiological reactions of any emotion.

Hymans' (2006) excellent work on nuclear proliferation, where Hymans convincingly shows how emotions, such as fear, affect decision-making processes of leaders.

Constructivism is equally plagued by shortcomings. Constructivist theories reduce emotions to cultural influences. This is hardly convincing. If social structure determines emotions as "scripted behaviour", as an external idea about how to feel and behave, it seems to leave emotions "out in the cold" (Ross, 2006). Emotions then are simply cognitive structures, similar to norms. What matters for constructivists is how collectives establish when and how to feel, communicate, and enact which emotion as part of the culture and socially determined roles. What is missing is how emotions feel. We often feel different from what we are supposed to feel, and we feel how suddenly emotions seem to take over, seemingly controlling us and our actions. In other words, taking the individual, phenomenological aspect out of a theory on emotions will remain unconvincing as an account of what emotions are. This does not mean that a constructivist perspective is not useful.

Because emotions seem so powerful in our daily lives, it is surprising that most constructivist accounts look at emotions only as the dependent variable. Those socially determined emotions then are associated with or equal certain behaviours and practices. However, what is often missing is how emotions might construct and undergird social structures in the first place. Put differently, social structures and culture impact and shape emotions, but emotions, while important for social interactions and behaviour, do not take part in constructing social reality. This seems a rather weak take on the role of emotion in the creation of social life.

To address these issues, some scholars have developed hybrid theories that draw on both sides. The most common proposal is to differentiate between basic and complex emotions. Basic emotions are natural kinds, that express themselves in involuntary bodily reactions, while complex emotions constitute social conventions. From such a view, fear would be a basic emotion, while guilt would be seen as a complex emotion. Plutchik (1980) for example developed a theory on emotion mixing akin to blending colours. He suggests that a different combination of basic (primary) emotions results in secondary emotions. Hatred, for example, is a combination of disgust and anger. Similar ideas are proposed by Griffiths (1997) and Oatley and Johnson-Laird (1987).

Such solutions seem convincing at first. It is also the perspective that many political scientists adopt who rely on basic emotions and appraisal theory with some constructivist layers on top. For example, Robin Markwica (2018: 4) defines emotions as "a transient, partly biologically based, partly culturally conditioned response to a stimulus, which gives rise to a coordinated process including appraisals, feelings, bodily reactions, and expressive behaviour, all of which prepare individuals to deal with the

stimulus.” Analysing humiliation in the Middle East, Fattah and Fierke (2009) follow a similar path, describing emotions as universal but cultural modulated. While these approaches have much to offer, they do not address the problems just outlined. Such approaches still assume that certain emotions are universal and triggered by external stimuli, while cultural influences modulate emotions and their expression. Approaches like this also do not address how emotions can construct our surroundings beyond the moment emotions are felt.

To summarise, we are left with several theoretical issues. Basic emotions theory simply lacks real confirmation, strongly indicating that emotions do not exist as natural kinds. Constructivism often severs the connection to emotions as subjective, felt experiences by describing them as social scripts and practices. At the same time, much of constructivism pays little attention to how emotions are not just constructed by social reality but also construct social reality. Fortunately, some theories address these problems. For that, I will now turn to a specific version of constructivism, called psychological constructivism.

2.2 Psychological constructivism as an alternative framework

Psychological constructivism is a more recent approach in studying emotions. It allows capturing the phenomenological aspects of emotions that are sidelined in other constructivist work, while emphasising the social construction of emotions. I follow leading psychological constructivists, most importantly Lisa Feldman Barrett (2017a; 2017b) in what she calls the "theory of constructed emotion". However, I will combine this with structural theories on emotions developed by scholars such as Barbalet (1998), Crawford (2014) and Koschut (2020), as well as the phenomenological work of Sara Ahmed (2004). Taken together, we have a powerful explanation of emotions and their effects as well as a suitable point of departure to theorise the function of conspiracy narratives based on their emotional content.

The key point I want to make is that emotions are psychological constructions of internal (bodily) input and external (environmental) input. Based on experience and socially acquired knowledge we unify inputs into a coherent emotional experience by drawing on a socially developed concept, such as fear. In this process, emotions become attached to the object we think of “causing” the experience. In that way, emotions are not simply passive receivers of social structure but equally their creator.

As a first step, let me explain how psychological constructivists see emotions emerging. I started this summary of theories with James' and Lange's thoughts on emotions. They suggested that we run not because we are afraid, but rather that we are afraid because we run. Let us return to this thought. It sounds vastly counterintuitive. It also is partially flawed. Restricting our analysis to bodily expressions

is misguided. As just noted, emotions do not necessarily have to contain specific physiological elements. Still, psychological constructivists revived James's and Lange's ideas, albeit in a more complex form.

The core idea that scholars propose is that we construct emotions out of many different pieces of information. We unify various ambiguous signals into a coherent episode of an emotion by using a socially learned concept (such as fear) (Feldman Barrett, 2017a: 25-30). To simplify this, we can break down those signals as coming from three sources. We unify a) internal input from body and brain, b) as well as information about our surroundings, while c) drawing on past experiences and learned knowledge and concepts. In that sense emotions are an emergent phenomenon, meaning they are assembled from various parts that form a whole that cannot be reduced to the sum of its elements (Scarantino and De Sousa, 2021; Siegel, 2018;).

While emotions cannot be tied to a distinct biological fingerprint, bodily signals still play a role in the construction of emotions. Our brain constantly collects sensations from our organs and tissues, the hormones in your blood, and your immune system. As Lisa Feldman Barrett writes:

> Think about what's happening within your body right this second. Your insides are in motion. Your heart sends blood rushing through your veins and arteries. Your lungs fill and empty. Your stomach digests food. This interoceptive activity produces the spectrum of basic feeling from pleasant to unpleasant, from calm to jittery, and even completely neutral (2017a: 56).

Especially when there is a significant change the brain might register this and use this as a building block for emotions. A prime example here is input that feeds into feelings of fear. Joseph LeDoux (1998; 2015b) argues that we possess certain innate survival mechanisms that when activated trigger certain mental and physiological responses. When perceiving novel stimuli, brain regions, such as the amygdala, become activated automatically, sending neurological and chemical signals throughout the body. Yet, this might be used to construct an episode of fear, excitement, or surprise, depending on the other input (or be ignored).

The second source of signals stems from our surroundings. Here our brain constantly interprets a plethora of information including visual information, sounds, smells, and the presence or absence of objects. We constantly make-sense out of things that happen around us, such as distinguishing a loud bang as being a "door slammed", fireworks, or a "gunshot" (Feldman Barrett, 2017a: 58). This happens based on the third source, that is past experiences and socially acquired knowledge that largely tell us how to interpret different objects, and settings and how they relate to us.

We integrate and interpret all these scraps of information together. Drawing on social concept of a specific emotion, this emotion concept might help make sense out of all these sensations. For example,

we need to know that in certain situations fear would characterise our emotions, and in others not. This complex process shows why the exact same bodily signals can lead in one situation to feelings of fear and in others to excitement. We might feel fear when facing a dangerous threat but excitement when on a rollercoaster.

At a first glance, this explanation seems nothing more than a combination of appraisal theory (external stimulus causes emotion) with cultural theories of emotion (emotions and our perception of stimuli are shaped by culture and emotion concepts). However, this is not the case. Emotions are not simply triggered and shaped but rather fully constructed and by extension construct the world around us (Feldman Barrett, 2015: 62-63).

The view that emotions are triggered implies that an individual evaluates a stimulus, consciously or unconsciously. The brain then triggers certain emotions that contain bodily and mental responses. In this process, we can grant to cultural theories that the evaluation is based on socially learned criteria. Still, emotions remain "caused" by the stimulus. This essentially maintains and object-subject distinction, where stimuli are independent from the observer, and independent from the emotion. For example, scholarly work shows how emotions influence decision-makers by affecting the brain's ability to process information (Hymans, 2006; McDermott, 2004: 167-169, Pearlman, 2013). These effects are said to set in once the emotion has been elicited.

However, psychological constructivism disagrees with this characterisation. First, as I pointed out, our brain incorporates a plethora of bodily signals into a feeling we experience as a specific emotion, many of those signals will be unrelated to the external stimulus. Furthermore, psychological constructivism suggests that our brain is actively influencing bodily states, predicting what bodily preparedness a situation requires before the situation is fully understood. This largely rests on learned patterns from personal experience and social influences. Thus, we construct a certain environment as dangerous before we evaluate this environment. It is like viewing a scene through tainted windows and then concluding it is dark outside.

In other words, objects are not simply out there causing our emotions, but rather get constructed by the feeling. We still describe the object as having caused our feeling, and, thus, the object becomes entangled with emotion, correctly or not. The bear becomes “fearsome”, the confidant trustworthy, and so forth (Ahmed, 2004: 8). This is supported by evidence that rationality and emotion are not opposites but rather work together inside the brain and cannot be separated. Emotions permeate thinking (Damasio, 1994). It should be clear that this process is highly social and deeply influenced by what we have been taught about objects, people, and situations.

This view essentially collapses the object-subject distinction. This view is also sustained by how concepts become emotionally charged, similarly to what Jonathan Mercer (2010) has called emotional beliefs. Emotions become attached to and ingrained in certain concepts. For example, for many people, many insects are not only seen but also "felt" as something negative. On the contrary, the view of other insects such as butterflies are intertwined with positive feelings. In other words, emotions are not simply caused by something external but rather are involved in the construction of our surrounding world. Emotions are not simply socially shaped but shape our social (and non-social world).

Such ideas have been implicitly capitalised on by Middle East scholars, particularly those focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian context. Naomi Head (2020), Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015), and Daniel Lefkowitz (2004) describe how significant portions of Israeli discourse emotionally construct Palestinians as threats, terrorists, and undeserving of empathy. On the Palestinian side, Laleh Khalili (2009) shows how Palestinian groups have cultivated the emotional image of Palestinian fighters as courageous heroes and noble martyrs. This indicates that the process of emotionally constructing objects, which I have described in more abstract theoretical terms, plays out in various contexts and is deeply political. I will discuss this in more detail in section 2.3.3.

To summarise, I see emotions as psychological constructions of internal (bodily) input and external (environmental) input. Based on experience and socially acquired knowledge we unify inputs into a coherent emotional experience by drawing on a socially developed emotion concept, such as fear. We can then understand emotions as a sense-making process, where we try to understand our body and brain and relate it to the world. To be clear, this is a highly social process, as we often take clues for understanding from others, including political elites. Importantly, in this process, emotions become attached to the object we think of "causing" the experience. In that way, emotions are not simply passive receivers of social structure but equally their creator. They are fundamental in creating the world around us, making objects appear to have certain properties and effects.

2.3. Fear, groups and conspiracy narratives

Having established what emotions are, I will turn to the specific feelings of anxiety and fear. As shown in Chapter 1, conspiracy theories are tightly linked to anxiety and fear. I described anxiety, insecurity and feelings of powerlessness as important sources for conspiracy narratives to draw on. Conspiracy narratives draw on those vague feelings and create specific fears, fears of evil enemies and their plots. Thus, my aim is here to give a detailed account of the content and relationship of anxiety and fear, and then continue to establish how fear influences social and political life. This will allow at the end of the chapter to specify the function of Israeli and Palestinian conspiracy narratives. As stated, conspiracy

narratives are a group phenomenon, thus this chapter will mostly focus on how we can think about emotions on a group level.

My argument is structured in four parts. First, I will defend my focus on anxiety and fear that neglects other emotions in the process. Second, I will outline the relationship and differences between anxiety and fear. The main point here is that fear is a specific emotional belief in the dangerous nature of some object, while anxiety is a more generalised feeling, disconnected or only loosely connected to a specific object. Third, I will detail how we can understand group-based fear and its effect on groups. I will show that fear can become ingrained in a group's social fabric. Last, I will show in more detail how conspiracy narratives are tools to shape group fears, constructing the image of a dangerous group of conspirators or even that of an eternal conspiring enemy.

2.3.1 The importance of anxiety and fear

Many philosophers, psychologists and social scientists see fear as one of the most influential emotions humans can experience. As Ted Brader and George E. Marcus (2013: 176) state, the "disproportionate scholarly attention focused on fear clearly reflects the centrality and importance of its function in human life." Janice Gross Stein (2013: 384) similarly writes that fear creates a particularly "powerful emotional experience". In this section, I will lay out why anxiety and fear are more fundamental than other emotions. Anxiety and fear easily breed and shape other emotions, such as anger. They seem to disappear or be absent when they actually hide behind other emotions. Because of this, anxiety and fear are often seen as the root cause of other negative feelings. With this argument, I will show why those emotions are important and underline their inclusion in my theoretical framework and justify why I ignore other emotions such as anger or hatred that initially might seem equally important.

Most scholars see anxiety and fear as important because of their strong effects on human cognition (Crawford, 2014; Huddy et al., 2005; Hymans, 2006; Markwica, 2018: 74-75, Pearlman, 2013). Fear especially is seen as linked to behaviour. Fear responses or action tendencies are famously characterised as falling into the three categories of flight, freeze or fight (Le Doux, 1998: 45; Turner and Stets, 2005: 257). While these points might be valid, I am not concerned in this thesis with a focus on individual mental states and behaviour. Thus, I want to suggest a different way of looking at anxiety and fear to understand their importance. This is via their fundamental power in shaping or breeding other emotions, anger in particular.

Already Roman philosopher Lucretius (1969: 98) highlighted that fear (of death) is constantly present. This fear would creep into other emotions and experiences, as it "commoves human life from its deepest depths […]". His thesis carries similarities to existentialist and psychoanalytical accounts that place fear

(or rather anxiety) at the centre of human experience (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020: 245). Modern philosophy places equal importance on fear. Drawing on Lacan, Ghassan Hage (2009: 68) describes emotions as our attempts to "pull ourselves together" or to "at least give ourselves the appearance of a certain wholeness, coherence, and togetherness" in the face of the enduring anxiety that stems from the sense of personal fragmentation humans inevitably experience. Similarly, Martha Nussbaum (2018), building on psychoanalytical accounts describes fear as the most dominant emotion of all. For Nussbaum, fear is experienced very early in our life. As infants, we all have powerful experiences of fear, mostly because we are helpless and rely extensively on others. Moments of safety are brief while moments of helplessness occur frequently (ibid: 22-23). Nussbaum writes (ibid: 20):

> Fear […] persists beneath all and infects them all, nibbling around the edges of love and reciprocity. […] fear often lurks beneath the surface of the mind […] it is of the essence of peaceful daily life that we push that fear to the back of our minds.

I am sceptical of equating those early childhood experiences with fear, as infants have yet to acquire the concept of fear. However, they still experience some sort of affective states that might be called anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness. What I see as more important in the above lines is that fear shapes other emotions. Or in Nussbaum's words, fear is in terms of causality "primary" (ibid: 14). Nussbaum develops a sophisticated account of how fear can influence other emotions. Nussbaum argues that fear often causes emotions such as anger, envy and disgust and at the same time "poisons" them. This in fact is a common argument in the more practical oriented literature. Practitioners, such as therapists frequently link fear, or rather more constant feelings of anxiety to anger (Dunn Togerson, 2022; Hawkins and Cougle, 2011; Thomspon and Schmidt, 2021).

The reason why anxiety and fear can lead to other emotions is because their experience is highly uncomfortable and mentally exhausting. We usually feel at mercy of external forces, leaving us powerless and helpless. Thus, individuals feel a strong urge to get rid of such feelings. In some ways, this might mean escaping or confronting the threat, if the threat is understood and escape is possible. However, this is often not possible. In the case of anxiety, there is not even an object to escape from. As Hymans (2006: 32) notes, the goal then often becomes to simply reduce the feelings of fear. This opens the temptation to choose anger over fear. Opposed to anxiety and fear, anger makes us feel powerful and in control. Thus, angrily blaming others for our anxiety or fear, makes it seem as if we found the cause of our feelings and reestablished control (Nussbaum, 2018: 82; Klein, 1984). This might seem especially tempting when individuals or groups feel vague anxiety or insecurity and attempt to make sense out of those affective states. An example of this is the typical scapegoating, where a particular threat is conjured and then the fear of that threat is turned into anger or hatred. Recently, scholarship has picked up the

idea that fear and anxiety can hide behind or transform other emotions (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020: 241-242; Kinnvall, 2017). For example, Simon Koschut (2014: 556) shows that NATO officials mask fear behind the technical language of threat or even behind the emotion of bravery.

As we can see now, fear is a fundamental emotion and can transform into other emotions, thus, playing a critical role in political life. In summary, and to quote Joanna Bourke (2003: 129): "History is saturated with emotions, of which fear may be one of the most relentless." I believe this together with the theoretical links between anxiety, fear and conspiracy narratives outlined in Chapter 1 constitute sufficient grounds for focusing exclusively on anxiety and fear. This is not to say that other emotions would not constitute a fruitful avenue for analysis. Conspiracy narratives are certainly also driven by a strong identification for the own ingroup that might constitute love. However, for exploring the function of conspiracy narratives, anxiety and fear seem to be more fruitful.

2.3.2 The concepts of anxiety and fear

This section will delineate how I will understand the concept of anxiety and fear throughout the thesis. Anxiety and fear are closely related concepts that are hard to distinguish and in fact often used interchangeably in daily discourse. Both feelings are located on a spectrum of affective experiences that we describe as ranging from mild apprehension to extreme dread and horror.

Scholars often describe fear as being related to a specific and understood danger, while anxiety is conceptualised as a generalised, non-directed (non-intentional) feeling (Bortolan, 2022; LaBar, 2016; Markwica, 2018: 73). Sometimes researchers propose another difference. LeDoux (1998: 228) argues that anxiety is unresolved fear. When a danger cannot be avoided fear becomes generalised anxiety. Similarity, when "causes" of fear are not readily apparent, anxiety occurs. The shared element of both understandings is that fear seems to be an acutely felt and more specific feeling, while anxiety is a broader, generalised feeling that affects us as "background" noise as part of daily life. Yet, the difference between anxiety and fear is blurry (Blanchard et al., 2008; Le Doux, 2015, 7-11).

Still, for the remainder of this thesis I will treat anxiety as a vague feeling, or rather group of feelings that contain feelings we label as anxiety, but also insecurity and feelings of powerlessness Feeling insecurity essentially entails anxiety and feeling powerlessness can be understood as anxiety as well. (Kemper, 1978: 55). Fear, however, is more specific. Because anxiety is vague it demands - more so than fear - to make sense out of it, to find the "cause" of the anxiety, which would promise the chance to address the "cause" and resolve the feeling. Understood like this, anxiety can constitute much of the input that becomes unified in a coherent feeling of fear via the social sense-making process of emotions described above. As I argued already in Chapter 1, conspiracy narratives are such a way to make-sense

out of anxiety by transforming anxiety into fear. In other words, vague feelings become more specific, feelings that do not have a clear "cause" become transformed into fears of a very specific enemy with a specific goal.

Most psychologists would describe fear from the essentialist perspective I critiqued above, based on a physiological profile including rapid heartbeat, sweating, dryness of the mouth or trembling (Barbalet, and Demertzis, 2013: 167; Vikan, 2017: 21). Due to my psychological constructivist framework, we can neglect this. What matters more is that we understand fear, as a socially constructed concept, or ideal type as involving those biological descriptions together with the looming presence of a threat that is related to potential and perceived future harm. Thus, fear, as well as anxiety, are future-oriented. When we feel anxiety and fear, we focus on harm, be it physical, emotional or psychological, that that has not yet come about (Barbalet and Demertzis, 2013: 171; Bar-Tal, 2001; Baumgartner et al., 2008; Hymans, 2006: 29;)

While fear and anxiety are both about harm, fear is connected to a specific object as just stated. We nearly always understand that this object causes our fear. However, as argued above this is misleading. It is important to distinguish between the complex input our fear is constructed with and the specific object we attribute our fear to (Barbalet and Demertzis, 2013: 170-172.; Le Doux, 2015: 20). While input and object might often be related, they do not have to be. In other words, our affective state is constructed, but we usually desire to pinpoint emotions to a specific cause, even if that object that has little to do with how we feel (Feldman Barret, 2015: 69-70; LeDoux, 2015a).

This also points to the specific influence of past experiences and knowledge in the creation of fear. We learn what to fear from harmful events that we experience or that are related to us by others. Fear can be very "rational". There are good reasons to fear many things. Yet, trauma is also very influential. As neuroscientist Joseph Le Doux (1998, 146) writes: potent memories [of fear] […] typically formed in traumatic circumstances, can also find their way back into everyday life, intruding into situations in which they are not especially useful." This can include collective traumas that are culturally taught. Feelings of fear based on trauma are not usually helpful. They cause groups or society to adopt a hypervigilant, mistrusting state that lends itself easily to the emotional construction of a dangerous, threatening environment (Bar-Tal, 2001; Crawford, 2014; Kinnvall, 2013).

To summarise, both anxiety and fear are emotive terms denoting effective experiences that worry about harm. Between the two, anxiety is more generalised, while fear is specific. This means fear constitutes an emotional belief that a specific object will potentially harm us physically, psychologically, or emotionally. Thus, fear constructs the object as fearsome. While sometimes an object can indeed be seen

as the reason for our emotions, we draw on a variety of information to categorise it as such. This opens the possibility that we simply attribute our fear to the chosen object to make sense of our surroundings.

2.3.3 The political effects of fear

As I have shown previously, conspiracy narratives are a group phenomenon. Theorising about the anxiety and fear of individuals is not sufficient. Rather, the question is how fear relates to groups. This might seem paradoxical, as emotions are experienced by individuals. Indeed, this is one of the key theoretical and methodical challenges when drawing on emotions in social science. In this section, I will show how fear can relate to groups, in what we can call group-based fear. Furthermore, I will show how fear can exist beyond the moment it is experienced by becoming institutionalised.

Group emotions are not something unusual. We often witness or experience them. During protests such as the Arab Spring, protestors angrily shout at the government (Bishara, 2015; Pearlman, 2013). Minority groups voice fear of government persecution, and sport fans happily cheering their national team's victory. The key link between how individuals feel, and group-based emotions is identification. As social identity theory (SIT) suggests, individuals adopt not only a personal identity but also a social identity, which derives from membership in various groups. While later neglected, initially SIT stressed the emotional bond that makes identification possible. Without emotions, group identities would be hollow (Fierke, 2015: 49; Mercer, 2014: 522). Social psychologists Diana Mackie and Eliot Smith (2016; 2018) convincingly build on SIT to describe what they call intergroup emotions theory. Those emotions are based on objects that are consequential for the group, and emotions are then experienced on behalf of the group (Coşkun, 2019).

This does not mean that group emotions are homogenous. Individuals in the group might feel the emotion to varying degrees, if at all. Mercer (2014: 522) suggests that the stronger the individual's identification with the group is, the more likely he or she will experience the emotion. However, we can simply not know what an individual in any group at a given time feels. Yet, what can be said is that often a dominant group feeling exists inside groups. This may arise spontaneously but usually is channelled and shaped by political leaders and institutions. For example, as Jack Holland (2015) has shown, Americans felt a variety of feelings after 9/11 but once the political narrative emphasised fear and anger, those became the emotions most Americans would report. Research has demonstrated this form of emotional "contagion" (Koschut et al., 2017: 492) in ample ways. Especially fear is an emotion that is often communicated by political leaders or institutions to pursue certain agendas, such as domestic or international "security" measures (Brader and Marcus, 2013; Crawford, 2014; Kehoe and Pickering, 2020). This is also the case in Israel where language of fear is excessively used by state institutions in

pursuit of certain policies (Bar-Tal, 2020; Ochs, 2013). Similarly, political regimes might purposely rely on the spread of certain feelings, fear in particular, to maintain their grip on power (Makiya, 1998). For example, Wendy Pearlman (2016) argues that, until the Arab Spring in 2011, the Syrian Assad regime successfully relied on widespread fear to discourage dissent. According to Neta Crawford (2014: 548), fear often outlasts "the initial cause" and "may become a self-sustaining climate".

These thoughts show how group emotions exist as the sum of feelings of individual group members. Analogous to how some researchers argue fear matters because it affects individuals when they experience it, this would limit the importance of group emotion to the moment group members experience it. However, my claim is that emotions matter beyond the moment they are experienced. This is because emotions become institutionalised.

As I have shown above, experiencing emotions is a process of sense-making, making sense of our body and brain, as well as our environment. In this process, emotions become attached to objects. Quoting Sara Ahmed (2004: 7-8), when feeling fear, we emotionally construct the object as "fearsome", a description that can become ingrained into how we generally think about the object. This means it becomes an emotional belief (Mercer, 2010).

This is reminiscent of feeling rules (Hochschild, 2012). Collectives define what should be felt and how this should be expressed. Such rules aid in making sense of our affective experiences, telling us which objects should elicit a certain emotion. Group leaders, elites and institutions are shaping group feelings by expressing feeling rules or by expressing emotions towards objects. It does not matter much if group leaders truly feel the emotions they are expressing. The point is that they create feeling rules that become part of groups' identities, also dubbed "affective communities" (Hutchison, 2016). Members of groups commit to see the emotional construction of an object and to enact the attached emotions. For example, Naomi Head (2020: 117) shows how during the 2014 Gaza war, right-wing Israeli groups constructed "Palestinians and those demonstrating compassion or empathy with them" as objects of disgust, anger, hatred and fear. Such constructions, (or re-constructions) can also produce positive effects. Protestors in the Arab Spring in 2011 shed their commitment to fearfully looking at their regime and instead enacted affective communities of anger and courage, or as Pearlman (2016) calls it surmounted fear.

Yet, we should not assume that group members feel these emotions constantly. What matters, however, is not what group members feel, but that they share the attached emotional belief. We treat the other group with hate, disregarding if we feel hate at any single moment or at all (Brogaard, 2020: 162). This can also be thought of as emotional stereotyping (Mackie et al., 2015). Certain emotions become

attached to the way the ingroup sees itself and how it sees the outgroup. I will call such emotions, eclectic emotions. Emotions that are chosen and adopted by groups as part of the group identity.

Via such a process, eclectic emotions not only remain at the discourse level but become part of a group's culture, practices, and institutions. This includes various sources, for example political discourse, artworks, movies (Bar-Tal, 2001). Communicating and shaping feelings into coherent fears with an intention to leverage it for policy purposes underscores what international relations scholars call securitisation and is an important avenue for fear to enter the policy-level (Buzan et al., 1998). As described in Chapter 1, securitisation theory argues that threats must be constructed as threats, and thereby become "securitised". Securitisation theory, even though not overly theorising about emotions essentially shows how fears are socially constructed and relayed back to individuals. However, for securitisation to be successful, fears must be credible, they must emotionally resonate with group members at least to some degree (Ganz, 2024; Van Rythoven, 2015). Securitisation takes fear and circulates it via public discourse until they reach policies. Once fears become institutionalised, they fade from view, seemingly becoming apolitical threat assessments (Robin, 2004).

Communicating eclectic emotions, creating emotional beliefs for groups and ultimately their involvement in justifying certain policies is closely related to the exercise of power. As Koschut (2020: 13) writes, "emotional meanings are embedded in institutionalised feeling structures that prefigure emotional subjects". Emotions are employed – instrumentally or not – by those in power to undergird power discourse and structures. Certain objects can be constructed in a positive light, while others become viewed as negatively, for example as fearsome threats. As mentioned, and as we will see in detail later on, Israeli mainstream society constructs Palestinians as dangerous, justifying or even making their marginalisation on security grounds imperative, while state institutions are endowed with positive emotions (Head, 2020; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015). As Sara Ahmed (2004) notes, emotions create boundaries, thus, sharpening the distinction between self- and other.

2.3.4 Fear and conspiracy narratives

In this final section, I bring together my observations on conspiracy narratives, emotions and fear. This will show that conspiracy narratives transform vague anxieties and existing fears into specific fears of hidden, conspiring enemies.

To recall, I have conceptualised conspiracy narratives as political narratives that point towards the secret and malevolent efforts of a small, powerful group that are aimed at harming the ingroup. Thus, they are usually - when not solely recounting events in the past - about an impeding danger, a danger that is

currently not under control, precisely because it is hidden. In other words, conspiracy narratives are narratives that carry fear. They express fear of specific objects and their mechanisations.

In Chapter 1, I argued that a key cause of conspiracy narratives lies in anxieties, insecurity and feelings of powerlessness. Yet, conspiracy narratives have a specific object, or in other words, they do not carry anxiety but fear. It is also clear that the expressed fears are group-based fears that individuals express on behalf of the group. Considering how emotions are made, on the individual and the group level, it is possible to see that conspiracy narratives are a tool of leaders and institutions to shape and channel existing anxieties, and past experiences into a coherent feeling of fear of a very specific object. Individuals and groups can make sense of their experiences and affective states via the top-down offered conspiracy narratives. This process can be highly instrumental and wilfully employed by elites and institutions but does not have to be. Elites might genuinely feel such threats. However, because they touch on some pre-existing affect, they are deemed credible by group members.

As I have discussed in Chapter 1, the threats and enemies that conspiracy narratives outline are powerful opponents that cannot be accommodated. The objects become emotionally constructed as fearsome. However, this is often a technical discourse around threats, the emotions fade from view and are not necessarily felt by group members, but nevertheless acted on. Because emotions such as fear become emotional beliefs and ingrained into objects, groups experience such threat assessments less as subjective feelings, but as an "objective" assessment about the nature, that is the dangerousness, of the other. As we will see, anxiety of Israelis around losing Jewish dominance becomes channelled into emotional beliefs of left-wing organisations as deviously attempting to destroy Israel. The daily Palestinian insecurity caused by a life under Israeli occupation becomes channelled into a historic narrative of colonial plots to divide and weaken the Middle East.

Those fears are meaningful for individuals and groups because they are not simply cognitive understandings of the world, but concrete emotional beliefs. We not only know that the deep state controls the judiciary, but we also feel it. In other words, conspiracy narratives express fears that become emotional beliefs about the nature of the feared object.

Here lies the function of conspiracy narratives. Conspiracy narratives are used by political actors because they transport and create – or rather can be used to transport and create - fears about specific events and objects and can be used to sustain or challenge political power.

Continuously expressed, the fear transported by conspiracy narratives can become institutionalised. Continuously communicating conspiracy narratives might establish them as a stable discursive element.

Yet, they might creep even deeper into the fabric of groups or society at large. Once institutionalised, the fear might fade from view but continues to be reproduced via those institutions constantly evoking the dangerousness of the emotionally constructed object. For example, the threatening image of left-wing non-governmental organisations (NGOs) became not only a staple of public discourse in Israel, but also cemented in various law initiatives. However, it is not only fear that then becomes expressed, but fear morphs into other feelings, such as anger or hatred. Left-wing groups are frequently accused of being traitors and often angrily confronted.

Overall, conspiracy narratives are a tool or vehicle for leaders or institutions to offer a specific way for individuals and groups to make sense out of themselves and their environment. They do so by channelling and shaping existing feelings into coherently shaped group-based fears of objects that become emotionally constructed as evil and threatening, even if those objects appear on the surface not to be a threat (but secretly are). Once in place, fear easily becomes institutionalised.

2.4 Conclusion

Anxiety and fear are an essential part of human life. We regularly feel anxious or afraid. Emotions seem to be completely natural. We rarely question what those feelings are or where they come from. Yet, a long-standing academic debate persists exactly around this question. In this chapter, I laid out a detailed conceptual framework on emotions, anxiety, and fear. My goal was to show how we should understand anxiety and fear and their relationship with conspiracy narratives.

This required as a first step an understanding of emotions more generally. The essentialist view proposes that emotions are discrete entities with a distinct biological profile that are caused by our appraisal of external stimuli. The essentialist view is challenged by constructivist approaches. Those approaches argue that emotions are not innate but rather socially learned ways of feeling and behaviour. Akin to language, emotions exist in every culture but still vary to a very large degree. In other words, emotions are not a biological but a social category.

However, I have argued that both approaches are unsatisfactory. Seeing emotions as predetermined responses of our body and mind to external events ignores their cultural, behavioural, and historic variety. Furthermore, consistent physiological profiles remain elusive. The constructivist angle is similarly plagued by shortcomings. If emotions are mostly socially predetermined, we have trouble explaining that emotions feel so different from other socially learned ideas. In other words, constructivist approaches neglect or downplay the phenomenological dimension that seems so critical about emotions.

As an alternative, I have proposed psychological constructivism that I combined with structural accounts of emotions. I defined emotions as psychological constructions. Based on experience and socially acquired knowledge we unify vague internal and external inputs into a coherent emotional experience by drawing on a socially developed concept of emotion, such as fear. We can then understand this as a sense-making process, where we try to understand our body and brain and relate it to the world. To emphasise, this is a highly social process, guided by others, including political elites who utilise emotions for political purposes. Importantly, emotions become attached to the object we think of "causing" the experience, emotionally constructing our surroundings, forming emotional beliefs.

Based on this, I turned towards anxiety and fear. To justify my focus on anxiety and fear while neglecting other emotions, I argued that anxiety and fear can be seen as a fundamental emotion often leading to or causing other emotions. I then outlined the concepts of anxiety and fear. Both concepts capture affective experiences that we describe as ranging from milder feelings such as apprehension to more extreme feelings like dread and horror. Both anxiety and fear are related to worry about future harm. While the distinction between anxiety and fear is blurry, I concluded that anxiety is a more generalised feeling that lacks a clear object we assign our feeling to. On the contrary, fear is related to a specific object. Usually, we understand this object to be the cause of our fear and emotionally construct this object to be fearsome. Therefore, we should see fear primarily as the emotional belief in the dangerous nature of some object that we believe, and feel might cause us harm.

With this in mind, I discussed the political effects of fear to lay the ground for theorising the function of conspiracy narratives as carriers of fear. While we can think of emotions occurring on a group level, what is more relevant is how emotions become institutionalised, exercising certain effects despite individuals not necessarily feeling fear. Political elites and institutions can channel and shape emotions via discourse, creating a dominant feeling inside the group. Once emotions like fear are circulating through discourse, they often become institutionalised as an eclectic emotion. I have proposed two major ways for this to happen. First, groups are emotionally governed by feeling rules that become embedded in group identity. Such rules stipulate what objects deserve which feelings and in turn which treatment, even if the emotion is not actually taking place. Second, I argued that fear is involved in processes of securitisation where fear allows certain objects to be perceived as dangerous and then designated a threat. These processes need to be understood as connected to the exercise of power, as legitimizing certain political projects and specific policies while delegitimising others.

Finally, I connected these insights to conspiracy narratives. By drawing on vague feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness, conspiracy narratives construct a certain object as dangerous due to its

specific actions. Thus, conspiracy narratives are essentially narratives of fear that allow fear to be communicated and to become institutionalized. This should then be equally understood as creating feeling rules or leading to securitisation. Hence, they are a tool for political elites or institutions to channel and shape existing feelings into coherently shaped group-based fears. When individuals feel vague anxieties or fears that leave them helpless leaders articulating conspiracy narratives offer a way to make sense of those anxieties and blame the fear on a specific enemy group. From there, conspiracy narratives can often turn into anger and hate. Overall, it is this intimate relationship between conspiracy narratives and fear that allows the former to play a political function: conspiracy narratives carry the fear of eternal enemies deep into the social fabric of groups, legitimising the exercise of power.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

The following research question guides the investigation: **What function do conspiracy narratives play in Israeli and Palestinian society?**

Initially, I wanted to capture possible *"causal effects"* of conspiracy narratives. Yet, I eventually adopted the term "*function*". I found it increasingly difficult to understand conspiracy narratives in terms of causal relationships between the independent variable of conspiracy narratives and dependent variables, such as specific policies. I moved to a constructivist understanding of those "effects". This is also evident in the theoretical framework I adopted, in which I see narratives and emotions as constitutive of groups' worldviews. In other words, narratives and emotions construct the world but do not "cause" it.

Thus, I developed an understanding of conspiracy narratives as deeply intertwined with existing political narratives, present and past group emotions, as well as material interests and structures of power. In this, conspiracy narratives take over a certain function by helping groups to make sense of their experience and emotions, while justifying or challenging political structures.

To shed light on the concrete function of conspiracy narratives in Israel and Palestine, it will be critical to contextualise and relate them to their narrative and emotional surrounding. This includes investigating feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness and demands an inquiry into two directions that the methodology needs to support: (1) conspiracy narratives, and (2) emotions. To be more specific, we can unpack these two directions via various questions:

1) **Conspiracy narratives:**

- What conspiracy narratives are prevalent in Israeli and Palestinian society?
- What do conspiracy narratives claim? Who are the evil actors described? What do those actors plan or what are they doing? How do those actors conceal their plans/ intentions?
- What (constructed) world are they part of? How do they link to larger narratives? What emotions do conspiracy narratives draw on? Are there particular experiences of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness?
- What world do those narratives finally construct?

2) **Emotions:**

- What emotions are prevalent in Israeli and Palestinian society, today and historically? Are anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness key features?
- How are those emotions embedded in the history of identity and narratives of the respective society?
- How do conspiracy narratives transport or transform those emotions?

Those questions are not meant to require a direct answer in the following chapters but will be answered implicitly while I investigate the function of conspiracy narratives using the adopted theoretical framework. However, there is one question that I see as requiring an explicit answer: the question of power, and conspiracy narratives relationship with it. The question of power is insofar important because it provides a way to critically assess conspiracy narratives. The danger of being agnostic about their truth value while approaching the topic from the perspective of those that narrate conspiracy narrative is to engage them without reservation. However, since conspiracy narratives can contribute to sustaining or challenging power structures, we can critically evaluate what kind of power structures conspiracy narratives are either involved in upholding or challenging.

3) **Power:**

- How are those conspiracy narratives and emotions linked to power structures?

Answering those three lines of questions requires a deep level of contextualisation. This considered, my aim will not be to quantitatively assess the spread of conspiracy narratives. Naturally, this might invite criticism of generalisability. I will show that my research still provides enough evidence that the conspiracy narratives included are important in the respective societies. Nevertheless, my findings should not be read that most Israelis or Palestinians necessarily believe a certain narrative.

Most importantly, however, the validity of my findings derives not from their generalisability but from the mentioned contextualisation. I will show with sufficient detail, akin to Clifford's thick descriptions (1973), how we can make sense of conspiracy narratives in this specific context of Israel-Palestine. Beyond this context, I hope that my theoretical framework and perspective on conspiracy narratives and emotions prove useful. This is why, I discussed my theoretical framework in an ahistorical and non-contextual way, so it might potentially be adopted for other contexts. However, it is not my aim to show that my theory of conspiracy narratives is useful beyond this context.

In the following chapter, I will detail the adopted logic of inquiry, the research design to answer the above questions. This contains the practical decisions I made regarding methods, participants, data generation and data analysis. Yet, I believe it is also important to reflect on underlying philosophical and personal assumptions. First, in (3.1), I will sketch out the basic ontological and epistemological assumptions of the project. Second in (3.2.), I will argue that semi-structured interviews with elites and the type of qualitative data they generated are ideal for this project. Third in (3.3), I will discuss participant selection and identity. Fourth in (3.4), I will detail how I conducted the interviews and then analysed the data using a qualitative content analysis. Finally, in (3.5) I will be discussing some ethical challenges including my positionality.

3.1 Ontological and epistemological assumptions

As a first step, I will give a brief overview of the adopted ontological and epistemological positions. This is not a comprehensive discussion of different approaches. My aim is rather to create transparency in how I understand the world and the role of research in relation to it. Furthermore, those assumptions play a part in tying together the theoretical framework and the research design.

Overall, this work is broadly based on an interpretivist framework. While various scholars understand the term differently, it encapsulates a shared commitment to access "social phenomena from the perspective of the participants" (Glesne, 2016: 19). I see two fundamental assumptions behind this commitment. First, on the level of ontology, interpretivism sees the world as socially constructed. Second, epistemologically, interpretivism sees knowledge and language as intrinsically connected and impossible to separate.

Ontologically speaking, interpretivism sees the world as socially constructed. Thus, what becomes important is not striving for objective explanations in the form of universal laws that govern human behaviour, but rather attempting to understand social phenomena from the inside. Individuals and groups give the world around them meaning, and it is based on this meaning that they act (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997: 102-105; Lebow, 2022: 40-42. These understandings are peculiar, and context specific. Individuals and groups perceive different realities and possess their own "truths". The best researchers can aim for, is to uncover inter-subjective truths, those views of reality that are shared by people (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012: 4).

Interpretivism is usually tied to a constructivist view of epistemology. With this, interpretivism goes beyond positivism. Drawing on Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012), positivism adopts two key positions that are contrary to interpretivism: (1), Ontologically speaking, they assume the "existence of an objective social world that is external to the researcher (2) Epistemologically speaking, both positions assume that objective, "truthful" knowledge of that world can be gathered. This view essentially rests on a distinction between object and subject, implying that social realities wait out there for the researcher to be discovered. However, this is not an assumption interpretivism agrees with.

Instead, interpretivism is also epistemologically constructivist. Epistemology and ontology cannot be separated because "intersubjectively constructed 'truths'" can only be accessed "through interactions between researcher and researched" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012: 4). The researched includes human beings but equally any other material. Data do not yield any truth on their own, they have no meaning in themselves but always require an interpretation by the researcher. As Kenneth Waltz noted (1979: 4), truth is not to be found by simply accumulating more and more data. On top of that, any

material researchers might study is “already interpreted” (Guzzini, 2000: 149). As Clifford Geertz (1973: 9) points out, “What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions”.

A key problem is that “language is not a transparent referent for what it designates nor does it merely ‘mirror’ or ‘reflect’ an external world but, instead, plays a role in shaping or ‘constituting’ understandings of that world” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012: 43). Thus, as philosopher of science Nelson Goodman (2013: 22) notes, research is not (only) discovery but “worldmaking”:

> if worlds are as much made as found, so also knowing is as much remaking as reporting. All the processes of worldmaking I have discussed enter into knowing. Perceiving motion, we have seen, often consists in producing it. Discovering laws involves drafting them. Recognizing patterns is very much a matter of inventing and imposing them. Comprehension and creation go on together.

To co-create with the researched a credible world, interpretivist scholars need to show that the research is “sufficiently contextualized so that the interpretations are embedded in, rather than abstracted from, the settings of the actors studied” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 47). Considering that much of those settings are socially constructed as well, a deep understanding of contemporary, as well as historical context is required. Based on Geertz (1973), this approach became referred to as "thick" descriptions.

To summarise, even if there is, ontologically speaking, one absolute social reality, there is no way to directly access it, as the world does not exist independently of our language and engagement with that very world through language. Consequently, research is always part of the creation, and not simply the discovery of worlds.

Those assumptions link to the theoretical framework and suggest a certain direction for methods. For the latter, it becomes imperative to adopt a method that allows the gathering of rich qualitative data. My role is to understand and contextualise conspiracy narratives and the attached emotion in their specific context (Chapters 4-7). For the former, it underscores that understanding conspiracy narratives should not be linked to establishing an “objective” truth, as individuals and groups have their own reality and their own “truths”.

Yet, I do not want to approach conspiracy narratives uncritically. Thus, I am adding the question of power to the investigation. If language is, amongst others, the reason why the object-subject distinction collapses, then language needs to be problematised in its relation to the world it creates and sustains. Discourse is often not the outcome of democratic deliberation akin to Habermas’ vision of a deliberate democracy (1998). Rather, discourse is the “primary site for the exercise […] of power” (Epstein, 2013: 502). When analysing conspiracy narratives and emotions, specifically when establishing and

comparing the function of Israeli and Palestinian conspiracy narratives, I will pay attention to how they relate to existing power relations and systems of domination (see Chapter 8).

3.2 Research methods: Qualitative semi-structured elite interviews

For this thesis, I adopted qualitative semi-structured elite interviews as a method, combined with an immersion in the relevant discourse, as I will explain below. This decision is based on three choices. As a first choice, I settled on *qualitative semi-structured interviews*. As a second choice, I narrowed the focus to elite participants. As a third choice, I decided to supplement the interview data with an *analysis of the broader discourse* patterns in Israel and Palestine. The section and the following sections present these choices as a linear process. In reality, the data gathering and analysis, and the theoretical framework are part of an abductive, and thus, iterative process where one step informed the other and I circled back between different steps.

3.2.1 Qualitative semi-structured interviews

I made clear that I needed rich qualitative data to understand and contextualise both conspiracy narratives, as well as the connected emotions.

Some conspiracy discourse could be easily accessed via newspaper articles, speeches, video clips and other social media posts. This is indeed some of the data I will be drawing on. This data is valuable and can illuminate much (see 3.2.3). However, conspiratorial discourse is often ambiguous. Frequently, narrators straddle the line between a power- and agent-centric discourse and conspiratorial narratives. As I outlined in Chapter 1, malicious intent is one of three elements of what makes a narrative conspiratorial. Malicious can include the intent to knowingly push a certain harmful agenda, as well as the intent to conceal those actions behind a purposefully fabricated façade. For example, an analysis that criticises human rights organisations for (carelessly) undermining Israel's security differs from a conspiratorial critique of human rights organisations as undermining Israel's security intentionally. Uncovering such differences between power- and agent centric discourse and conspiracy narratives not only requires qualitative data but ideally the opportunity to probe those specific elements. The opportunity to ask participants for clarification on the motives they attribute the actor that constitutes a threat, e.g. human rights organisations is important, especially because those elements are often vague in written material.

Consequently, qualitative interviews seem the most suitable method. A key contribution of interviews often lies in getting someone on the record, and getting their explicit views, even if quotes remain nonattributable (Rathbun, 2008: 693). Beyond this specific point, interviews in a conversational style

(and therefore not quantitative surveys) are useful. After all, it is through "conversations [that] we get to know other people, learn about their experiences, feelings, attitudes, and the world they live in" (Kavle and Brinkmann, 2009: xvii). Conversational interviews, uncover the meaning participants give to their world, and importantly, the meaning they give to the actions and views of others (Weiss, 1994: 9-10). The latter part, the actions, and views of others are essential about what conspiracy narratives constantly speculate about. Lastly, interviews allow me to explore some aspects of emotions more openly. For once, texts often, even though not necessarily, convey less emotions. It is interesting to observe how people talk about the plots they are seeing. Furthermore, in an interview I can explicitly ask for feelings or insights into the (perceived) feelings of others.

I decided on semi-structured and not open interviews. Semi-structured interview involves a list of prepared questions, but the researcher can follow up on points of interest that come up in responses before moving to the next question. This usually means that interviews resemble a conversation (Holland and Edwards, 2013: 29-32). In fact, researchers should explore the depth of the data, and not be satisfied with brevity (Weiss, 1994: 3). Yet, compared to open, unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews provide a basis for comparison across interviews. Essentially, semi-structured interviews allow me to probe views on similar topics across different interviews. For example, I inquired about the support of Western states for Israel in all interviews with Palestinian participants. At the same, time the flexibility allowed me to follow up when potential conspiratorial content came up, and push participants especially on the question of intent.

Nevertheless, the interview method faces criticism. Especially, interpretivists often prefer ethnographic methods that allow for a deeper immersion in the social world of participants, and a combination of observation and conversation (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014; Rinaldo and Guhin, 2022). However, ethnographic methods are not suitable for this research. As I show below, I wanted to explore various contexts (Israel, Palestine) and individuals in various organisations (activists, academics etc.) which would have been impossible using ethnographic methods.

3.2.2 Elite interviews

I narrowed qualitative interviews down to elite interviews. The assumption behind this is that in each group certain people, the elite, wield more power than others, mainly due to their position in social, political, economic, or cultural institutions. I am not attempting to address the debate between those who see one relatively coherent elite ruling a society and those who see society ruled by various elites with at times overlapping at times conflicting agendas (Barron et al., 2017). What matters here is that certain individuals shape their society more than non-elite members of society. Elite research also theorised

different types of elites, usually labelled according to the field they are active in, and the type of power they wield (Khan, 2011). While not excluding other forms of power, here I see power as primarily connected to the ability to shape group as well as public discourse, emotions and more specifically to drive processes of securitisation as described in Chapter 1.

What elite work seems to agree on, however, is the importance of actors outside the official state institutions, such as ministries or the military. This can be conceptualised as political networks (Thompson, 2003; Victor et al., 2018). Without going into the specific literature on political networks, we can draw on Israeli political scientist Ami Pedahzur (2012: 9) who defines a political network as "a loose and dynamic composite of political actors whose worldview on various issues overlaps and who frequently come together for the purpose of shaping policies in the spirit of their shared ideology". This includes people at the intersection of political and social life, working for influential organisations, including politicians from main parties, public intellectuals, top journalists, or known activists.

These elites shape group discourse, as well as group emotions. They invite other group members to see the world in a certain way and offer ways to make sense of personal and group experiences including emotions via the production of narratives. I am not claiming that it is only the elites that shape non-elite group members. Often elite figures pick up certain views, and elements from the general group population, but can form often vague sentiments into more coherent positions, making them almost tangible. I described this process in the previous chapter where elites are part of transforming (vague) anxieties into concrete fears via conspiracy narratives.

Considering these thoughts, elite interviews fit well to this research project. Yet, interviewing elites is often seen as more challenging compared to non-elite interviews (Conti and O'Neil, 2007; Lilleker, 2003). While I disagree that this is necessarily the case, the literature makes several observations regarding elite interviews that are worth discussing.

Elite participants are by definition influential and might have insider knowledge. This makes them particularly attractive as interview partners for certain types of research, for example on policy formulation. Certain elites might be hard to access, or too busy to devote time to a project perceived as insignificant (Walford, 2012). Thus, the literature emphasises the use of social and institutional capital, for example in the form of university letterheads, to underline the prestige and seriousness of the project. A key avenue to explore when approaching elites is the function of gatekeepers in making connections (Campbell, et al., 2006; Mendez, 2020; Parson et al., 1993). I will discuss this more in section 3.3.

However, elites are not only described as hard to access, but as the literature notes, are in a position of power vis-à-vis the researcher (Desmond, 2004; Walford, 2012). First, Elites are also often knowledgeable on the topic studied and therefore approached as "experts". In that sense, elites might have a particular understanding of the project. However, as Daniel Lefkowitz (2004: 15) opines while researching Israeli identity, this is also the case for non-elites. Participants essentially interpret the project the way they understand it, which often is not in line with the researcher's understanding. The difference in elite cases might be that elites would feel more comfortable expressing their understanding and contradicting the researcher. For example, in one case, the participant said at the end of an interview that dragged along painfully, that I was asking the wrong questions. I only partially succeeded in fighting the urge to justify myself. Yet, I asked the participant to provide both the "right" questions and answers, which did result in useful data.

However, the emphasis on elite power is often oversimplified (Ntienjom Mbohou and Tomkinson, 2022; Smith, K., 2006). The relationships between elite participants and the researcher are shaped by various other factors, some of which might favour the researcher. For example, during my fieldwork in the West Bank, I was in some respects, in a position of power relative to those I interviewed. I could come and leave freely, have access to a known Western university and the privilege of being heard more easily. Furthermore, I ultimately decide how participants are framed and represented. Yet, this does not mean that I was fully in a position of power but rather that power relationships are more subtle than much of the literature suggests.

Overall, elites are influential figures, organised in networks. While elites are experts, interviewing elites matters in this project because it is elites that shape public narratives and emotions, including conspiracy narratives.

3.2.3 Immersion in the Israeli and Palestinian discourse

Interviews are a suitable tool for this project. Yet, they have shortcomings. The 40 interviews I planned on conducting seemed insufficient to grasp how the conspiracy narratives and emotions emerging from the data relate to larger narratives and emotions in the elite network, but also in society more broadly.

As the theoretical framework suggests, investigating conspiracy narratives requires studying the respective group narratives and emotions more generally. Conspiracy narratives do not exist in a vacuum. Yet, the interviews are not a systematic discourse analysis. However, if we supplement interview data with data from other narrative sources it becomes possible to establish the discursive and emotional surroundings of conspiracy narratives. Hence, I immersed myself in the respective group discourse, based on a general reading of the discursive space in Israel and Palestine (see 3.3). This

immersion included not only reading text sources, but also listen to audio- and watching visual material. Such content seemed to be particularly meaningful since social media became a popular choice for both spreading as well as accessing political content. Yet, my immersion was limited by my language skills.

In the Israeli context, I only could proficiently access the English-speaking right-wing discourse. This discourse is considerably large. Most key newspapers, for example, have an English version. I started following key right-wing figures on social media, read their tweets, watched their YouTube videos, and read their opinion pieces. In the Palestinian context, much of the discourse is in Arabic only. While I could and did access it, the amount of information I can analyse using Arabic is significantly smaller than in English, as scanning over and reading articles takes significantly more time. Thus, my immersion was limited to specific sources. I intensively read Palestinian newspapers affiliated with Fatah and to a lesser degree with Hamas and followed some specific social media accounts.

I read until I reached "data saturation". A file in which I gathered those sources that contain conspiratorial content, or narrative fragments closely connected to the conspiratorial, includes about 200 sources for the Israeli and about 120 for the Palestinian context. I followed the discourse patterns before, in parallel with, and after the fieldwork with the interviews, in a period from January 2022 to January 2024. The bulk of this data was produced between 2018 and 2023, with some sources going back as early as 2000.

3.3 Participant selection

In total, I conducted 46 interviews during two fieldwork trips. I travelled to Israel in September 2022 for four weeks and conducted 22 interviews, mostly in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area and West Jerusalem. I travelled to Palestine in May-June 2023, conducting 24 interviews in several areas of East Jerusalem and various parts of the West Bank, including Ramallah, Bethlehem, Jenin and Nablus (see Annex I for a list of all interviews).

The key step in organising interviews was to select, and recruit participants. As common in qualitative research, I adopted a "purposive sampling strategy" (Emmel, 2013: 33). I relied on individuals who were prominent figures in both the Israeli and the Palestinian society. In both cases, I started with several emails to potential participants. After a brief exchange, we usually agreed on an interview date once I would be in the area.

Yet, approaching the topic was not easy. Ethically, it was important to inform participants honestly about my PhD project. However, at least in the Israeli case, leading too openly with the term "conspiracy narratives" made it initially difficult to engage the prominent figures I aimed to reach. For example,

some Israeli academics I spoke with associated conspiracy narratives with flat-earth theories and similar ideas, viewing the topic as unworthy of serious academic investigation in the broader Israeli context. To mitigate these challenges, I titled my project “Conspiracy Narratives and the Politics of Fear in Israel and Palestine” to emphasise both the subject of conspiracy narratives and their link to fear. I also provided a more thorough explanation of the specific narratives I was interested in. I highlighted what was stated in the information sheet: “The study aims to understand and explain how political narratives that demonise groups or entire peoples affect Israeli and Palestinian societies and relationships within and between these two groups.” In the personal conversations that followed, I ensured the aspect of conspiracy was understood. In the Palestinian case, I adopted a similar approach to introducing the topic. However, the word "conspiracy" (mūåąmara) did not present the same challenge. As I detail in Chapter 7, the term is more commonly used in Palestinian discourse and less associated with notions of delusion compared to the Western or Israeli context. In both the Israeli and Palestinian context and in line with my agnostic approach to conspiracy narratives, I left it open what those conspiracy narratives might be, and if they constitute truthful accounts or not.

Starting with a few interviews at the beginning of the fieldwork, I relied on snowballing to reach further participants. Those first contacts acted as gatekeepers and were able to bestow on me the necessary credentials to secure further interviews. This increased the successful outreach significantly. Gatekeepers seemed to be especially important in Palestine. I could rely on some of my connections, both through the university, as well as through work experience in the West Bank, to get access to such gatekeepers. I encountered Palestinian society as being more closed to outsiders, more fragmented, but also smaller and more personalised than its Israeli counterpart. I experienced the trust gatekeepers could generate as quite significant, especially outside the English-speaking elite in Ramallah. What was important, however, was that I did not simply ask participants who else they could recommend talking to, but rather asked if they could connect me to specific people that I had identified as important for my work. Only then, I asked for other recommendations as well. With this “directed snowballing” I reached a good number of people I intended to interview.

To enable this “directed snowballing”, I needed an in-depth understanding of the structure of both societies and their public discourse. This allowed for narrowing down the analysis to specific groups and categories of people. As I will show below, this justifies my focus on the right-wing elite in the Israeli case and certain important institutions, and broader interview patterns in the Palestine case, restricted mainly to three groups of people in Jerusalem and the West Bank.

3.3.1 Israeli participants and the right-wing political network

As I did the first part of my fieldwork in Israel, I will start with an analysis of Israeli society, showing how I narrowed the interviews down to the right-wing elite.

The Jewish part of Israeli society is often broken down into two political camps: The Left and the Right, with a potential centre placed in between. To study Israeli conspiracy narratives, I solely focus on right-wing conspiracy narratives. There are two reasons why narrowing the analysis to the right is conducive.

First, focusing on the Israeli right, allows me to concentrate on the politically dominant part of society. Since 2001 the right or centre-right has continuously ruled the country. While there certainly have been shifts on policy matters between different right-wing governments, and discussions around various topics, in general, the right was able to systematically shape the country based on a certain worldview. The worldview of Israel's right continues to evolve and combines different steams that could be discussed. To simplify such debates, today, the right-wing worldview is characterised by a combination of nationalist and religious values. The major divide between the left- and the right since 1967 has been the question of peace (Goodman, 2018: 4, 19; Hazan, 2021: 354). In the right-wing view the conflict with the Palestinians cannot be resolved, as it is primarily not rooted in a territorial dispute, but rather in Palestinian antisemitism and rejectionism of a Jewish state and life per se. The right also views Israel as a Jewish state with Jewishness understood as a combination of Jewish ethnicity and Jewish religious tradition, if not Jewish religious beliefs. As a result of those elements, Israel's right argues against territorial concessions and a Palestinian state, both on grounds of security and ideology, seeing the West Bank as an integral part of the Land of Israel (Kimmerling, 2005: 85, Shindler, 2015). Lastly, Israel's right embraces neo-liberal policies. However, neoliberal economics are consensual across the political spectrum, and in the case of Israel's right subordinate to nationalist and religious considerations (Shalev and Mandelkern, 2021).

Second, over the same time, the Israeli population shifted significantly towards the right. In the most recent comprehensive survey of Israeli society, Shmuel Rosner and Camil Fuchs (2019) recorded 60% of Israeli Jews identifying as right-wing (34%) or centre-right (26%), compared to only 11% that identify as centre-left, and 5% as left. The Israeli Democracy Institute reaches similar conclusions (Keller-Lynn, 2022). Together, these two observations mean that right-wing narratives are socially dominant. This is not to say that all dominant narratives originated on the right. As I will show in Chapter 6, several influential narratives stem from the time of the left-wing dominance of the country, many of which have been absorbed equally by the right and the (Zionist) left.

It should be clear, however, that this focus excludes three groups. First, conspiracy narratives of Israeli left-wing Jews are not considered. I did conduct several interviews with participants on the left, but the wider the aim was to gain context information on right-wing narratives. Second, it also excludes Haredi conspiracy narratives. Even though the Haredi community is located on the right, it offers a distinctly different worldview than the other parts of the right. Several of the Israeli participants made clear that Judaism mattered to them, but none of the participants were Haredim. My analysis also excludes narratives of the Palestinian citizens of Israel. Excluding these three groups is a methodological choice to delineate the dominant part of Israeli society and limit the scope of the analysis. With this, I am not making any claim about conspiracy narratives among the excluded groups.

Before giving a detailed overview of the participants, I need to conceptualise and map the Israeli right-wing political network, showing how the selected participants represent the right-wing network. In political party terms, the right-wing spans across what is sometimes called the "national camp" (HaMachna HaLeumi). Today, the ruling right-wing coalition is sustained by six parties, led by Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party. The other five parties are three far-right parties: Otzma Yehudit – Jewish Power, the Religious Zionist Party, and Noam, and two Haredi parties, in the form of United Torah Judaism, and Shas. The right-wing party Yisrael Beiteinu and the centre-right National Unity party are part of the Knesset but not part of the government coalition. In total, right-wing parties occupy 82 seats of the 120 seats Knesset.

Yet, the right-wing network stretches beyond parties and includes various civil society and media organisations, on top of increasingly popular social media channels. While there is significant diversity, the network character is very visible. Often the same individuals appear in different organisations. For example, a top journalist, might write for several right-wing newspapers, appear at right-wing conferences, and sit on boards of certain NGOs, while acting as an advisor to political figures. I am excluding in my analysis media formats television and radio, as I was not able to access spoken Hebrew-only material.

Think tanks and NGOs

There is a strong and increasing presence of right-wing organisations in Israel (Asseburg, 2017). A full listing is impossible here, but it is worth outlining some key participants and institutions I draw material from (see Annex II for a list of all organisations appearing in this thesis). It should be noted, that in general, these right-wing organisations hold sway over public discourse and were often vital in shaping the country's debate and legislative agenda, if not actively drafting it (Murciano, 2020; Katz and Gidron, 2022).

In terms of think tanks, two of the most notable organisations are the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA), and the Kohelet Policy Forum (Forum Kohelet). The JCPA mostly publishes around topics of security, diplomacy, Israeli-Palestinian, and Israeli-American relations. What is of interest is its strong focus on what it calls "Apartheid Antisemitism" (JCPA, 2024). Forum Kohelet promotes a conservative, neo-liberal, nationalist agenda, adopting the slogan: national sovereignty, individual liberty (Forum Kohelet, 2016). Forum Kohelet received considerable public attention during the current government's effort to reform the judicial system and is often described as close to decision-makers (Weinberg, 2022).

A second group are "monitor" organisations. They see themselves as non-partisan watchdogs guarding Israel against the negative influence of "anti-Israel" NGOs or media organisations. Such organisations include Camera – Honest Reporting, Palestinian Media Watch, UN Watch, Israeli Academia Monitor and NGO Monitor. The more prolific of those organisations present their findings to parliamentarians in and outside Israel and are accredited with the UN and are widely known outside Israel.

Lastly, there are several activist-leaning NGOs. These organisations have been described by civil society scholars as "bad civil society organisations" (Jamal, 2018). Three of the most prolific organisations are Im Tirtzu (If you will it), Ad Kan (It stops now), and Regavim (Crumbs of Earth). All three organisations describe themselves as staunchly Zionist (Im Tirtzu, n.d.; Regavim, 2023). Regavim is a pro-settlement NGO that sees itself as defending the land of Israel from Palestinian encroachment. Ad Kan is a single-issue NGO, dedicated entirely to fighting: "anti-Israeli organizations" (Ad Kan, 2022). Im Tirtzu is "defending Zionism" by addressing anti-Zionism in NGOs, academia, education, and the judicial system. It is self-described as "the largest Zionist movement in Israel" (Im Tirtzu, n.d.). Founded in 2006 as a student movement, it has today a wide reach into and across Israeli society. For example, on its 10th anniversary Prime Minister Netanyahu personally recorded a message congratulating Im Tirtzu for "fighting for the truth" (Altman, 2017).

Media organisations

Another part of the right-wing discourse is the numerous media outlets, and independent political commentators that have been recently joined by social media content creators. The Israeli newspaper with the highest circulation is *Israel Hayom* (Israel Today). *Israel Hayom* is distributed free of charge in Hebrew but also published online in both Hebrew and English. Dubbed by its critics "Bibiton", a pun merging Bibi (Netanyahu) and the Hebrew word for newspaper (iton), due to its close support for Netanyahu, it is known for pushing a right-wing agenda (Beaumont, 2023; Tarnopolsky, 2012). Three other newspapers I drew on are the right-wing but more moderate *Jerusalem Post*, the extreme right-wing site *Israel National News, Arutz Sheva* with a clear national-religious viewpoint, and an English-

speaking site, called *Jewish News Syndicate*, addressing an American audience. Critically, many of the columnists for one newspaper regularly write across those several publications, indicating their close connection.

Aside from the traditional media, there is a variety of very popular social media sites. Some of them are affiliated with the organisations listed above. Yet, there are (semi)-independent channels that garner hundreds of thousands of followers. For example, the YouTube channel of Netanyahu's digital affairs advisor Hananya Naftali currently boasts 382'000 followers (Naftali, n.d.). Furthermore, some academics like Gadi Taub play an active role in public life, both on social media, but also in various events of the right-wing network. Such people exercise significant influence in shaping the public discourse in but also about Israel.

Israeli participants

Based on this understanding of the right-wing network, I aimed to reach a wide range of network members. Due to the various Israeli election campaigns during this PhD project, it proved hard to reach active politicians. Otherwise, as the breakdown will show, I interviewed participants from all the above fields. I am strictly protecting the confidentiality of the participants, and therefore, I will be sparse on the participants' details. In total, I conducted 22 interviews with Israeli participants. All interviews were held in English. 16 interviews were with male and 6 with female participants. 14 of those interviews were with senior individuals affiliated with the right-wing network who fit into four categories:

- Members of NGOs, such as NGO monitor or Im Tirtzu (6 interviews)
- Members of think tanks, such as Kohelet Policy Forum or Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (4 interviews)
- Journalists and content producers affiliated with right-wing news outlets, such as Israel Hayom or Jewish News Syndicate (2 interviews)
- Academics affiliated with Israeli Universities, such as Bar-Ilan University (2 interviews)

All participants are actively engaged in the Israeli political scene, either via political activities or outspoken public stances. A large majority of the interviewed participants have a large media presence, often combining both traditional media and social media appearances. Many of them are not only loosely affiliated with the Israeli right, but are prominent members, speaking at large rallies or events.

I also conducted 8 interviews with people loosely affiliated with the left to gain more insights into the Israeli context, including the role of fear and right-wing narratives. Those individuals fit into four categories as listed below.

- Academics affiliated with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem or Tel Aviv University (2)
- Journalists affiliated with Haaretz (1)
- Activists affiliated with Israeli Human Rights organisations, such as Breaking the Silence or B'Tselem (4)
- Politicians affiliated with the Meretz Party (1)

Many of those individuals worked or still work for organisations that were often the target of right-wing conspiracy narratives and thus could shed light on what situations those narratives create.

3.3.2 The structure and discourse in Palestinian society

Palestinian society has a high degree of diversity. Palestinians are subject to various political contexts. The entire Palestinian population numbers about 14 million (end of 2021). However, only 5.3 million Palestinians live in the West Bank and Gaza. Most Palestinians, around 7 million, live in the Arabic diaspora (Awad, 2022). Yet, in the diaspora, they face distinct circumstances depending on their location. The situation of Palestinians in the US differs from that in Lebanon or Jordan. But even inside Palestine realities are divergent. Palestinians in Gaza live under the Israeli blockade and Hamas rule. Palestinians inside Israel are granted citizenship but face substantial discrimination. Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem are under internationally recognised occupation, with certain matters delegated to the PA. Accurately reflecting the various contexts would not be possible in this thesis, and, thus, some form of limitation is necessary.

To study Palestinian conspiracy narratives, I focus solely on the context of the West Bank and East Jerusalemite elite. A focus on Palestinians under internationally recognised occupation in Jerusalem and the West Bank allows me to hold the context relatively stable. While it could be argued that the status of Palestinians in Jerusalem is significantly different from those in the West Bank, excluding Jerusalem would mean ignoring one of the centres of political, cultural, and spiritual life for Palestinians worldwide, including for those in the West Bank. To gain a roughly comparable context, while including the Jerusalem, I focus on Palestinians and their narratives in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. This means excluding other Palestinian contexts and their conspiracy narratives. I am excluding Palestinians in Israel, Gaza, and in the various diaspora settings.

However, even in the confined space of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Palestinians have no dominant group as Israel does. This makes further restrictions on the scope of my analysis difficult. Palestinian society and Palestinian elite networks are split into at least three parts that all shape public discourse: The old Fatah elite, the more conservative Hamas elite, and lastly the activist elite. This threefold split is partially due to a political regime that carries little legitimacy. It is thus, not only a

political split between supporters of different parties but a fundamental disagreement about the direction of the Palestinian struggle, which became replicated in a generation split. As Cammack et al. (2017: 18) put it, "Palestinian institutions have largely lost the ability to speak to the broader Palestinian population or to mediate their difference". Hence, I decided not to narrow down the analysis to a specific part of Palestinian society. It would have been methodologically problematic to write about Palestinian conspiracy narratives while only studying a small part of the public discourse.

The Hamas-Fatah split

The most known and politically evident split in Palestinian society is the rift between the two main political factions, Fatah and Hamas. As Palestine scholars Saleh Hijazi and Hugh Lovatt (n.d.) note, the split between Hamas and Fatah is "reflected to varying degrees in refugee camps, Jerusalem, and municipal and union elections". Furthermore, the split generated two simultaneously existing Palestinian discourses, that converge and diverge (see Chapter 7). Although many Palestinians, especially the younger generations, have been organising and operating outside or across these factional lines, formal politics is still largely determined by Fatah and Hamas.

Fatah sees itself as a non-ideological mass party and the general expression of the Palestinian national movement but espouses a mix of nationalism and secularism typical of other national liberation movements in the 60s (Baumgarten, 2005; Hassan, 2000). After the 1967 war, Fatah became the dominant force within the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and came to dominate the PA after its establishment in 1994. Inside the PA, Fatah controlled both the presidency, the government under the Prime Minister and the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). Since its establishment in 1987, the Islamist Hamas has challenged the dominance of Fatah (and the PLO) considerably. With the clear failure of the PA-embraced peace process and the Second Intifada Hamas' popularity soared. In 2006, Hamas won the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council. However, PA President Mahmoud Abbas, as well as Israel and much of the international community, was not willing to accept and cooperate with Hamas. Eventually, the political deadlock and conflict between Fatah and Hamas escalated. In 2007, Hamas usurped Fatah's control over the Gaza Strip. In turn, Mahmoud Abbas tasked Fatah members with creating a new government to rule over the West Bank. Thus, the Hamas-Fatah split established clear areas of control for both actors.

Today, large parts of society remain divided in their support for or affiliation with the two main parties. In polls recorded before October 2023, about 40-50% of the respondents in the West Bank stated that they would vote for Hamas' Ismail Haniyeh or Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas respectively (PSR, 2022: 11; 2023: 13). Having remained in control in the West Bank, Fatah established a network of patrimonial

relationships. Thus, official institutions are firmly in the hands of its supporters. Furthermore, many of the older members of the political elite in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are affiliated with Fatah, often being part of the organisation since the first Intifada (Cammack et al., 2017). While various Fatah factions exist, a relatively coherent Fatah narrative is externally communicated. This is mainly done via official events, but also media organisations, such as *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* (The New Life), the official PA newspaper.

While Hamas rules the Gaza Strip it essentially plays the role of an opposition party in the West Bank. It serves as an alternative for many, especially for those who are disillusioned with Fatah's rule, including the widespread corruption, and for those that are more conservative and religious. It is hard to discern a particular West Bank Hamas discourse, separated from the larger Hamas discourse, however. In general, several online news sites are associated with Hamas, especially the Palestinian Information Centre and Palestine Today.

Palestinian civil society

The number of people who are willing to vote for either Fatah or Hames should not, however, be considered representative of the support for those parties more generally. When polls introduce a third candidate, such as independent Marwan Barghouti, that candidate is favoured by more than 60% of the respondents in the West Bank (PSR, 2022: 11; 2023: 13). Importantly, much of Palestinian civil society stands in opposition to both Hamas, the PA and its Fatah members. Civil society groups, such as student groups, unions, and neighbourhood committees, have a long tradition in the Palestinian context and played a visible role in the largely non-violent resistance of the first Intifada (see Annex II for a list of all organisations appearing in this thesis). Yet, more formal NGOs proliferated after the establishment of the PA in 1993, and international state-building efforts, with some commentators assessing the "NGO-isation" of Palestinian civil society. Many scholars see this development critically, assessing that this depoliticised Palestinian civil society, as liberation and resistance efforts shifted to a focus on development projects, instead of national liberation (Arda and Banerjee, 2021; Dana 2015; Herrold, 2022). Yet, many Palestinian NGOs, especially human rights organisations are outspoken and critical of Israel, as well as the PA. The most well-known of these organisations are probably Addameer and Al-Haq. Established in 1979, Al-Haq is the oldest Palestinian NGO and "documents violations of the individual and collective rights of Palestinians in the OPT" (Al-Haq, 2010). Addameer supports Palestinian political prisoners arrested by Israel and the PA (Addameer, 2021).

Many Palestinian civil society organisations are staffed by younger people. In my assessment, I would say the age of many staff members is below 30. While indicative of Palestine's young society, it also

reflects the generation split between the old elite with a grip on the political system and a more politically frustrated younger generation. This does not mean, that Fatah or Hamas does not recruit younger people, but even younger people in those organisations (in the West Bank) are often unhappy, sidelined and without influence (Høigilt, 2016; Stern, 2022). NGOs (and civil society more generally) also represent Palestinian women more than official institutions where women are notoriously underrepresented (Sayigh, 2010; Klein, 2019: 31).

Outside official NGOs, Palestinian civil society includes various other personalities that I broadly label community leaders. Some of these are known academics, businesspeople, or even religious figures. While some of those are independent, others have loose affiliations with certain political factions. While those affiliations might be visible to an insider of Palestinian society, for me they were often not apparent. In the list below, I kept those participants separate, even if their discourse might fit with one faction or the other.

Overall, civil society actors employ a very different language and discourse than the official party line, even if Palestinian narratives remain linked (see Chapters 6 and 7). Overall, Palestinian civil society, including NGOs is an important element in society and, thus, remains included in the investigation.

Palestinian participants

In total, I conducted 24 interviews with Palestinians in the West Bank or East Jerusalem. All participants are actively engaged in the Palestinian political scene, either via political activities or outspoken public stances. All of the participants can be described as the Palestinian elite, nearly all of them have university degrees and come from decent socio-economic backgrounds. Interviews represented all three poles outlined above and included 15 male and 9 female participants. Participants can be divided into five categories:

- Activists with NGOs, such as Al-Haq or Addameer (6 interviews)
- Academics, affiliated with Palestinian Universities, such as Bir Zeit or Bethlehem University (3 interviews)
- Community leaders, including religious and business leaders (5 interviews)
- Members of the Fatah elite, including PLC members (6 interviews)
- Members of the Hamas elite, including PLC members (4 interviews)

12 interviews took place in English, 3 in a mix of English and Arabic, and 9 entirely in Arabic.

3.4 Interview design, conduct and analysis

I will now discuss the design and conduct of interviews, and finally how I analysed the data. All methods, questions and analysis tools were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee at the School of Government and International Affairs (see also 3.5).

3.4.1 Interview design

To design the interviews, I developed a prepared list of questions. Questions for Israelis and Palestinians were different, reflecting the different contexts but also the different topics I expected conspiracy narratives to connect with.

For the Israeli context, the questions were designed to identify which enemies the Israeli participants believe are currently opposing Israel, and what methods these adversaries might be using to oppose, or even destroy, the country. I began the interviews by asking, "In your view, are there any actors fundamentally opposed to Israel?". I then typically followed up with questions about the intentions and methods of these actors, including whether they might deliberately conceal their motives or strategies. As a result of this line of questioning, the interviews often centred on Palestinian and European actions and intentions towards Israel, as well as internal Israeli relations.

In the Palestinian case, I began with a general question about the methods Israel employs to maintain the occupation. I then asked, "What is the goal of the Israeli occupation in the short, medium, and long term?" After discussing Israeli practices and intentions, I typically shifted the conversation to Western support for Israel. I asked whether such support exists, how it is provided, and how it developed. This led to a question about Western intentions: "What are the reasons for European and American support for Israel?" From these questions, the interviews largely focused on ongoing Israeli policies towards the Palestinians, Western support for Zionism and Israel, and intra-Palestinian relations.

For both contexts, I maintained the same interview questions throughout the interview process. However, I continuously improved follow-up questions, following a dynamic process between interview conduct and design.

3.4.2 Interview conduct

Conducting the interview does not start when the researcher asks the first question. Rather, it starts when the researcher and participants meet; it is crucial to build rapport quickly. As the literature notes, exchanging pleasantries and conducting a little small talk before the interview is important to create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019; McGrath et al., 2019). Sending greetings from the contact person often aided in building an almost personal connection between me

and the participants (Rubin and Rubin, 2012: 79). In the Palestinian context, showing cultural knowledge of specific Palestinian phrases helped and likely convinced participants of my genuine interest in their situation.

The first question constituted a broad, warming-up question to create a basic conversational flow and was designed to put the participants and me at ease. This proved useful, as most interviews were quite conversational, albeit leaning heavily on the participants' side. The following questions, as suggested by the literature, moved from the broad to the specific, and were designed in an accessible language (Rubin and Rubin, 2012; 136-137). Probing and asking participants to elaborate instead of simply moving through the questions was important. As Glesne (2016: 114) advises, interview questions should not be treated as a list to be completed quickly. At times, I rephrased and summarised what I understood and asked for further clarification. In other places, I summarised what I heard elsewhere and asked the participant to comment.

Questions remained indirect and open as suggested by the literature, avoiding loaded and leading questions (Weiss, 1994: 74). Such conduct aids in in remaining open and hearing aspects the researcher does not expect. Hence, I avoided overtly direct questions such as: Could you please tell me what conspiracies are taking place against Israelis/Palestinians? For once, I wanted to see how politics was framed, and where it became conspiratorial, without leading the participants directly to this topic and the word conspiracy. I believe this to be important due to the negative connotation of the term. In fact, several participants on both sides would essentially reference a conspiracy but then exclaim, 'but this is not a conspiracy', often to imply that what they were describing is real, not bogus. Yet, on the Palestinian side, participants used the term more freely, and not necessarily associated it with untruth, especially those who were not fluent in English (see also chapter 7).

Most interviews ranged between 60-90 minutes, as suggested by the literature. I spoke for about 10%-15% of that time. I found it useful to sometimes simply wait a short time for interviewees to continue talking, instead of interjecting (Glesne, 2016). Based on participants' consent, I recorded 43 out of the 46 interviews using a recording device. I still took notes to remember points to come back to during the interview, as well as to convey a clear interest in the words of the participants. I paid specific attention to this after one participant wondered why I was not taking many notes. Recording means an interview is easier to follow and provides crucial time to devise follow-up questions (ibid: 116). All interviews were conducted in a safe environment strictly based on the wishes and choices of the participants. These were public spots, such as cafes, but at times private gardens or homes.

3.4.3 Data analysis

After I finished the interview process, I started with the analysis. The first step was to transcribe the interviews. I created full transcripts of all interviews. While this was time-intensive, transcribing all data helped in fully understanding the content, already trying to figure out themes in the process. I made comments on the transcripts about specific aspects beyond the words spoken by participants that I believe mattered. For example, I made notes on the interview setting, gestures used, laughter, or interruptions that seemed meaningful (Weiss, 1994: 62).

The process of transcribing and then analysing are both part of the interpretive process, which I dubbed "world-making", as I am drawing meaning out of the narratives and the emotions that became recorded in the interviews. This is a useful place to reflect on the element of language involved in the interview and analysis process. For the interviews, I relied mostly relied on two languages, English and Arabic. I conducted one interview in German that I fully translated. Otherwise, I kept the transcripts in the original language (which at times was a mix of Arabic and English). This relieved me from the challenges, including the interpretive burden, involved in translating the transcripts. Yet, for the Arabic transcripts I needed to make sense of them in English, and whenever drawing on material for the analysis I translated important parts myself.

An important aspect of the analysis consists of establishing the context of the words that both participants use (and documents, such as newspaper articles) are situated in. A key challenge is to be aware of how concepts translate from one language to another.

A difficulty in translating Arabic into English is its different grammar. First, Arabic frequently uses the collective singular to describe a category. Arabic speakers would usually not say, teachers are well-paid, but the teacher (male) is well-paid (yaḥṣul al-muʿalim ʿala rawātib jaīda). From the context, we can establish that what is referred to is the collective group of teachers, or even "teacher" as an abstract concept. In the context of this thesis, participants might say "the Israeli" (al-isrāʾīlī) but generally this refers to the Israelis as a group. Thus, I would translate it as the Israelis or Israelis. However, only context can tell us this distinction. Yet, the problem with such grammatical constructions is that they inevitably open other questions, such as: who are the Israelis? Does this mean every Israeli or rather the majority? Or should we talk about the "state"? Of course, problems like this are not unique to Arabic. Similar issues appear also in English when participants used words such as "Germany" or slipped into saying "they", which is quite natural in normal conversation. While it is good to give participants the benefit of the doubt, using such collective descriptions can also be illuminating, as they might indicate ideas around the relative consistency and homogeneity of a polity and its policies.

Second, Palestinians often say the Jews (al-yahūd) while referring to (Jewish) Israelis, and thus use the word to distinguish between Arab-Palestinian Israelis and Jewish Israelis, reflecting Israeli self-identification as the "Jewish" state. In other words, "the Israelis" or "the Zionists" are often used interchangeably. Practically, this means that, for example, not every sentence that states 'the Jewish lobby wields significant influence' might mean the Jewish lobby but could mean the Israel or Zionist lobby. However, it also can indeed mean the Jewish lobby. Such nuances are important and only clear from a longer conversation or, if possible, by asking for clarification. Yet, we should be aware of the problems involved when terms converge or are loaded with potential ambiguity.

However, language obstacles also affect the participants. Sometimes participants had to, or wanted to speak English, for example out of politeness, or to prove their ability. This can affect grammar or word choices and requires more careful interpretation. Overall, this underscores that any transcription or translation is already an interpretation and, thus, part of the analytical work.

For the analysis itself, I conducted a reflexive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis itself is a blurry term referring to various but very similar techniques. Additionally, some scholars adopt different names, such as qualitative content analysis. On a general level, such tools are designed to systematically derive meaning from the data material via coding and the establishment of themes. (Schreier, 2012). The difference between approaches is less about the actual conduct, but rather about hidden assumptions about the meaning of data in relation to the world (ontology) and the role of the researcher in relation to the data (epistemology). I mainly followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) usage of the term, an approach they have comprehensively developed since, and call now Reflexive Thematic Analysis (2022). Reflexive Thematic Analysis, based on an interpretivist framework, approaches knowledge as subjective, and contextual, and, thus, themes do not simply emerge from the data, but are created by the researcher. This understanding fits well with this project. In essence, Braun and Clarke outline six steps in conducting a thematic analysis: (1) dataset familiarising, (2) data coding, (3) initial theme generation, (4) theme review, (5) refining, defining and naming themes, (6) writing the analysis (ibid: Chapter 1).

As these six steps make clear, analysis is not a linear process, but rather iterative. I moved back and forth between reading the transcripts, colour-coding them, developing, and then refining the themes, before finally naming themes. In the process, I developed various themes that eventually became subsumed into larger themes. While I was careful to strike a balance between patterns and nuances, the data, and the themes I will present show the general themes and inevitably obscure many details.

I conducted two separate analyses for the Israeli and Palestinian material. There are certainly various ways to code and make sense out of the transcripts as themes can be developed based on different logics.

However, what I focused on was the actors' participants described as orchestrating some plot. This seems logical because conspiracy narratives focus excessively upon actors and their intentions. As I have argued in the theoretical framework (Chapter 1), conspiracy narratives are hyper-focused on agency.

The data was not analysed in isolation. In parallel, my immersion in the respective discourse continued and both readings inspired each other. For example, I grasped the meta-theme of post-modernism inside Israeli conspiracy narratives by reading the general discourse, as I discovered a large amount of right-wing literature on this idea, and subsequently, I saw the theme present in the interview data.

Overall, I developed one meta-theme for both cases, as well as two themes for Israeli and three themes for Palestinian conspiracy narratives, including various subthemes.

3.5 Ethical challenges and positionality

In this last section, I will reflect on research ethics and positionality. Positionality is the "ethical obligation" for an "exploration of the implications of subject and object" (Amoureux and Steele, 2016: 4). In more practical terms, it can be understood as a reflection of the researcher on their positions and relationships towards the researched (Schwartz-Shea, 2012: 133). I will disclose my position on three aspects and discuss related ethical questions. These are 1) my engagement with Israel-Palestine, 2) my aim of empathy with Israelis and Palestinians, and 3) reflections on power relations and fieldwork.

3.5.1 Personal position and engagement with Israel-Palestine

My engagement with the topic of Israel-Palestine has a substantial history and is highly personal. I will reduce this to two parts: My initial stance and the shift of this stance to a critical position.

My initial stance towards Israel and Palestine was anchored in the typical German pro-Zionist, and orientalist framework that might be critical of Israeli polices but overall defends Israel and attributes the conflict to Arab intransigence and Palestinian terrorism. I aligned with what Angela Merkel articulated in 2008 in front of the Knesset: Germany's historical responsibility for Israel is part of Germany's raison d'état and, therefore, Israel's security is non-negotiable.

The background to this lies in my first engagement with the region and its people as part of a youth exchange when I was 18. I met a group of about 15 young (Jewish) Israelis, got close to some, and stayed friends with two. The youth exchange was, and was designed to be, a transformative experience. Germany's culture of Holocaust remembrance is closely tied to Israel as a Jewish state. As critical voices (Cronin, 2022; Moses, 2021; Gessen, 2023; Zuckerman, 1998) have pointed out, Germany's discourse tightly links, if not conflates the well-being of Jewish life with the existence of Israel as a concrete

regime. This culture of remembrance is also embedded in youth exchanges according to the goals stated in the latest guidelines for German-Israeli youth exchanges (BMFSFJ, 2011).

During one illustrative moment, we visited the Holocaust memorial in Berlin. When confronted with the horrors of the Holocaust, nearly all of us cried, and I kept thinking that these people I got to like would have been murdered by the German state back then. The museum finishes with underlining the importance of Israel as a haven for Jews, linking in a deeply emotional way the Holocaust, the safety of my new Israeli friends to the state of Israel and framing it as German and Jewish redemption.

My stance began to change when I worked with international organisations in the OPT. For the first time, I was in sustained contact with Palestinians and the reality in the West Bank. Abstract concepts such as occupation, curfews, and checkpoints became tangible and personally relatable. With continued friendship with Palestinians, as well as Israelis, I left the narrow confines of an Israel-centric discourse. Today, my stance is characterised by a rejection of the current reality in Palestine and a wish for a democratic and free future in the full enjoyment of all human rights for all inhabitants of the area.

3.5.2 The question of empathy

The basis for this research is to take individuals, groups and their views and emotions seriously. The aim is to understand in which context people form those narratives. I don't see it as my position to judge the individual who holds such beliefs, while I might judge the beliefs to be inaccurate, discriminatory, and potentially dangerous.

Understanding both Israeli and Palestinian views and emotions from the "inside" required empathy. Empathy – understood as the "intentional" and I would add emotional, "embracing" (Yanow, 2015: 23) of another person's perspective - is frequently discussed as important in interviews (Arsel, 2017; Cutcliffe, 2003; Mohr et al., 2021; Jakobsen, 2021; Shesterinina, 2019). Empathy allows for a deeper engagement with participants as it invites participants to discuss sensitive, emotional topics. Empathy for me, however, involved two ethical questions.

The first ethical question was the extent to which empathy should be extended to individuals who hold harmful views. In the literature, several scholars note the difficulty of balancing empathy with critique, warning that too much empathy might equal an uncritical acceptance of claims made by participants, being especially problematic when participants hold harmful beliefs. Ben-Ari Eyal for example wonders if researchers should allow themselves to "be truly empathic as a basis for critiquing the […] perpetrators of violence?" (in Mohr et al., 2021: 7). Other scholars voice similar concerns (de Coning, 2023; Mohr et al., 2021:).

However, Hautzinger and Scandlyn (in Mohr et al., 2021: 5) suggest that "sensitive critique requires us, to some extent, to become the object we seek to undo". Comprehending the groups that we study requires some degree of identification (Schlee, 2019). I believe critically engaging and challenging harmful beliefs requires empathy first but empathy must be embedded in intellectual honesty. Günther Schlee (2019: 8) explains this in reference to Scott Atran's view of empathy without sympathy. "You have to imagine yourself in their position […] [b]ut in the case of 'evil' people, you cannot sympathize with them, take over their political positions".

The second ethical question addresses a potential failure in offering the promised empathy. Offering equal empathy to Palestinians and Israelis was not always easy. At times, I was reluctant to empathise with the Israeli position and feelings. I illustrate this with events around the attack of Hamas on Israel in October 2023.

When the Hamas attack that massacred Israelis in their homes started, I watched with horror. The storm of emotions, especially the insecurity that the attack caused in Israeli society was intense. Friends kept telling me how fearful they were, even weeks after the attack. One friend, who at the time of the attacks had been abroad texted me upon being back in Tel Aviv: "I am afraid to sleep, maybe terrorists will come into my house." At the same time, even friends who usually expressed somewhat leftist positions towards Palestinians were suddenly advocating for the erasure of Hamas at any cost, expressing complete disregard for Palestinian life. Yet, when Israel in turn attacked Gaza, it became increasingly challenging to accept those feelings. After just a few days, several Palestinian friends and participants texted me that they lost family members or even their entire family. I became increasingly angry and unwilling to empathise with my Israeli friends for ignoring Israeli violence. Whenever I felt this ability and cornerstone of the project was threatened, I had to set aside that specific work, focus on other parts, and come back once that openness returned.

3.5.3 Fieldwork and power

As I have emphasised, research is not simply discovery but the co-creation, the drawing out, the making visible of realities. In this, the relationship between the researcher and the participants is critical. These relationships are strongly connected to the identity of the researcher and participants and are influenced by implicit power relationships (Berger, 2015). Identity can be approached as personal characteristics such as gender, race and age. Furthermore, the researcher's personal stances and emotional responses to participants can be highly influential (Rubin and Rubin, 2012: 83).

In reflecting on my fieldwork experience and relationships with participants, including reflexivity on potential power relationships I am to ensure the "credibility" (Cutcliffe, 2003: 137), and the

"trustworthiness" (Smith S., 2006) of my observations and conclusions. To structure this reflection, I will review three areas where identity and power have come to bear: Access to participants, the relationship with participants, and finally the departure from the field and analysis of the data.

Access to participants

My specific white German male background did not seem to hinder contacting, and meeting participants. As I was seeking out political elites, language or cultural barriers around gender, as would have potentially existed with secluded communities, such as the Haredi, did not affect me much. However, I was still an outsider and was met – at times – with some hesitancy. Trust building was, thus, essential. Part of trust building was transparently communicating the topic and aims of the research as well as informing both gatekeepers and participants that data would be handled completely confidentially and securely, as outlined in the participant information sheet and approved by the university ethics committee with my data management plan. It was important to convey my genuine interest, as well as my empathy with both gatekeepers and participants. I felt this especially in Israel where a few times participants told me that I was a "good guy" and therefore trustworthy. What mattered as well, was being present in the area, showing gatekeepers and participants that I tried to experience their context. Being locally present, enabled far easier ways of contact, such as WhatsApp messages and spontaneous meetings.

In terms of physical access, however, my privilege was readily visible. I could enter Israel without trouble, and travel to and through the West Bank with little obstacles. Compared to many Palestinians who dread the many Israeli checkpoints, for me, they were simply a nuisance. Recognizing that my experience is in no way representative compared to Palestinians enabled me to listen more, (partially) leaving my assumptions behind. This is somewhat similar with Israelis. When I arrived in Tel Aviv to conduct fieldwork on the West Bank, over the next few weeks, Tel Aviv was subject to rocket fire coming from Gaza. For the first time, I heard the air sirens, and the interceptions of rockets via the Iron Dome. For many of my Israeli friends, the rocket fire, even though mostly harmless is frightening, requiring them to run for shelter. As I was not socialised in this context, I was less emotionally affected, knowing the risk was minimal. Before travelling, reflecting on travel risks was important, and done via the university risk assessment, making sure travel was appropriate and safe.

Relationship with participants

Accessing participants through gatekeepers set a friendly relationship that allowed for conversational interviews. Each interview was based on informed consent and voluntary participation of all participants, and the principle of do-no-harm. Usually, I brought with me copies of the approved consent

form and helped participants to understand it. Often, however, participants were hesitant to sign the sheet but rather gave oral consent. None of the participants were particularly vulnerable, most participants are public figures, comfortable speaking about political, and potentially sensitive topics, or at least working for public organisations. Nevertheless, as stated, I have ensured the confidentiality of all data and avoided the inclusion of any identifiers to further protect participants from potential backlash.

Throughout the interviews, I met the interviewees on their terms, interviewing participants at a site of their choosing, often in their own context. This helped to equalise or reduce potential power dynamics. Limited Hebrew on my side did not seem to bother participants, while my knowledge of Arabic made participants comfortable. In Palestine, I often felt that I was treated as a figure of authority, with participants referring to me numerous times as Dr. Johan. On both sides participants visibly tried to convince me of their narrative, using phrases like "This is what we are really dealing with". In these cases, what shone through was their knowledge of another narrative that I might end up listening to. While participants often said I should talk to all sides, they usually felt they held the truth.

The interviews were certainly shaped by me being German. Participants, when talking about European powers and their effect on Israeli-Palestinian politics, often talked about Germany as a specific example. I suspect other researchers would have thus gotten, at least when it comes to details and specific examples, quite different data. At the same time, this was helpful. Because I know the German context, I could ask more precise follow-up questions and relate the examples to the broader topic of the interviews.

Departing from the field

Throughout the fieldwork, I ensured that data was stored confidentially and securely. Upon arriving in the UK, I handled the data according to the data management plan. As I promised participants, I kept data safe and confidential and removed identifiers in all transcripts. As mandated by my department's ethics committee, I deleted all audio files upon completion of the transcripts. This was requested to further ensure that the remaining data did not contain any personal information that would allow participants to be identified.

When I left the area to travel back to the UK, it created a clear rupture between myself and the participants. It highlighted my privilege to leave and to remove myself from the context at will. In contrast, participants stay in their contexts and continue being affected by the struggles they are subject to or engaging in. Leaving, however, opened the question of what I owe the participants who volunteered their time and thoughts for the benefit of my research. It almost places them in a position of emotional

power, urging me not to betray them. However, because I felt this for both sides, it felt conflicting. I feel obliged, both intellectually but also emotionally to present an analysis critical of Israel; at the same time, I feel I need to honour the Israeli participants and their lived experiences. Often those Israelis held beliefs that are to be rejected on moral grounds. This mirrors the above discussion on empathy, the danger of being drawn too close to participants. I almost hoped that especially on the Israeli side, I would find unpleasant people who are easy to criticise. However, all my participants were incredibly friendly (towards me), at times inviting me into their homes, providing food and readily helping with my research. Many of them fight hard to protect their community from the threats, for example of "dangerous Palestinians" they perceive to be real. However, here lies my power to interpret and frame my research. Yet, here I wanted to note that even the voices that are deeply complicit in an oppressive reality come from people I judge to be generally good, or simply normal. As social anthropologist Günther Schlee puts it, we know "that also the perpetrators of violence are entirely normal people in other contexts."

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined the broader philosophical, methodological but also personal assumptions this work is based on, and which methods were appropriate in addressing the outlined research question.

Generally, I argued for the adoption of an interpretivist approach that emphasises the social construction of social phenomena, in a world where individuals and groups act based on the meaning they attach to their surroundings, including to the actions of other people. It becomes the role of the researcher to understand the world from the perspective of these individuals and groups. At the same time, interpretivism acknowledges research should not be conceived as simply discovering objective truths, but rather as involved in the construction of reality, in Goodman's words "worldmaking".

Based on those assumptions, it becomes imperative to understand conspiracy narratives from the perspective of the narrators, which in turn requires highly contextual and rich qualitative data. I argued that such data can be gathered via interviews. Interviews allow an exploration of the political views of participants while retaining the possibility to ask follow-up questions, a tool particularly useful to understand conspiracy narratives that are often characterised by ambiguity. I narrowed this further down to qualitative semi-structured elite interviews. Elite interviews make sense, as they allow me to focus on those parts of society that shape public discourse and emotions. Semi-structured interviews allow for better comparisons across various interviews.

To determine which participants to recruit for the interviews, I analysed Israeli and Palestinian society. As Israeli society is dominated by the political right and the associated right-wing network, I decided to focus on Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives and conducted 14 interviews with senior right-wing individuals. I conducted a further eight interviews with participants from the Israeli left to gain further context information. Palestinian society is fragmented across various political contexts. To narrow down the analysis and guarantee some comparability across individual experiences, I decided to focus solely on the West Bank and East Jerusalem. As Palestinian society is split across three large segments, Fatah loyalists, Hamas supporters, and an independent civil society sector, I decided to include all three segments to generate a full picture of Palestinian conspiracy narratives in the context of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In total, I interviewed 24 Palestinian participants across those three segments of society.

As the interview data was not sufficient to fully contextualise conspiracy narratives, I also relied on a broader observation of the respective discourse, immersing myself in the Israeli right-wing, as well as in the official Fatah and Hamas discourse by reading hundreds of online newspaper articles, as well as consuming social media posts and videos. I used the interview data to conduct a thematic analysis, developing codes for the interview data and subsequently refining it, also drawing on my contextual knowledge from the general observation of the respective discourses.

Chapter 4 – Anxiety, Insecurity and Powerlessness in Israeli Society

In this chapter, I turn towards the Israeli context. While Chapter 5 will present the main themes of Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives, this chapter will lay the ground for understanding the context they derive from.

To establish this context, I pursue two goals. First, I will show the development of feelings of anxiety, powerlessness and insecurity among right-wing groups. I will highlight three sources of anxiety, powerlessness and insecurity: 1. Conflict-related anxiety, 2. Socio-economic anxiety, and 3. identity-related anxiety. Some of those feelings are peculiar to Israel's right, others are widespread in Israeli society today. What matters, however, is that Israel's political right interprets these feelings in specific ways. For example, post-Zionist attacks on Israeli identity reverberate not only among right-wing Israelis. However, it is especially Israel's right that interprets those challenges as a significant, and potentially mortal security threat. While the right sees Israel militarily not as weak, it believes Israel to be isolated with a fragile legitimacy, and only a heartbeat away from downfall and genocide, at least if Israel does not remain vigilant. This is the emotional fertile ground that conspiracy narratives draw on.

Second, I aim to show how the Israeli political right achieved political prominence and ultimately came to exercise hegemony over the political system. This is related also to three specific factors: 1. The impact of conflict, 2. Socio-economic cleavages, and 3. The role of religion. Both of my aims are closely related and connected to trends that feed each other. For example, conflicts created insecurity not only among right-wing voters. Yet, the insecurity of conflict made Israel's public move consistently to the right, notably in the wake of the Second Intifada. The right-wing parties in turn provide an ideological framework that emphasises how conflict cannot be resolved, feeding the conflict-generated feelings of insecurity.

Some disclaimers are important. This chapter should also not be read as a comprehensive history of Israeli politics and emotions. I will have to paint with relatively broad strokes the sources of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness, and the rise of the Israel right-wing camp. As such, this chapter provides a generalised account. However, individuals who identify as Israeli experience vastly different situations that I cannot remotely capture here. Furthermore, when I refer to Zionism in this chapter, I will – if not indicated otherwise – refer to mainstream Zionist ideas as implemented in Palestine. With this, I exclude, for example, early Zionist voices that advocated for a bi-national state. Lastly, I will approach this chapter from a Jewish-Israeli perspective, focusing on the experiences and narratives of Israelis as described by them, while critically exploring their purpose.

The chapter is organised in six sections. First (4.1), I will detail the three sources of anxiety. Second (4.2), I will outline the beginnings of Zionism and the Jewish settlement enterprise in Palestine. Third (4.3), I will sketch the "statehood years", the early Israeli history until 1967. Fourth (4.4), I will detail the period around the 1967 war and the political ascent of the Israeli right. Fifth, (4.5), I will discuss the First Intifada and the rise of the Oslo peace process, before finishing (4.6) with the Second Intifada, and the last two decades of Israeli history. While the sections proceed linearly, I will highlight several key issues in broader blocks that transcend this periodisation.

4.1 Three levels of Israeli right-wing anxiety

Many scholars who study feelings of anxiety and fear in Israeli society agree that fear levels are high and that discourses around threats, security and fear are abundant, and deeply ingrained in society (Bar-Tal, 2001; Halperin et al., 2008; Illouz, 2023; Ochs 2013; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015; Thorleifsson, 2015).

Scholars tie such feelings to Israel's long history of violence as well as ongoing conflicts, the history of Jewish persecution, especially the Holocaust, and the political instrumentalisation of the latter. However, scholars also deem this paradoxical. For example, Israeli scholar Uriel Abulof (2019: 19-20) assesses: "The safer Israel has become, the more anxious Israelis have become […] it has never been more prosperous and powerful […] and yet, Israeli Jews have remained fearful, often more so than before." In other words, the high levels of fear cannot only be linked to physical threats that many Israelis believe their army can cope with. I want to advance a threefold explanation of feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness in Israeli mainstream – that is right-wing - society. I will show that those feelings are rooted in the history of conflict, in economic and social changes, and in anxiety linked to Israeli identity, and right-wing identity in particular. For analytical clarity, I will separate those three areas, although it should be kept in mind that those three areas are tightly linked and overlapping.

4.1.1 Conflict-related anxiety and insecurity

The first source of anxiety is the long history of conflict that Israeli society has been involved in. Regardless of the causes of violence, Israeli society has and continues to experience high levels of anxiety and insecurity due to conflict. Yet, such feelings are especially pronounced on Israel's right with insecurity often being a driver for a right-ward shift in Israeli society.

Israel as a state was born through a bloody conflict. Since the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, Israel has seen another 10 major violent conflicts with the surrounding Arab states and the Palestinians.[7] Even before

[7] I am including the major wars as well as three rounds of fighting in Gaza in 2008, 2012 and 2014.

1948, Jewish settlers, immigrants and refugees encountered violence. War after war led to a “siege mentality” (Bar-Tal and Antebi 1992; Krebs, 2011).

Israelis, but especially the right-wing, understand the conflict with the Palestinians as an "eternal fate" as Kimmerling puts it (2008: 177). The famous song “We are the Children of Winter ’73” released in 1994 captures this feeling pointedly. The song presents young Israelis born after the Yom Kippur War in 1973, addressing their parents, who promised peace; however, now the young generation finds themselves in the army: We are the children of Winter, ‘73 […] You promised a dove, an olive leaf, […] You promised peace at home, […] We have grown and are now in the army with our weapons, and helmets on our heads (Attias, 2018).

The song captures the feeling of peace being desired but seemingly unattainable in the face of conflict imposed on Israel. These experiences of war and violence are deeply entrenched in collective, but also private memory. Conflict is for many Israelis a lived reality. Conflict is nearly always a personal experience, be it via the conscription into the army, the daily news dealing with attacks on Israel, or the loss of relatives, friends, or acquaintances. One academic who works extensively on fear in Israeli society stated:

> there is almost a consensus among Jewish Israelis that levels of threat are very substantial and if Israel wouldn’t be powerful and able to protect itself […] that Arab countries […] or the Palestinians would threaten Israel, and even its existence (Interview 20).

This consensus is certainly part of the general right-wing ideological outlook. As Del Sarto (2017: 80) describes, the right sees Israel as encircled by an “alliance of evil forces [...] primed on the destruction of the Jewish state”. Thus, especially right-wing Israelis emphasise significant feelings of anxiety and insecurity due to the perception of living in a hostile environment.

4.1.2 Economic and social marginalisation

The second area that undergirds anxieties, specifically among right-wing voters is socio-economic insecurity and marginalisation, often framed as a struggle between the first and the second Israel. Israel’s society is divided across lines of ethnicity, religion, socio-political status and political orientation.

In terms of ethnicity, Israeli society consists of Ashkenazi, European Jews and non-European Jews, often lumped together as Mizrahim. This contains Jews from North Africa, the Middle East, as well as more recently Ethiopian Jews.[8] Today, 45% of Israeli Jews self-identify as Ashkenazim, while 48% identify as Mizrahim (Pew, 2016: 75).

8 I will use Mizrahim as an umbrella term. Sometimes the term “Sephardim” is used instead. Technically, Sephardim refers to descendants of Iberian Jews, often coming from North Africa, while Mizrahim refers only to Jews from the Middle East. Ethiopian Jews are not included in either term.

Ashkenazim tend to vote for centrist parties and in the case of Labour former left-wing parties. Other groups tend to vote for right-wing parties. For example, in 2022 the Israeli Democracy Institute (Anabi, 2022) recorded (subsuming non-Ashkenazi Jews in the category Sephardim) that a large majority of Likud (58%) and Shas (75%) voters define themselves as Sephardi, and a minority-as Ashkenazi (Likud: 21%; Shas: 3%). There is also a considerable overlap between being more traditional/religious and identifying as Mizrahi, and right-wing.

Right-wing voters often stem from the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder. The same survey found that "the lowest income earners were Shas (61%) and Torah Judaism (58%) voters, followed by almost half of Likud voters (46%). Just 29% of Likud voters reported above-average income". This shows how economic issues impact right-wing voters disproportionally. We will see that Israeli governments especially right-wing government, increasingly pursued neoliberal economic policies that resulted in rising inequality and economic insecurity, especially for lower segments of society, and thus, particularly for right-wing voters. Despite being disenfranchised economically, paradoxically, they still vote for right-wing parties.

Thus, the factors of political orientation, class, ethnic origin and religiosity intersect. All factors relate to a history of discrimination and marginalisation of non-Ashkenazi Jews in Israel. Socioeconomic discrepancies considerably lessened over time. Due to an increasing number of interethnic marriages, varying estimates see the number of babies born to mixed couples as 25% or even as high as 40% of all Jewish newborns in Israel (Rebhun, 2022). However, views on ethnicity are more tenacious (Okun, 2004; Sagiv, 2017). As Smooha (2021: 196) shows only around 15% of Israeli Jews define themselves as mixed. Socio-economically, those who identify as Ashkenazi still occupy on average higher positions in almost all sectors of society, are more affluent, more secular, and less traditional. Arguably, Israelis, and especially right-win voters, perceive the gap as a lot wider than it statistically is. Sentiments about ongoing racist and discriminatory practices towards non-Ashkenazi Jews still surface today. As one right-wing participant told me:

> the old [left-wing] elite […] were horrified when [right-wing Menachem] Begin was elected […] by the segment of the population that the Ashkenazi elite considered barbarians. Now [today] the whole campaign of the left was […] also a racist dog whistle against the Mizrahim, the Jews from Oriental countries. When the leaders of the Left say: we will not let the scumbags, the Bibistim, the baboons, win, all these code words for Netanyahu voters evoke an ethnic ring. […] This is the constant subtext (Interview 20).

However, these sentiments are hard to divorce from arguments around political control and religiosity. Yet, what remains important is that right-wing voters have a history and ongoing feelings around being marginalised by and powerless in the face of the Ashkenazim, often dubbed the "elite".

4.1.3 Ontological insecurity

Finally, to resolve the paradox of Israeli insecurity, identity-related anxiety is key. Scholars regularly remark that Judaism contains a tension between universalist and particularist values (Hughes, 2014; Lundgren, 2001). This tension is replicated in Israeli Zionist discourse, constituting two contradictory impulses. On the one hand, parts of Israeli Zionism articulate the desire to achieve "normalcy", allowing the Jewish nation to be accepted, and to live in peace, or as Micah Goodman (2015: 2.33) puts it: "to end the exile from humanity." On the other hand, parts of Israeli Zionism embrace Jewish particularism, accepting the condition of a nation that "shall dwell alone".

The more this tension grew over time, the more it brought out questions about Israeli identity. It also became the defining line between the political right and the left. As Aronoff (1991: 186) states: "What fundamentally divides Israeli Zionists is their evaluation of whether or not the Jewish people and its state are capable of being 'normal,' and whether or not such a condition (if it is possible) is one that should be sought."

This identity conflict kept producing ontological insecurity as detailed in this chapter. Yet, I will show how many in Israel shifted to the right, and, thus, came to embrace the perception of "abnormality", establishing a solid identity around feeling isolated and persecuted. While this stabilised the identity conflict, this particularist identity is itself a source of anxiety. This warrants some further explanation.

Zionism aimed to create Jewish normalcy via Jewish sovereignty, which in Herzl's vision would overcome antisemitism. Yet, Zionism in Palestine became realised as a settler-colonial project and was from the beginning contested and implicated in war. The experience of war combined with deep-seated feelings of persecution and the Holocaust especially (Segev, 1991; Wistrich 1997; Zertal, 2005). The latter came to serve as a prism for interpreting Israel's conflicts, with feelings of an imminent genocide resurfacing periodically. Holocaust survivor and philosopher Yehuda Elkana (1988) demurs Israel's Holocaust culture, writing "the deepest […] factor that motivates much of Israeli society […] is […] a profound existential Angst fed by a particular interpretation of the lessons of the Holocaust […]".

Yet, many on the left, especially in the aftermath of 1967, came to argue that Israel needs to shed its siege mentality and Holocaust fears, recognise its strengths, and make peace or even embrace a post-Zionist identity. This challenge led to a deep identity conflict, producing ontological insecurity, especially for Israel's right who perceived such changes as deeply threatening to the developed Jewish religious ethno-nationalist ideology. However, when the conflict with the Palestinians reignited during the Second Intifada, Israeli liberalism and post-Zionism were crushed, muting the identity question. Yet, right-wing ontological insecurity continues.

Drawing on Abulof (2019: 14), we can explain this because paradoxically, "Zionism which promised the ultimate solution to Jewish insecurity, turned out to be its late modern incarnation". As Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015: 37) notes, settler-colonial societies are "constantly haunted by the colonized". The right-wing identity tied to the religious ethno-nationalist project inherently perpetuates anxiety, as it constantly creates the conditions for Israel to be (violently) opposed, seemingly reaffirming the idea that Jewish safety can only be guaranteed by a militarily powerful and Jewish-dominated Israel. This fundamentally entrenches religious ethno-nationalist anxieties, where Palestinian identity and post-Zionist ideals seem to pose a challenge to Jewish domination and the legitimacy of a Jewish-dominated state. Because right-wing religious ethno-nationalism cannot easily resolve this anxiety, it reverts to the "elimination of the native" (Wolfe, 2006), aiming to maintain a state on the whole land of Israel or large parts of it either without the local Palestinians or dominating them. Yet, when such an ideology is challenged by continued post-Zionism both from inside and outside, it lays bare what we could call "Zionist fragility", the anxiety-filled defensive reactions of many right-wing Israelis experience when facing calls for a post-Zionist liberation of Palestine. These identity related anxieties underscore the pervasive right-wing feeling of facing grand, global forces that could destroy Israel.

4.2 The Zionist revolution: 1880 – 1948

Zionism became implemented in Palestine, yet its historic roots are found in Europe. I will briefly outline how Zionism emerged as a desire for normalcy and safety of the Jewish nation.

4.2.1 The ideological beginnings of Zionism

At the beginning of the 19th century, most Jews saw themselves as a vague group of people, a people in the loose pre-modern sense united by shared religious and cultural beliefs, but set apart by various local, and pre-national identities (Sand, 2009). A major part of those shared beliefs was a religious yearning for the promised land, which was pointedly captured by poet Yehuda Halevi: "My heart is in the East and I in the uttermost West." Yet, a return to Israel was imagined solely as a divine act preceding the redemption of humanity (Stanislawski, 2016: 2).

Inspired by European nationalism, Zionist thinkers, such as Theodor Herzl began to advance an understanding of Jews as a modern ethnic nation. For them, the situation of the Jewish people in exile was unnatural and posed two fundamental problems, to which a Jewish state would be the answer (Abulof, 2019: 13). The first, persisting antisemitism regularly resulted in discrimination and violence. The second, the "menacing tidal wave" (Neumann, 2011: 76) of assimilation threatening to erase Jewishness (Sternhell, 1998: 12). It is often believed that Herzl and others primarily thought to create a haven for Jews to shelter from antisemitism. Yet, as described in "Altneuland", Herzl believed that if

Jews were to organise as a nation in their state, antisemitism would vanish. By ending the exile among the Gentiles, the Jewish exile from humanity would end as well, and Jews would achieve the desired "normalcy", a nation among the family of nations (Goodman, 2015; Rubinstein, 2000: 25).

Thus, Zionism aimed at rejecting the abnormal and creating the conditions for normalcy. Yet, this radical break with both tradition and Jewish enlightenment was seen critically by most Jews at the time. On the one hand, it went against traditional prohibitions that saw Jewish redemption, including the return to Zion, as a divine act, not a human-made political project. On the other hand, many liberal Jews rejected the notion that Jewish assimilation would ultimately fail. This created the urgent need to justify and legitimise Zionism. Zionism would become a Jewish majority position only after the Holocaust. (Stanislawski, 2016: 9-10).

Overall, Zionism proposed a revolutionary project aimed at the physical but also identity redemption of the Jewish people. While the World Zionist Organisation discussed various options for acquiring land, including the "Uganda Plan", Zionist leaders eventually decided to settle in Palestine.

4.2.2 The pre-state period of Zionism in Palestine

In 1882, the first Zionist settlers arrived in Palestine, retrospectively named the first Aliya (Hebrew for "ascent"). Yet, the Zionist settler-colonial project truly started with the Second (1904-1914), and Third Aliya (1919-1923) that laid the ground for the newly formed Jewish community in Palestine, called the Yishuv. The settlers established the key institutions that the Yishuv would carry forward until the establishment of Israel in 1948 and further, spearheaded modern Hebrew and introduced the principle of "Hebrew Labour" the employment of Jewish not Arab workers (Glazer, 2007).

Early on, Zionism contained various political factions, but mainly the labour movement and the right-wing revisionists. Both sides aimed to create a Jewish secular state on as much land as possible, and only differed in the preferred methods (Sternhell, 1988: 6). During the 1920s, the labour movement gained the majority and ultimately achieved political hegemony over the Yishuv. The labour movement in the form of David Ben-Gurion's party Mapai followed a left-leaning mix of nationalism and socialism with the latter being subordinate to the former. (Maron and Shalev, 2017: 14, Sternhell, 1998).

Leading Zionists believed that building a Jewish state required uniting diverse Jewish groups into a "natural community" by forging a new Hebrew identity, and a complete break from the humiliating conditions of exile (Aronoff, 1991: 175). The Yishuv looked down on the Jews in exile and their perceived weakness. A seminal piece capturing this theme is "The City of Slaughter" by "poet laureate of Jewish nationalism" Hayim Nahman Bialik (Ginsburg, 2014: 1). Bialik emotionally expresses the

horrors of antisemitic violence, contempt for the Gentiles, but also disgust at the passivity of the Jewish survivors. To quote a short passage:

> So you go down from there and come among dark cellars
> Where they tainted the decent daughters of your kin, among the tools.
> A woman - one woman - under seven, seven of the uncircumcized, […]
> The men lay in their shame and saw - and did not move or stir,
> […] And perhaps each even prayed by himself in his heart:
> Lord of the world, work a miracle may the evil not come on me (cited in Bateson, 1966: 751-752).

In contrast, Zionism envisioned a "new Jew", engaged in hard farm labour, physically and mentally strong, and in deep connection with the land. This idea was embodied by the pioneers, the Zionist vanguard that came to exercise considerable influence over the self-understanding of the Yishuv. The pioneers cultivated an intense desire for the land. For example, pioneer Yosef Weitz wrote:

> the deeper I dug, the sensation of the soil became more profound and spread through me, and the feeling overcame me that I [must] embrace the land, merge into it, suck from it the essence of life. The spirit of the generations blew within me from the depths of the soil […] (cited in Neuman, 2011: 2).

Longing for a close connection with the land also hints at the desire to be natives. However, unlike the Palestinian Arabs, the Jewish settlers and immigrants were not natives. Thus, parts of the Hebrew literature envied the Palestinians. Ramras-Rauch (1989: 38) contends that the "image of the Arab as indigenous", appears frequently in pre-State literature where "the Arab is perceived as maintaining the wholeness of the land by symbolizing rootedness and continuity", unlike the Yishuv's members who struggled with conditions in Palestine. In the words of influential writer Yosef Haim Brenner:

> Those that belong [the Palestinians], that have their own sun to shine and their own rain to fall on them, that aren't a quarter-of-a-century old […] well, they may be filthy beggars themselves […] but at least they're not the outcasts of the earth (cited in Ramras-Rauch, 1989: 36).

Ramras-Rauch explains how Brenner expresses that the Jewish settlers' roots are not genuine but rooted in the mentality of the Diaspora: "the desire to be 'at home,' [to be] a native son, [becomes] […] the inescapable sense of estrangement from the land". But "the Arabs" that despite "their primitive way of life, are native sons" (ibid: 37). The desire for nativeness was also an attempt to legitimise Zionist settlements, towards their community, but also to others, including the British colonial power.

In fact, the Hebrew-Zionist literature is replete with references to how Palestine was uncultivated. Neuman (2011: 79) lists a multitude of descriptions for the land including: "'hollow,' 'ruined,' 'bare,' 'dead,' 'abandoned,' […] 'desolate'". Ultimately, these descriptions were geared towards sustaining the claim to the land. In this view, only the settlers developed the land, proving that they would be the true

natives, the people that yearned for the land, and the people that the land yearned for (Neuman, 2011: 42).

This was furthered by the Zionist tendency to ignore the Palestinians as political subjects. The known phrase, "A land without a people, for a people without a land", attributed to Israel Zangwill captures this. Palestinians were not perceived as a nation, and as such, they could not claim the land. Palestinian resistance was rarely perceived as national resistance (Kaplan and Penslar, 2011: 17; Ramras-Rauch, 1989: 204). The events around Tel Hai and their subsequent mythologisation illustrate this.

Tel Hai was a Jewish outpost in the northern Galilee. In 1920, regional tensions culminated in the "Battle of Tel Hai", when Arab fighters overran the outpost killing eight Jewish defenders. The "heroism of the […] pioneers" quickly became a major myth in the Yishuv and early Israel (Goldstein and Zerubavel, 2021; Zerubavel and Sarig, 2021). However, it also captures the Zionist perspective on Palestinian resistance, framed as a story of innocence versus evil. In the pioneer's logic, attackers were bandits with criminal intent or antisemites. Thus, Zionist leader Berl Katznelson eulogised the fallen of Tel Hai as "the men of toil and peace" and Ben-Gurion expressed: "Tranquil people, cultivating their land in their own country, are suddenly attacked by bandits." (cited in Zertal, 2005: 21). Zertal deems this as

> defensive apologetics by means of which […] Zionist discourse cloaked the settlement of and struggle for the territorial expanse. According to the Zionist narrative, history had always begun the moment that Jewish settlers faced attack by Arab marauders; […] not preceded by [...] dispossession of the local population (ibid: 22).

This theme of criminal Arab gangs resurfaced continuously throughout the Yishuv and early Israel (Kelly, 2017).

Overall, the Zionist revolution was aimed at achieving normalcy and safety for Jews. In Palestine, however, the Yishuv had established its legitimacy and did so by developing romantic myths about the land, while simultaneously denying Palestinian claims. The ensuing resistance by Palestinians was framed as unreasonable aggression, thus, paradoxically laying the ground for the siege mentality, and an embrace of the abnormal. Such narratives found their way into right-wing discourse and will also resurface in the right-wing conspiracy narratives.

4.3 The statehood years: 1948 – 1967

Under the labour movement, the Yishuv created important narratives, as well as institutions that would influence Israeli history. It would take until the War of Independence in 1948 for Israel to be founded, against the backdrop of the Holocaust, and under the continued leadership of David Ben-Gurion.

4.3.1 The war of independence and the siege mentality

The war of 1948 lasted from December 1947 to July 1949. The first phase before the departure of the British constituted a "civil war" between Jewish and Palestinian forces. The second phase, from May 1948 onwards constituted Israel's first regional war. The Israeli experience of the war and its subsequent mythologisation form key components in Israeli identity (Slater, 2021: 73). Especially the narrative of defensive heroism against an overwhelming genocidal enemy crystallised. For example, Benjamin Netanyahu (2000: 84) describes the events with the following words:

> Arab irregulars began pouring into Palestine […] seeking to prevent the Jewish state from coming into existence, and they were followed within months by the regular armies of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon. […] Israel's ragtag forces were overwhelmingly outnumbered […]. As the Arab armies invaded, Israel's life hung in the balance. […] Yet even on the brink of disaster, they somehow held on.

While several scholars point out that Arab forces were numerically not much larger, Israelis experienced the 1948 war as an existential and defensive war of a small Jewish community against an alliance of Arab forces (Pappé, 2022: 116; 122-123). During the war, the civilian population underwent significant hardship, including two thousand deaths.

During and after the war, reverence for the Jewish soldier pioneer became widely expressed. Kaplan and Penslar (2011: 347-348) point towards children's letters, citing one example:

> I greet you and your comrades in arms who are fighting the Arab enemy threatening to destroy our homeland. You who fight on the front, spilling your blood for our country, battling against savages from the desert […] Hebrew warrior!

Racialised fears of Arabs as "savages" that the Yishuv had been cultivating surface in the quote as well and helped justify the ethnic cleansing in 1948. Historian Benny Morris (1991: 42) years later framed Palestinians in exactly that light, writing that the ethnic cleansing was almost unavoidable because of "the Yishuv's fears of what would happen should the Arabs win and, alternately, what would happen to a Jewish state born with a very large, potentially or actively hostile Arab minority in its midst."

After 1948, conflict continued. Aside from the war in 1956, Israel faced attacks by Palestinian "infiltrators", at times supported by Israel's neighbours. From 1950 to the end of 1956, 264 Israeli civilians were killed (Morris, 1993: 98). The "constant thefts, robberies, and sabotage, the sniping, and the occasional murder" caused a sense of insecurity, especially in the Mizrahi border communities. As Schweid (2001: 28) remarks, for the "generations of native-born Israelis", leaders like Moshe Dayan, Yitzhak Rabin, and Ariel Sharon, "the war for the Land of Israel became their basic experience" forming the siege mentality that Dayan clearly expressed in 1956:

> […] our eyes are closed to the reality of our fate ….]. The millions of Jews, annihilated without a land, peer out at us from the ashes […] to settle and rebuild a land for our people. But beyond […] the border lies a surging sea of hatred and vengeance […] that […] fills the lives of hundreds of thousands of Arabs, who live around us and are waiting for the moment when their hands may claim our blood. We mustn't avert our eyes, […] [but be] armed, strong and unyielding […] (cited in Ginsburg, 2016).

The bourgeoning siege mentality, however, was not only a function of the violence that the Zionist project was mired in but also of the legacy and interpretation of "the millions of Jews, annihilated without a land".

4.3.2 The lasting legacy of the Holocaust

The Holocaust left a strong impact on Israeli society as historian Idith Zertal (2005: 3) writes:

> The Holocaust has always been present in Israel's speech and silences; in the lives and nightmares of hundreds of thousands of survivors who have settled in Israel, and in the crying absence of the victims; in legislation, orations, ceremonies, courtrooms, schools, in the press, poetry, gravestone inscriptions, monuments, memorial books.

However, the process of incorporating the Holocaust into the Israeli collective memory and culture was not passive but based on a "dialectical process of appropriation and exclusion, remembering and forgetting" (ibid: 4), a process often deliberately shaped by the Israeli elite that interpreted the Holocaust from a strictly Zionist perspective to underline the importance and legitimacy of Zionism and to explain the conflict with the Arab nations.

Seeing the looming war in 1948 on the horizon, Zionist leaders drew heavily on the Holocaust, mixed with genuine fear was also the aim to construct "Israeli power and consciousness of power out of the total Jewish powerlessness" (Zertal, 2005: 4).

After all, nothing justified the exercise of power and war of 1948 more easily than the Holocaust. Over time, Arabs, and Palestinians became routinely described as the new Nazis, and the Holocaust formed the ultimate lens for understanding every war Israel engaged in. For example, according to Shlomo-Ben Ami, the war in 1948 was experienced as intimately connected to the Holocaust: (cited in Slater, 2021: 77)

> Accounts that focus on the [equal] number of troops on the ground ignore the traumatic memory of the destruction of European Jewry, the Yishuv's deep sense of insecurity, and its tendency to see every battle in [the] apocalyptic terms [of the Holocaust].

Decades later, during the invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Prime Minister Menachem Begin opined that destroying the PLO's headquarters was like sending forces to eliminate Hitler in his bunker (Margalit, 1994). Amos Oz famously responded: "Hitler is already dead, my dear Prime Minister," and attested

Israeli political culture a self-destructive 'urge to resuscitate Hitler in order to kill him every day anew […]' (cited in Margalit, 1994).

Over time, the Holocaust would enter Israeli society as a "chosen trauma", as Oren (2019: 4) writes. This process was facilitated not only by narratives of the political elite but also via the institutionalisation of cultural and educational activities, including the identity-forming visits to Auschwitz (Segev, 1991). Feldman (2008: 60) describes the visits as a "voyage" that "is a civil religious pilgrimage, which transforms students into victims, victorious survivors, and finally, olim to the Land of Israel." In 2022, a poll right before Israel's Holocaust Remembrance Day found that nearly 50% of Israelis were afraid that another Holocaust would befall the Jewish people, underlining the way the Holocaust entered the Israeli emotional outlook (Dvir, 2022).

4.3.3 Left-wing dominance over the state and society

Since the end of the 1920s, the left-leaning labour movement, first in the form of the Mapai and then the Labour Party exercised political hegemony over the Yishuv and Israel, usually garnering more than 50% of the total votes.

In Israel's first election in 1949, Mapai won a decisive electoral victory. Ben-Gurion principally decided against any coalition with the right-wing rival Herut, as well as the communist party Maki and opted instead to build a wide coalition that included the ultra-orthodox parties that previously had opposed Zionism. Ideologically, the Herut party was Mapai's principal rival. Herut took a decidedly hardline stance in foreign policy matters, including on the 1949 ceasefire, the economically much-needed reparations from West Germany in 1952, and later the withdrawal from the Sinai in 1956. Instead Herut "spoke of the sanctity of the historic boundaries" of the entire Land of Israel (IDI, n.d.).

Yet, it was the labour movement that exercised hegemony through its influence across state institutions and society. Based on Ben-Gurion's vision of Mamlakhtiyut (statism) the labour movement imposed the state's authority across society, neutralising other power centres; and placing the nation-state as the focal point of national identity (Ben-Eliezer, 2019: 87; Kimmerling, 2005: 101). The labour movement dominated the country's bureaucracy, the army and the Histadrut, promoting a state-centric corporatist development model that apart from several years of austerity after 1948 delivered sustained economic growth, including rising living standards across society. Ideologically, the labour movement with its mix of nationalism and socialism appealed to a broad voter base that was further broadened with its role in achieving independence and, as I will delineate below (4.4.2) the tacit religious symbolism it adopted.

Since the period of the Yishuv, the Ashkenazim dominated society and state and largely determined Israel's culture and political ideology. Before the Holocaust, the Ashkenazi Zionists regarded Mizrahi communities across the Middle East at best as "anthropological curiosities", but not as potential immigrants (Segev, 2007: 56). Yet, due to rising tensions between Jewish communities and Muslim communities in the Arab world, Israel encouraged Jewish immigration. Between 1948 and 1953, Israel absorbed more than 350'000 Mizrahi Jews, who came to constitute in 1968 the majority in the country (ibid: 43).

Yet, from the very beginning, Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews faced systematic institutional racism and discrimination. The Ashkenazi Jews looked at Mizrahim as "socially and culturally underdeveloped" (Shumsky, 1955: 6), fearing the country would slide backwards into an 'oriental' culture. Ben Gurion himself declared:

> those [Jews] from Morocco had no education. Their customs are those of Arabs […]. The culture of Morocco I would not like to have here […]. We do not want Israelis to become Arabs. We are duty bound to fight against the spirit of the Levant, which corrupts individuals and societies, and preserve the authentic Jewish values [...] (cited in Cohen-Almagor, 1995: 472).

Mizrahi migrants were mostly settled in development towns. Development towns lacked infrastructure, educational resources and jobs, locking Mizrahi communities into economically vulnerable positions. Racist stereotypes further blocked their upward mobility. Mizrahim were expected to "Europeanize", and to shed their culture and traditional religiosity (Dowty, 1998: 145). As Dowty (1998: 150) argues, being excluded from the Zionist mainstream pushed Mizrahi Jews towards the right. To prove their allegiance to Zionism, doubted by the Ashkenazim, Mizrahim demonstrated "distance from an enemy with whom they had cultural similarities."

Initially, Mizrahi did vote predominately for the labour movement, often based on patrimonial tries. Discrimination, resentment, as well as their more conservative worldview would eventually lead many of them to embrace right-wing parties, where they even began to adopt a more Hawkish, expansionist, and religious right-wing worldview.

Overall, the years of statehood, between 1948 and 1967, and the experience of conflict interpreted through the prism of the Holocaust fortified the Israeli siege mentality and provided ample grounds for feelings of insecurity. At the same time, experiences of discrimination, and socio-economic marginalisation of Mizrahi Jews laid the ground for a change of guard between Israel's left and right.

4.4 The beginning of the occupation: 1967 – 1990

In 1967, tensions between Israel and her neighbours escalated and resulted in Egyptian troops moving close to the Israeli border. Israel launched an attack on Egypt framed as a pre-emptive strike. Despite Israeli warnings, Syria and Jordan joined the war. However, in only six days Israel defeated Egypt, Syria and Jordan and occupied the Sinai, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank, and annexed East Jerusalem.

4.4.1 Feelings of crisis and settlement expansion

In the year leading to the war, the atmosphere in Israel was filled with anxiety. Israel experienced an economic recession, and many Israelis harboured deep doubts about the survival of their society. Between 1952 and 1965 Israel's economy grew rapidly and started to overheat. By cutting government spending, the Mapai government attempted to tackle inflation but created a significant recession (Aderet, 2016; Arlosoroff, 2018). Unemployment reached 11-12% of the workforce (Shalev, 1992: 200). The economic downturn affected young people and Mizrahim the most. Poverty dramatically increased in some parts of the country, creating an increasingly sharp contrast between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi areas. Many young Mizrahim, full "of anger over their situation […] spoke of rebellion […]" (Segev, 2007: 48).

Simultaneously, the security situation remained tense. Palestinian fighters continued operating from Jordan and Syria. In the months before the Six-Day War, Israeli sources recorded an increasing number of attacks that reinforced further a siege mentality.

In the days preceding the war, the mood turned apocalyptic. Once again, Israelis feared another Holocaust. Segev's analysis (2007) of everyday sources such as letters and diaries, clearly shows the extent of those anxieties. Segev (ibid: 14-15) also quotes Haim Gvati, Minister for Agriculture who wrote in his diary "I am filled with fear […] Everyone understands this is a battle to the death. There are rumors that we are not prepared for war […] there is no faith that we can stand up to our enemies." Anxiety was not only expressed in private settings but also enacted. Some municipalities directed Rabbis to consecrate public parks in expectation of mass fatalities and a dire need for mass graves (ibid: 207).

Yet, after Israel's unexpected and decisive victory, this mood shifted. The public was overwhelmed, especially as Israel was suddenly in control of Judaism's most holy places, including the Western Wall in Jerusalem and the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. The very fact that the war lasted 6 days (and on the 7th the lord rested) further enhanced the war's religious if not messianic meaning that many on the political right gave it. This lent a religious-nationalist interpretation of Zionism considerable traction. Yet, the religious significance was felt across the political spectrum (Pedahzur, 2012: 36). It also led to

a resurgence of territorial maximalism in Israel (Sprinzak, 1991: 35) and the beginning of settlements, and the rule over an additional 1,3 million Palestinians.

Directly after the war, settlement activities started, mainly by activists of kibbutz movements, before official approval, as "the immediate incentive for renewing settlement activities […] was the lingering memory of the high status of the former pioneers." (Shafir and Peled, 2002: 160). The Labour movement first codified their ambition in the Allon Plan. While never officially adopted, successive Labor governments largely followed the plan. It primarily envisaged settlements for simultaneous agricultural and security reasons in the Golan Heights and the Jordan Valley, while the rest of the West Bank could potentially be traded for peace with Jordan, not the Palestinians (Pedahzur, 2012: 38-40). Settlement activity also followed earlier lines of thought, claiming that the West Bank was largely desolate as "the Arabs" were not the cultivators of land, but the creators of desert (Segev, 2007: 427).

Yet, the Allon plan was implemented hesitantly. By 1975, less than 2000 settlers lived in the West Bank (Saleh, 1990: 339). For the generation of Labour leaders born in Palestine, "the period of massive frontier expansion had, by and large, come to an end in 1948." (Shafir and Peled, 2002: 161). One of the most prolific thinkers of the left, A. B. Yehoshua (2001: 48, 50) remarks: "I believed, that the State was essentially finished with war [after 1948]", "We were the generation, the only generation, […] which possessed a clear consciousness of the physical boundaries of our country". This consciousness gave this generation, so Yehoshua claimed, a more secure identity, a sense of normalcy, that 1967 overturned.

4.4.2 The increasing religiosity of Israeli society

Settlements were also founded by religious activists. Traditionally, ultra-orthodox Jews were opposed to Zionism, and only a smaller movement of religious Zionism existed, centred around the ideas of Abraham "Rav" Kook. However, the victory in 1967 propelled religious Zionists around Kook's son, Zvi Yehuda Kook, to declare the State of Israel as an openly divine tool in the process of redemption. Thus, several scholars trace the roots of Israel's religious right to the immediate aftermath of the June 1967 war (Lustick, 1988; Sprinzak, 1991). Starting in 1974, the newly found right-wing religious movement, Gush Emunim established settlements deep in the West Bank, seeing itself as the harbinger of the redemption process. In their view, the entire land of Israel (Eretz Yisrael) is holy, indivisible and requires settling. Peace and a return of land would, thus, endanger redemption itself. The importance of the national-religious settler movement lies not only in its role in expanding colonial control in the West Bank or what they refer to as Judea and Samaria but in its ability to decisively influence policy. As

shown by various scholars, the settler movement garnered widespread influence in the Likud party and Israel's bureaucracy (Masalha, 2000: 110, Pedahzur, 2012).

The impetus of 1967 for the nationalist-religious understanding of Zionism is important. Nevertheless, religion had always been tacitly embedded in Zionist ideology. Zionism inevitably drew on religious symbolism, as Judaism "defines its target population and legitimises its claim to the Land of Israel." (Peled and Peled, 2019: 13). With the founding of Israel, Judaism became a "publicly affirmed, national-state religion" (ibid: 13). This was "based on a golden triangle of […] Jews, the Bible, and the Land of Israel" (Nitzan-Shiftan, 2017, 37), and created an overarching narrative that allowed various immigrant groups to identify with the state. A. B. Yehoshua would remark later, that this religious-nationalist symbolism completed the shallow identity of the "New Jew" (ibid: 38). Based on the influence of the ultra-orthodox parties, Israel adopted several religious aspects in official institutions and laws. For example, marriage in Israel is until today handled in accordance with religious law.

While partially rooted in demographic trends that increased the percentage of traditional and religious Jews in society, a specific Israeli fusion of nationalism and Judaism developed and became widely accepted. Today, a majority of Israelis reject Halakhic law, but follow Jewish religious traditions, even those Israeli Jews who self-identify as secular. (Pew, 2016; Rosner and Fuchs, 2019). In such conditions, offering a strictly secular Jewish, or a post-nationalist identity does not resonate with the electorate. While not inevitable, Zionism's secular identity was set up to fail. Instead, the existing right-wing parties, including Likud draw on religious values more overtly, aligning them more with today's voter preferences.

4.4.3 The Yom Kippur War, the crisis of the left, and the ascent of the right

If the 1967 war gave rise to Israel's religious right, the Yom Kippur War cemented this trend. The 1967 temporarily revived the Labour Party and briefly concealed its weakness.

On Yom Kippur on 6th October 1973, the Egyptian and Syrian military surprised an unprepared Israel. Initially, Egyptian and Syrian forces advanced successfully in the Sinai and Golan Heights. Israeli casualties soared. Once again Israeli society saw itself on the verge of destruction (Segev, 1991: 393-394). Three weeks later the war had ended. While Israel had regained the lost territory, Israelis still see the war as a major trauma that engendered "a deep crisis of leadership, values and identity. The nation filled with despair, self-doubt and existential fear." (Abulof, 2019: 18).

Part of this was that the 1973 war re-opened Israeli identity issues, that the euphoria of 1967 had temporarily silenced. Already the 1948 war had created guilt among some and led to the Israeli literature

genre of “shooting and crying” (Hochberg, 2019). For example, S. Yizhar in his novel Khirbet Khizeh tells the story of a young Israeli soldier ordered to expel Palestinians from their village, depicting “colonial violence, […] and […] the inner turmoil of the narrator” (ibid), who eventually goes against his conscience and joins the ethnic cleansing. Generally, the protagonist of Israeli literature at the time would often cry in “self-pity” “whenever he had to shoot” “for of course he hated war more than anything else.” (Segev, 1998: 290).

Such feelings resurfaced once again after 1967. For some on the left, such as authors like Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua. The beginning of the occupation, as they saw it, evoked a “deep moral and existential crisis” that “the reality of war, growing military violence, occupation, invasion” (Hochberg, 2019) brought about. According to Eliezer Schweid (2001: 40), Oz and others saw themselves not as the perpetrators of Israel’s “original sin” (Karsh, 2023) but as “the ones who inherited and perpetuated it.” They could “justify their Zionist identity [only] with difficulty, as an unavoidable necessity brought about by the catastrophe that befell their people.” (Schweid, 2001: 40).

Behind their literature, and the “non-apologetic apology” (Hochberg, 2019), I would argue, stood an anxiousness that the abnormality Israel was engaged in was inescapable, both materially but also in terms of contested legitimacy. What subliminally resonates here are anxieties that later would result in an embrace of post-Zionism for some on the Israeli left. For others, such as the Israeli right, however, the felt abnormality resulted in an embrace of the siege mentality, but also a closer connection to religious symbols that could lend legitimacy to Zionism (Abulof, 2019: 18).

This crisis was, however, an opportunity for the political right. In 1977, the Likud party led by Menachem Begin won the election, breaking the long-standing Labour hegemony. Likud’s victory was a result of the economic situation, the deep crisis of the Israeli left, but equally the result of two major challenges to Ashkenazi dominance: the increased weight of religious symbolism in the wake of 1967, and second, the increased demands by Mizrahi Jews to take their concerns and traditions seriously. Before 1973, the majority of Mizrahim had voted for Labour, but then, the Likud garnered most Mizrahi votes (Shafir and Peled, 2002: 89). Likud effectively channelled Israeli and especially Mizrahi anxieties and powerlessness, by communicating their grievances and amplifying them, as well as the newfound desire for nationalist-religious symbolism and expansionism (Pappé, 2022: 199).

4.5 The peace process: the First Intifada and neo-Liberalism: 1990 – 2000

In 1977, Egypt and Israel signed the Camp David Accords, signalling that the principle “Land for Peace” was applicable in practice. Yet, for Israel to embrace negotiations with the PLO, two factors needed to

converge in the early 1990s: the First Intifada, and the rise of the neo-liberal peace agenda. However, before a general change in the perception of the benefits of peace among Israelis was necessary.

Throughout much of its history, "the dominant stream of the Israeli left did not believe in making peace." (Goodman, 2018: 37). Until the mid-1970s, the labour movement never made a peace agreement a priority. The well-nourished siege mentality publicly left little space for peace negotiations that might have meant finally settling Israeli borders. Yet, Israel had been building since the 60s clandestine relations with at least some Arab states (Jones and Guzansky, 2020). Yet, publicly, peace continued to be understood and as a naive hope. The iconic song, "Flowers in the Barrel" expressed the yearning for peace but as Oren concludes, the song as well as many others, described peace as a "utopic and unlikely scenario" (Oren, 2019: 169).

However, due to the 1973 war, many Israelis realised that military might alone might not guarantee peace. The peace treaty of 1979 between Egypt indicated tangible peace was an option. The overtures of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat were euphorically greeted by Israel's left and gave birth to Israel's first mainstream peace movement: Peace Now (Shalom Achshav). After the Camp David Accords, the movement turned towards the issue of the occupation, advocating for a peace deal with the Palestinians (Hermann, 2002). Despite Likud signing the peace deal with Egypt, it gave birth to the Left's dream of peace. Still, all Israeli governments maintained that as long the PLO engaged in terror and did not recognise Israel it could not be negotiated with. Yet, the First Intifada was the first element to facilitate a change (Sela, 2021: 454).

4.5.1 The First Intifada

Between 1967 and 1987 Israel cemented its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, relying on a mix of harsh suppression, tying the Palestinian territories into Israel's economy, as well as attempts to grant limited autonomy by coopting local Palestinian leaders as a counterweight against the PLO. Yet, in December 1987, the First Intifada broke out following a traffic accident in the Gaza Strip.

Even though the Intifada largely adopted modes of civil disobedience as well as low-level violence, Israeli forces reacted brutally. Minister of Interior, Yitzhak Rabin instructed soldiers to break their arms and legs, a statement that "became engraved in the public conscience" (Ben-Eliezer, 2019: 174). At the end of the Intifada, more than a thousand Palestinians had been killed, while Israel suffered less than 30 fatalities.

The impact of the Intifada was twofold. First, the Intifada shattered Israeli insistence that the Palestinians could be ignored. Until the 1970s, Israelis maintained that the Palestinians were not a real nation, as

captured by former Prime Minster Golda Meir's quote "there was no such thing as Palestinians". Paradoxically, and despite Israeli insistence, Israeli governments sought to curb Palestinian nationalism and support for the PLO in the West Bank via the creation of the village leagues. Starting in 1978, the village leagues were local governing bodies run by Palestinian figures willing to collaborate with the Israeli military authorities. While not successful, the concept of limited self-government without statehood foreshadowed the creation of the PA by the Oslo Accords in 1993 (Gazit, 2003: 207-208).

The Intifada, however, brought the Palestinian demand for national self-determination into mainstream Israeli consciousness. Yaacov Lozowick, former Archival Director at Yad Vashem, writes (2003: 173) "for the first time in decades, their [the Palestinians] tactics could not be brushed aside as criminal actions".

Furthermore, the Intifada revealed the intrinsic violence of the occupation. Young Israeli soldiers returned home deeply troubled. They signed up to fight a dangerous enemy, but had become a police force (Goodman, 2018: 32). During the most violent period of the Intifada, some nine hundred reserve officers, sent a letter to Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir arguing that peace was more important than the West Bank (Ben-Eliezer, 2019: 175). "Thus, as time went on, Israeli citizens became increasingly aware of how problematic it was to impose military rule on a civilian population." (Goodman, 2018: 32). To large parts of the Israeli public, the occupation became costly, both in economic and moral terms. The corrupting effects of the occupation on Israel started being discussed outside left-wing intellectual circles. Yet, other voices vocally cautioned against any withdrawal. Settler organisations together with the right-wing Likud party emphasised the dangers of losing the "strategic depth" of the West Bank, arguing it would mean not only an end to the right-wing dream of Eretz Israel but more importantly, would spell doom for an indefensible small Israel. Yet, for a while, those voices were muted by many Israelis critical of the occupation.

4.5.2 Neoliberalism and the Oslo Accords

The external influences of Globalisation and Liberalisation pushed Israel towards Oslo as well. Shafir and Peled (2002: 21) aptly summarise: "The peace process, which began with the Egyptian–Israeli peace signed in 1979 and reached a turning point with the Oslo Accords of 1993, is part and parcel of the broader processes of globalization and liberalization." Those broader processes accelerated at the end of the cold war which many in the West belief signalled the "end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992), the global triumph of liberalism, prosperity and peace.

Israel's trend towards economic liberalisation started under the first Likud government in 1977 (Krampf, 2018: 193-196). However, liberalisation fully took off in 1985. In the wake of economic stagnation and

hyperinflation, a unity government of both Labour and Likud adopted the Economic Stabilisation Plan that tackled government spending and corporatist arrangements (Maron and Shalev, 2017: 16). It was the starting point for wide-ranging liberalisation measures, including vast privatisation of enterprises, liberalisation of the capital markets, and systematic weakening of the welfare state.

The liberalisation resulted from and was meant to strengthen the economic integration into the global markets. The left increasingly saw Israel's conflict as an obstacle in this process, and thus, saw sustained growth tied to advancing peace (Ram, 2018a). Shimon Peres, one of the key architects of the Oslo Accords heavily promoted this idea. In his book, The New Middle East (1993), a "blueprint for the future of the region based on economic rationality, peace, democracy, cooperation, mutual gain and general prosperity" (Ben-Porat, 2005: 39), Peres writes:

> If war is the source of regional distress, the one and only solution is peace […], the thousands who now live under poor conditions—will gain. […] [C]cooperation between countries […] will also characterize the […] transition from confrontation to peace. […] relationships on voluntary agreements between equal partners is a prerequisite for this. […] Israel can form a real partnership with the Palestinians (1993: 92-93, 98).

This vision of a neoliberal globalised peace was supported by the peace movement, the Ashkenazi elites, as well as the private sector (Ben-Porat, 2005; Ram, 2018a; Shafir and Peled, 2018).

Economic neoliberalism went in hand with increased civic liberalism, as well as post-Zionism. However, neoliberalism had unintended consequences. The neoliberal transformation generated economic growth but also inequality, and economic insecurity, especially for the underprivileged Mizrahim (Gutwein, 2017: 21). Building on the already existing resentment of the Ashkenazi elite, the right effectively offered an Israeli brand of right-wing populism, combining ethno-nationalism with neoliberal economic policies (Krampf, 2018). Furthermore, as Danny Gutwein (2016; 2017) convincingly argues, the rise of neoliberalism ties together with settlement expansion. As the lower economic strata of Israeli society voted for right-wing parties, settlement expansion not only satisfied ideological demands but also constituted a way to offer economic benefits, such as cheap housing.

4.5.3 The Oslo Accords and liberalism

On 13 September 1993, after a series of secret negotiations, Israel and the PLO signed the first part of the part of the Oslo Accords, followed by Oslo II in 1995.

The Oslo Accords were supposed to finally achieve Israeli normalcy in internationally accepted borders. They were "designed not only to change the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians but to change the course of Jewish history […], to end their [the Jews] exile from the rest of humanity […]" (Goodman, 2018: 46). This was indeed a palpable feeling among the promoters of the peace process.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, under whose supervision the Oslo Accords were negotiated, directly challenged the siege mentality. For example, he stated “the train that travels towards peace has stopped this year at many stations that daily refute the time-worn canard ‘the whole world is against us’” (Caplan, 2020: 26). This was paired with an urgent belief that the occupation was corrupting Israel’s ‘soul’. In a different speech, Rabin remarked:

> We will have to choose, on the one hand, between the road of zealousness, the tendency towards dreams of grandeur, the corruption of ethical and Jewish values as a result of ruling over another people […] and, on the other hand, the road of maintaining a Jewish, democratic, liberal way of life […]. (cited in Oren, 2019: 173)

The recognition of the PLO and Palestinian rights to at least some part of the land came as a surprise, but most Israelis hesitantly supported the peace process and the left-wing urge for normalcy. Yet, the main opposition party, the right-wing Likud, together with the religious parties, as well as the settler groups, outlined from the beginning the alleged dangers of peace, and mobilised against the Oslo Accords. The right accused left-wing voters, as well as Rabin of being anti-Jewish. For example, Ariel Sharon, (cited in Ben-Eliezer, 2019: 182) warned “The majority who voted for Mr. Rabin […] range from conditional loyalty to hostility regarding the Jewish state and the denial of its right to exist”. Rabin’s reliance on the Arab parties to support the passing of the Accords through the Knesset gave the right further ammunition. Rabin headed only a minority coalition that relied on support from the Arab parties. This was the first time, any government had relied on support from the Arab parties, "something hitherto considered unthinkable in the ethnocentric discourse of Israeli political culture” (Kimmerling, 2005: 53).

The limited move towards at least a reconfiguration of the occupation during the Oslo Accords ignited the atmosphere in the country, especially as the security situation worsened. Between 1993 and 1995, a series of suicide bombings conducted by Palestinian groups that opposed the Accords, including Hamas, shook the country. Yet, the right utilised the insecurity and blamed it on the Accords and Rabin personally, culminating in a large demonstration in Jerusalem, where participants chanted "Death to Rabin", while "the leaders of militaristic-religious society” did not interfere (Ben-Eliezer, 2019: 187).

On 4 November 1995, Rabin was assassinated by a young national-religious Israeli Jew, Yigal Amir. Whatever Rabin’s intentions, he challenged the deeply anchored Israeli religious ethno-nationalism and siege mentality, constituting not only a fight over Israel’s borders but also identity. This process could have potentially led Israel to further normalisation, transcending the Zionist consensus. However, a flare up in violence including some suicide attacks carried out by Hamas, the razor-thin majority of the peace camp evaporated. In 1996, Likud under Benjamin Netanyahu won the 1996 elections (Peretz, and Doron,

1996). While negotiations, despite Likud's reluctance, somewhat continued, the peace process slowly broke down, culminating in the Second Intifada.

4.6 Modern right-wing anxieties: The Second Intifada and post-Zionism: 2000 – 2023

When Ariel Sharon, leader of Likud at the time, provocatively visited the temple mount in 2000, the Second Intifada started, eclipsing the defunct remnants of the peace process, shifting Israel's public and parties to the right, and ending Israel's period of liberalism and post-Zionism.

4.6.1 The Second Intifada

The Second Intifada shocked the Israeli public to the core. More than 700 Israeli civilians were killed (B'Tselem, 2010; Jewish Virtual Library, n.d.). Many remember this period as traumatic, filled with daily insecurity and anxiety, especially due to the regular suicide bombings. Between 2000 and 2005, various Palestinian factions conducted a total of 181 suicide bombings across the country. For example, in 2001, Hamas targeted a popular nightclub in Tel Aviv, the Dolphinarium. One surviving victim recounts the evening:

> I was just 18 years old […]. My friends and I had gone out [...] when suddenly all we saw was smoke, screaming and chaos. A terrorist blew himself up, murdering 21 Israelis […], 16 of them teenagers just like me. […] As I laid there in excruciating pain from a leg wound, I watched my friend take his last breaths (One Family, 2024).

According to Juliana Ochs (2013: 9), during the Intifada, "People spoke about living in constant fear […]. Israelis were deeply afraid for their own lives and for the existence of the State of Israel." Suicide bombings became widely seen as the epitome of Palestinian terror, as an irrational strategy solely based on hatred. So, wrote Lozowick (2003: 248):

> this was not a radical new form of negotiation, or the despairing cry of a downtrodden people, grasping under its yoke. This was something entirely new: A whole society insanely in love with death. There is no political goal to be served by such insanity […].

This prevalent view captures how Israelis understood the Intifada as pure evil, as unrelated to the history of the conflict or Israeli actions, often also connecting it to the Holocaust. Ochs (2013: 69) reports that in 2005 close to Passover, the Israeli NGO "One Family" ran a commercial on the *Haaretz* website, drawing on the words of the Passover prayer, "In every generation […]. They rise against us. To annihilate us". While displaying the text the ad juxtaposed images of Auschwitz and the "shell of a Jerusalem bus destroyed in a suicide bombing". The ad, thus, drew a straight line between Jewish persecution under the Nazis to the Palestinians. Fear becomes the "connective tissue" (ibid: 69) of Israel's collective memory, violence constructed as inherently antisemitic.

The intense feelings of insecurity that arose during that period were certainly rooted in the violence of the Intifada itself. As noted, however, part of the Israeli fear narrative had been constructed from the beginning to paint itself as solely defensive, eradicating its initial violence. Anxieties, genuine or not, are used to emotionally reinforce this narrative, while constantly deriving from the narrative (ibid: 65; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015: 7)

Politically, the Intifada drastically altered the political landscape in Israel. From the Israeli perspective, the Intifada broke out shortly after Ehud Barack offered the PLO far-ranging concessions. Most Israelis concluded that the Intifada "did not break out *because* of the occupation; it broke out after Israel offered to *end* the occupation." (Goodman, 2018: 47, emphasis in the original). This narrative broke the Israeli left. Tom Segev describes the dominant feeling that led many on the left to turn disillusioned towards the right: "You sit with your leftist friends in a café, talking about peace and human rights, discussing a withdrawal from the occupied territories. If you're lucky, the bomb explodes after you've left. You think you're an idiot, and you don't vote for any of the parties that talk about peace" (Segev, 2003: 162). With this, the left-wing liberal discourse of Rabin and Peres all but vanished from much of Israeli society. Since the start of the Second Intifada, no centre-leftwing party has ever been able to form a coalition government.

4.6.2 The shifting political landscape

In retrospect, the Second Intifada accelerated Israel's trend towards a stable right-wing majority. Today, 60% of Israelis identify as right-wing (Lintl, 2023: 2; Rosner, and Fuchs, 2019: 223).

The Intifada and Sharon's premiership established a new vocabulary in Israeli politics: separation. Already in the face of the Oslo Accords, Likud used less overtly religious-nationalist rhetoric but drew heavily on the principle of "security". Sharon continued this trend by advancing the idea of separating Israelis from Palestinians as comprehensively as possible. In 2005, Sharon enacted this unilateral disengagement Plan from Gaza, uprooting 21 Gaza settlements, as well as four in the West Bank, under furious protest of the settler movement, and the right wing of the Likud. Additionally, Sharon approved building the separation wall systematically cutting the West Bank off from Israel and East Jerusalem but also incorporating the main settlement blocks effectively into Israeli territory (Goodman, 2018: 61). This new strategy effectively envisages not a solution to the conflict but its containment. Because the purpose was not annexation but separation, the strategy was still broadly anchored in a two-state solution model, even though, between 2002 and 2005 Sharon's government policies systematically weakened Palestinian institutions, to the extent that political scientist Baruch Kimmerling deemed this political genocide, or "politicide" (Kimmerling, 2006). Sharon's unilateral separation and disengagement policies

led to furious resistance from the right wing of the Likud. Hardline Likud members as well as the settler movement deplored not only the loss of Gaza settlements but more importantly were anxious that the separation would lead to relinquishing Israeli control over the West Bank called Israel's biblical heartland or Judea and Samaria. In 2005, to implement his agenda, Sharon and others left Likud and formed Kadima, as a centre-right party. The separation policies were not part of a renewed Israeli effort to seek peace. Rather, separation aimed at softening a dilemma Israelis increasingly recognised. Kimmerling (2006: 18) explains this dilemma succinctly:

> Two deeply rooted existential anxieties exist within the Jewish Israeli political culture: one concerns the physical annihilation of the state, […] and the other the loss of the fragile Jewish demographic majority, on which the supremacy of and identity of the state rest.

Thus, although Sharon's Kadima accepted the right-wing premise that peace with the Palestinians was not feasible – at least any time soon – Israel could reduce the threat of losing Jewish supremacy due to demography. Separation did so by reducing Israel's control over more than a million Palestinians in Gaza, while also aiming to reduce security issues that constantly arose with an Israeli presence inside Gaza (Freilich, 2021: 421-422; Geist-Pinfold, 2023: 100-101).

One major impact of Sharon's politicide combined with the disengagement was the weakening of the Fatah-led PA and the empowerment of Hamas. After winning the Palestinian elections in 2006, Hamas clashed with Fatah and took over the Gaza Strip in 2007, becoming the strip's de facto government. Hamas' takeover of Gaza created a new hostile area directly at Israel's borders, allowing Hamas to launch rockets into Israeli territory, escalating into "major operations" in 2008, 2012 and 2014 (Tal, 2021: 118). The same process unfolded when Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, and tension with Hezbollah that started entrenching itself further after the withdrawal led to a full-blown war in 2006.

Led by government rhetoric, the disengagement and the rise of Hamas and Hezbollah seemingly confirmed the conclusion that territorial concessions are risky or even suicidal. As Journalist Meirav Arlosoroff (2024) summarises:

> Hostile actors transformed areas vacated by the military in Gaza and Lebanon into strategic threats against Israel [...]. The view that any withdrawal would lead to the establishment of a 'State of Hamastan' has shifted from a right-wing position to one entrenched even in the Israeli center.

In many ways, this affirmed the right-wing worldview that the conflict cannot be solved and that normalcy with Israeli neighbours but especially with the Palestinians cannot be achieved, thus, once again cementing the anxiousness of the siege mentality, the view that Israel will "forever live by the sword" as Benjamin Netanyahu opined (cited in Ravid, 2015).

Whereas Sharon's legacy endured, Kadima did not. In 2008 Sharon fell into a coma. His successors Ehud Olmert and later Tzipi Livni led Kadima to electoral victories in 2006, and 2009 respectively. Yet, it was Likud once more led by Netanyahu that formed the government in 2009, a dominance Likud and its right-wing allies still hold today over Israeli politics.

Despite several rounds of fighting in Gaza, during the Netanyahu years, the issue of the Palestinians moved to the background. On the one hand, the fighting in Gaza underlined the right-wing narrative of no partner for peace, on the other hand, it remained too marginal to impact Israeli society much and became a routine, a form of regular insecurity that Israelis learned to live with. Netanyahu even managed to circumvent the Palestinians by engaging in normalisation talks with Arab regimes and signing the Abraham Accords in 2020 with the UAE and Bahrain. As a result, the conflict faded from being publicly discussed. As Israeli pollster Tamar Herman observes, among the items voters care about, the conflict ranks low. This is partially the result of the left-wing parties having moved significantly to the right on security issues, essentially becoming centrist parties. In the 2022 elections, no party, aside from the Arab parties ran on a visible, committed peace platform or proposed "any blueprint of a future peace negotiation." (Herman, 2022).

Thus, what divides the Israeli public today is a set of ideological and identity debates about the nature of the state. These, however, became increasingly urgent, creating a lot of anxiousness regarding Israel's political identity. While right-wing security anxieties became mainstream and so did the right, ideologically, right-wing governments attempted to undo nascent Israeli liberalism and framed themselves increasingly as fending off dangerous progressive trends. This has included promoting various pieces of legislation that promote Jewish supremacy and populist versions of (illiberal) democracy, branding leftwing groups as traitors and attempting to undermine the current legal system. As this is a major theme in right-wing conspiracy narratives, I will now discuss the perceived challenge of post-Zionism.

4.6.3 The post-Zionist challenge

For more than two decades, the Israeli right, mostly in the person of Benjamin Netanyahu, has dominated the country continuously and was able to significantly shape Israel's internal debates, without much opposition. Yet, the right sees itself threatened by an ideological challenge. "Armies may menace" Israel "physically, but it is on the level of ideas that the gravest threats are registered.", as Yoram Hazony (1996: 85), a right-wing public intellectual phrased it, referring to post-Zionism.

The occupation since 1967 triggered internal criticism against the policies of the state. This further increased with the brutal Lebanon war in 1982, and the First Intifada. Combined with the global liberal

trend as outlined above, the late 1980s and the 1990s saw a shift inside Israel's left towards more universalist stances. This includes, on the one hand, a moderate shift towards embracing liberal-universal values, as embodied by the Oslo Accords, and the "judicial revolution". On the other hand, a radical vision of discarding Zionism altogether received attention. Both trends are often described by the right as Post-Zionism (Hazony, 2000: XXVII). Behind this shift was, as Efraim Karsh (2023) opines, partially the desire for normalcy: "Fatigued by decades of struggle, yearning for normalcy, […] many educated Israelis found themselves receptive to the notion that a large portion of the fault for the conflict lay with their own country's actions […]."

Domestically, the Knesset adopted two basic laws with quasi-constitutional status that codified civil rights for all citizens. Simultaneously, with what Supreme Court Justice Aharon Barak called the "constitutional revolution", the High Court took up the prerogative to examine government decisions and laws based on their compliance with the state's Basic Laws, the nearest thing Israel has to a written constitution. The Court also challenged repeatedly the role of Judaism in public life and toned down ethno-nationalist impulses. It further strengthened liberal values by granting near-universal standing in front of the Court, including to Palestinians in the OPT (Scheindlin, 2021). This made the Court a powerful player, and "the main, and almost last guardian of veteran Ashkenazi, secular, liberal, semi-universalistic Western bourgeois values" (Kimmerling, 2005: 77). Over the last decades, the right has been increasingly criticising the court, labelling it "liberal tyranny" and voicing anxieties over forced secularisation and Jewish identity loss (ibid: 77). Yet, Israeli liberalism stayed within the boundaries of the Zionist consensus. The Court, for example, upheld relatively consistent colonial practices (Thrall, 2021). Potentially, however, blooming Israeli liberalism could have been an important step towards post-Zionism, as a fuller vision of a liberal, open country for all.

The more radical challenge to right-wing, if not Israeli identity in general, came from post-Zionists. At its heart, post-Zionism envisions the creation of one state for all its citizens, requiring, according to post-Zionist thinkers, the rejection of Zionism and the Jewishness of Israel (Gutwein, 2001: 10). Post-Zionism started in the late 1980s as an intellectual movement based on Palestinian and Mizrahi voices that challenged Zionism's hegemony (Pappé, 2014b). Spearheaded by the new historians, post-Zionism argued that Zionism had systematically victimised the Palestinians but also Mizrahim (Segev, 2007). Overall, post-Zionism attacks the "foundational myths of Israel" (Sternhell, 1998), challenges the status quo, and prescribes a different model of Jewish society in Palestine.

Post-Zionism became a phenomenon in films, books and other cultural works. Yet, even in the liberal 1990s, post-Zionism remained marginal and elitist. Still, as Ilan Pappé (2014b: 212) points out, post-

Zionism left a public impression as “it was also wrongly assumed that [...] “post-Zionism won over large segments of the Israeli public”. But post-Zionism gained traction internationally, be it the 2001 Durban Anti-Racism conference that equated Zionism with apartheid, the Boycott-Disinvest-Sanction (BDS) movement founded in 2005, modelled on the sanctions against Apartheid South Africa, or the reports by Amnesty International (2022) and Human Rights Watch (2021) that see Israel as engaging in apartheid. Especially, Israel’s right saw a threat in post-Zionism and reacted with considerable attention and resources. In 2006, Israel founded the Ministry of Strategic Affairs which was primarily occupied with fighting Israel's "delegitimization" (Aked, 2023; Blau, 2017). This reaction can only be explained by reference to the ontological insecurity laid out above.

Post-Zionism activates deep identity fears of the right. To begin with, post-Zionist findings damage the positive image right-wing Zionists have of the community they identify with, and thus, is experienced as a direct attack on their identity. Furthermore, the emphasis on moving beyond a Jewish-dominated state evokes deep anxiety, as most right-wing Israelis believe that a non-Jewish environment is inherently threatening. This explains why calls for a one-state solution, or the return of Palestinian refugees are equated with genocide. Even left-wing Zionists such as Adi Schwartz and Einat Wilf (2020) liken the Palestinian right of return to a war against Israel. To repeat, however, framing Palestinians as threatening has been a cornerstone of Zionism from the beginning. Franz Fanon already observed this feature of settler-colonialism. Laurence and Karim (2007: 24) write: “The fear of the other is embodied in Fanon’s settler as fear of the colonized natives who want to appropriate the settler’s place: […] ‘the settler knows very well; […] They want to take our place.’”

Palestinian violence understandably deeply scarred Israeli society. However, right-wing voiced claimed from the beginning that Palestinian violence was antisemitic, evil, or in other words illegitimate. Acknowledging the legitimacy of that violence would entail acknowledging the settler-colonial practices Zionism adopted and thus undermining the claim to Palestine. Palestinian identity constitutes the same challenge for the Israeli right, as the right closely identifies with Zionism as a liberation project for the Jewish people. For this reason, right-wing Israelis often feel threatened by cultural Palestinian expressions: "a literature festival becomes an act of violence. To say the word “intifada” is genocidal. To wear a keffiyeh is to threaten the foundations of civilization. This is the fragility of the coloniser" (Kundnani, 2023). Or in short, Zionist fragility that is notably prevalent on Israel’s right.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I described two developments. I highlighted how the three sources of right-wing anxieties—conflict, socio-economic marginalisation, and identity issues—developed, sometimes

closely connected to and at other times disconnected from mainstream Zionist discourse. I also presented how Israel's right wing emerged from a marginalised position to political hegemony. While a complex development, I reduced this to the factors of religion, conflict, and the struggle between the first and the second Israel. There is significant overlap between these two developments, and I will integrate them in a final summary.

First, the persistent engagement in conflict, often framed and experienced as existential, has produced profound feelings of insecurity in Israeli society. Together with the Israeli interpretation of the Holocaust, a distinct siege mentality emerged. Israeli right-wing voters, in particular, harbour strong beliefs about the hostility of Arab nations and Palestinians, but also doubt the motives of the international community. At the same time, the experience of conflict drove Israeli society more and more to the right. This became especially pronounced as the left embraced a vision of peace and normality with the Oslo Accords.

Second, socio-economic marginalisation has led, especially among right-wing voters, to anxiety and feelings of powerlessness. Marginalised by Israel's Ashkenazi left-wing elite and experiencing racism and socio-economic inequality, voters from poor backgrounds, often Mizrahim, turned towards the right-wing Likud to channel their grievances. Additionally, liberal, left-wing reforms in the 1990s championed by the Ashkenazi elite posed another source of anxiety for right-wing Israelis, threatening traditional and religious values. Consequently, socio-economic marginalisation and the perceived encroachment of liberalism on right-wing identities were exploited by right-wing parties, enabling them to challenge Labour dominance while promoting a brand of Israeli religious ethno-nationalism that became dominant.

Third, various moments in Israeli history have produced identity-related anxiety. I narrated this story based on the desire for normalcy, to be an accepted nation among others versus the impulse to embrace the perceived abnormality of being persecuted outcasts. While Zionism was designed to create this normalcy, its legitimacy was and continues to be questioned. Attempting to create this legitimacy, Zionist pioneers strove to build a close connection with the land while denying the Palestinian identity and claim to the land. However, the violent takeover of land buried in Zionism the seeds for an abnormal situation, of being (violently) opposed, and created the origins of modern right-wing anxieties around not being legitimised and feeling challenged by Palestinian identity as natives. Thus, right-wing Israeli leaders made various attempts to reaffirm their identity, such as with religious claims or via demands that Palestinians recognise Israel as a Jewish state. At the same time, to avoid acknowledging the initial

violence of taking over the land, and thus acknowledging the non-native status of Zionism, Palestinian violence was framed as criminal or antisemitic, and essentially apolitical.

Throughout Israel's existence, especially since 1967, some liberal and left-wing voices have tried to create the desired normalcy, while others rebuked these efforts as delusional and dangerous. Hidden behind policy discussions, such as whether to leave the West Bank or not, was a struggle over Israeli identity. When the Oslo Accords, the most prominent attempt to achieve normalcy, ended in the violence of the Second Intifada, much of Israeli society moved to the right, overtly settling the debate over Israeli identity. Yet, challenges to Israeli legitimacy continue and are perpetuated by Palestinians, as well as by left-wing and international post-Zionist voices.

Overall, the chapter shows how anxieties are deeply anchored in Israel. From the right-wing perspective, ideological threats have today mostly replaced conventional ones. However, these ideological challenges from inside and outside Israel are not understood as simple identity challenges but as security threats. This is based on the right's interpretation of the history of the conflict and the Holocaust, believing that only Israel, or rather a Jewish-dominated Israel, constitutes a safe haven for the Jewish people. Thus, without Israel, the Jewish people would be in danger. These vague feelings, often lying beneath the surface of right-wing discourse, form the ground for the conspiracy narratives that I will present in the next chapter — conspiracy narratives that draw on these vague feelings to produce specific fears of imminent plots by dangerous and evil enemies.

Chapter 5: Israeli Right-Wing Conspiracy Narratives

This chapter presents the conspiracy narratives that exist in the discourse of the Israeli right. All conspiracy narratives I will present carry the three structural elements of conspiracy narratives, describing a conspiracy by referring to the a) the secret plans or actions, b) hedged by a powerful group of conspirators, c) based on malicious intents. The chapter highlights the main themes of conspiracy narratives, what feelings they draw on, and what threats they emotionally construct.

The chapter will show that right-wing conspiracy narratives express broadly two themes: fears of Palestinian plots on the one hand, and liberal and leftist Israeli and European efforts on the other hand. In the conspiratorial discourse of Israel's right these two threats that narratives emotionally construct become often linked, fusing at times into a seemingly larger conspiracy, a dark world where a coalition of broad actors is working to destroy Israel.

The chapter will also show how the conspiracy narratives presented are grounded in the three main sources of anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness prevalent on Israel's right, as described in Chapter 4. While anxieties around the Holocaust and Jewish persecution are often hiding behind conspiracy narratives, we will see that conflict-related insecurity plays a smaller role than the perceived ideological challenges to Israel and the right-wing identity, emphasising the importance of what I called right-wing Zionist fragility.

All these often ambiguous and vague feelings need to be explained, defended against, and taken control of, thus requiring the process of emotional sense-making I described in Chapter 2. This requires a palpable source that produces these feelings, a source that can be identified as being the threat. The chapter will show in detail how those anxieties are drawn upon by conspiracy narratives that channel these feelings into specific fears of Palestinian and left-wing plots. In other words, conspiracy narratives present a tangible cause, a group of conspirators that can be blamed for those various anxiety-inducing challenges and changes, and thus promise to alleviate such feelings. For example, the perceived threat of secularism is not a social development but rather intentionally engineered by Israel's deep state.

As theorised in Chapter 2, the conspiracy narratives construct the image of a fearsome group of conspirators that through discourse, like the discourse presented here, can become institutionalised, cementing an emotional belief about the dangerous nature of the securitised object. While I will not yet discuss the political function of such a process, the chapter will show that such an image is constructed. To this end, the chapter will trace what language is used, and how and what threats are evoked. This will show that overall right-wing conspiracy narratives do not alleviate anxieties but shape them into

powerful fears of a world of hidden motives and agendas, and of enemies trying to destroy Israel with devious methods. Importantly, conspiracy narratives evoke an imminent apocalyptic rupture, imagining Israel to be the safe haven for the Jewish people, but also as fragile, its downfall only a moment away, if not acted quickly. This further underlines the right-wing perception of Israel as isolated and outnumbered.

Before getting into the content, I should make three more comments. The chapter is not a complete list of Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives; I am restricting the analysis to those narratives that are most prevalent. Second, while right-wing conspiracy narratives exert a strong gravitational pull for many on the right, it is important to remember that Israel's right is diverse in its positions and beliefs, and not all individuals and groups that are located on the Israeli right will identify with all (or any) conspiracy narratives presented. Lastly, when talking to my participants, it became clear that they try to work for something they perceive as just in the normative sense. They believe they are fighting for a just cause, that Israel is truly being threatened, and that Jewish lives are at stake.

The chapter will be structured as follows: First (5.1), I will outline the meta-narrative of the threat of postmodernism that Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives are embedded in. Second (5.2.) I will detail the first theme of right-wing conspiracy narratives, which revolves around alleged Palestinian machinations. I will describe three sub-themes (5.2.1 - 5.2.3). Third (5.3), I will address the second theme of conspiracy narratives that revolves around the plots of the Israeli liberal and left-wing forces, as well as the influence of Europe. I will identify three sub-themes as well (5.3.1 - 5.3.3).

5.1 The Meta Narrative: The threat of Postmodernism

Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives are embedded in a larger theme capturing the deep right-wing anxieties around a challenge to Israel's identity and the legitimacy of the Zionist project. Right-wing groups still worry over military threats but claim that those threats are flanked, if not dwarfed by a coordinated campaign of untruthful, and dangerous narratives that undermine Israel morally, Israeli faith in Zionism and Israel's Jewish character. We can recall here Yoram Hazony's quote (1996: 85) from Chapter 4 that "Armies may menace" Israel "physically, but it is on the level of ideas that the gravest threats are registered." Writing in 1996, Hazony referred to Israeli Post-Zionism. Hazony has broadened this assessment since to emphatically warn that Israel, Zionism and right-wing conservative values are fundamentally threatened by the ideology of postmodernism, due to which Israel is seen as fighting an ideological war not only against the Palestinians but more importantly against global leftwing forces (Hazony, 2023). This view on postmodernism is the meta-narrative in which Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives are embedded.

On the Israeli right, we find a deformed understanding of the intellectual movement of postmodernism, appearing under various but interchangeable labels: postmodernism, neo-Marxism, and wokeism. Postmodernism is seen as entailing an extreme form of moral and epistemological relativism that would imply the absence of good, evil, and truth, as Ronen Shoval (2021) Dean of the neo-conservative Tikvah Fund claims. As one participant explained further:

> Postmodernism says that everyone is eligible to have his own narrative […]. This is […] one of the cornerstones of postmodernism. I hate this word [narrative]. In my view, there is truth and lie, […] the word narrative today is meant to give the seal of approval to lies and to reduce the truth to the level of narrative. […]. So now, the lie and the truth are the same (Interview 8).

For the right, the relativism of postmodernism came to dangerously impact the study of the Middle East, and the Israeli-Palestinian context specifically. Conservative Middle East scholar Martin Kramer laid out much of this criticism (2001; 2016). For Kramer, "postmodernism, which postulated the subjectivity and relativity of all knowledge" (2001: 31) was utilised by Edward Said in his work on Orientalism, which subsequently led to the capture of American Middle East scholarship by post-colonialist thinkers. While Kramer does not indulge in conspiracy narratives, what he does share with Israeli right-wing narratives is the very critical perspective on postmodernism. For Kramer (2022: 5-6) the result of young (American) scholars following those paradigms and rising through the ranks of academia is that: "The people who determine the pace of Middle Eastern studies today tend to be radical leftists. […] They seek to delegitimize it [Israel] completely [...] and they champion the 'one-state solution' in a form that would end Israel."

On the Israeli right, Kramer's debatable conclusions have been re-packaged through a conspiratorial lens, and seen as a deliberate act by the Palestinians to take over the public debate:

> Eventually, the Palestinians have borrowed their [Foucault's and Sartre's] themes and used them for their agenda. Edward Said for example […]. This is where the paradigm shifted and the critical neo-Marxist theory started accusing Israel of taking over the land and punishing the Palestinians, where it's actually the other way around […], but facts don't matter […]. Scholarship is essential, it's part of the war against Israel. Palestinians […] understood that […] and they invested money through lots of Arab states […] in the West by building all kinds of Middle Eastern centers […]. Once they invested that money, they shifted the paradigm into anti-Israel propaganda. […] (Interview 16).

Postmodernism, borrowed by the Palestinians, came to redefine how the West looks at Israel and the Palestinians, with the Palestinian cause high on the Western agenda, often called "Palestinianism". On the Israeli right, Palestinianism refers to an ideology of dogmatically supporting Palestinians and the Palestinian narrative. Right-wing Israeli writer Victor Rosenthal (2022) describes Palestinianism as a closed ideology that

> includes a historical narrative, a cause to which its believers aspire and an idiosyncratic language in which familiar words have special meanings. In this, it is similar to Marxism, which is not surprising, given its origins. Palestinianism originated in the 1960s and was created by the cognitive warriors of the Soviet KGB. […] With the decline of pan-Arabism, Palestinianism became a useful way to incite the Arab world against the West.

Thus, postmodern Palestinianism is not simply sympathy for the Palestinian cause, but a radical endorsement of anti-Israel positions, giving rise to a variety of dangerous lies and distortions. According to one participant "the agenda of human rights has been hijacked by postmodernist thinking […]. Israel […] is being recast as the white supremacist implant in the Middle East" (Interview 4). Others connect such post-modern thinking to a new intensive wave of antisemitism. Scholar Shmuel Trigano (2020: 170-172) associated with the JCPA, writes that Israel "nourished by the manipulation of history by Palestinian nationalism" faces a "new age of Jew-hatred". Trigano concludes that this ideology "is called postmodernism, which also has numerous satellites: postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and gender doctrine […]." In other words, the "postmodern war" fuels a menacing "tide" of antisemitism versus Jews worldwide (Straus, 2024). For Israel's right, observing these perceived developments re-affirms the critical importance of the existence of Israel as a Jewish-dominated state while feeling deeply anxious about these deep challenges to Israel's legitimacy.

This discourse lays discursively the ground for conspiracy narratives to channel various anxieties into two specific fears of conspirators, the Palestinians and left-wing forces that I will describe in the sections below. In those sections, postmodernism, the spread of Palestinian positions via intentional lies, and deception will frequently appear. Postmodernism became somewhat of a right-wing bogeyman, an "umbrella term" (Finkelman, 2022) for expressing various grievances and anxieties that are often packaged in deeply conspiratorial language.

5.2 Right-wing conspiracy narratives: Palestinian machinations

The first theme of conspiracy narratives relates to fears of Palestinian efforts to undermine Israel. It is possible to discern a variety of conspiracy narratives that relate to this perceived Palestinian war against Israel. They can be divided into three larger blocks: 5.2.1, the invention of Palestinians, 5.2.2, Palestinian diplomacy and 5.2.3, Palestinian propaganda. All those narratives create a fearsome image of the Palestinians as an eternal, wicked and plotting enemy of Israel who, however, hides this nature and intention skilfully.

5.2.1 The invention of the Palestinian people and their claim to the land

Israeli right-wing discourse frequently claims that Palestinians do not exist as a national group, and are non-native Arabs, most of whom arrived in Palestine once it flourished under the Zionist influence. This

is why, according to one participant “many of the Palestinians carry names like Al-Masri, [which translates to] 'the Egyptian', […] what you call Palestinians are actually people who came here in the last 100 years” (Interview 8). On the contrary, the immigrating Jews are described as returning to their ancient homeland, an identity that carries significant importance for right-wing Israelis in particular. Yet, as described in Chapter 4, challenges to this right-wing Israeli identity by the Palestinian national identity which claims nativeness also cause considerable anxiety among right-wing groups. Conspiracy narratives deflect, explain and direct this anxiety by stipulating that such Palestinian claims are not only baseless, but a deliberate invention to destroy Israel.

This starts with claims that Palestinian identity is a solely tactical invention. For example, according to Im Tirtzu, the term Palestinian did not exist until the 1960s. An Im Tirtzu video (2022a) details the alleged flimsy claims of Palestinians in contrast to the long Jewish history in the land:

> Over 3000 years ago, when King David made Jerusalem the capital of the Jewish people of Israel, there were no Palestinian people. […] When the Romans destroyed the second Jewish temple in Jerusalem, there was no Palestinian people. […] After World War I when the allied powers […] recognized the right of the Jews to their homeland and gave the Arabs the rest of the Middle East, there was no Palestinian people. […] after Israel's war of independence, nobody called to establish a Palestinian state […]. But then in the 1960s, out of nowhere, a Palestinian people emerged. But from where?

The video continues with a quote from an interview with Zuheir Mohsen which is widely quoted in right-wing circles. Mohsen was a member of a strongly pan-Arabist faction of the PLO in the 1970s. As quoted by the video, he said: “There is no such thing as separate Palestinian people. There is no difference between Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians … the Palestinian identity exists only for tactical reasons. The creation of a Palestinian state is a new instrument in our ongoing war against the state of Israel” (ibid.).

Other right-wing figures (Cohen and Boyd, 2019; Israel Hayom, 2024) go further arguing that the Soviet Union was behind the invention of the Palestinians. Brand summarises this claim pointedly:

> It all started with the creation of a fictitious 'Palestinian People' who allegedly demand political self-determination […] created by the Soviet disinformation masters in 1964 when they created the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the 'PLO'. The term 'Palestinian People' as a descriptive of Arabs in Palestine appeared for the first time in the preamble of the 1964 PLO Charter, drafted in Moscow […]. For most of that time, it was held in the firm grip of Yasser Arafat's iron fist. But Arafat was not the fierce, independent actor he posed as; he was completely dependent on the Soviet KGB […] (Brand, 2014: 1-2).

Hence, the Palestinians claiming to be a people with claims on the land is described as a serious, dangerous and ongoing plot to “wipe us [Jews] off the map along with our unbroken, thousands-of-

years-old bond with this land", as Shragai (2023a) says, invoking genocidal intentions behind this alleged conspiracy. Such statements, while never explicitly stating emotions, clearly carry fear: the fearsome image of the plotting Palestinians, that cements fear of Palestinian plots as a right-wing eclectic emotion.

To bolster their own claims and undermine Palestinian claims to the land, Israeli conspiracy narratives allege that the PA would intentionally destroy Jewish heritage while inventing "fake roots" (ibid.). In an interview, Naomi Kahn (2023), the Head of the International Division of Regavim, fearfully describes that the PA runs a "carefully constructed program of destruction" of Jewish heritage sites (32.34-39) that is "worse than ISIS because" "the international community is supporting it" (33.03- 10). Despite the PLO's commitment in the Oslo Accords to preserve 13 listed Jewish heritage, the PA identified the destruction of Jewish sites as one of its priorities, so Kahn. Moreover, the PA would silently but actively try to construe a fake Palestinian history:

> An entire narrative […] it gets bigger, deeper, broader, all kinds of insanity […]. The Palestinian Authority has a very large ministry that has full-time employees, this is what their job is [inventing Palestinian history]. […] All sorts of things. They have renamed some of the flora and fauna, you have new Palestinian names for things […]. Jerusalem Pine now got some Palestinian name. Various birds and all these things. They create a new narrative […] and then they have something to refer to […]. It, therefore, becomes fact (40.37-41.59).

Irrespective if the PA does destroy heritage sites, the right-wing narrative is conspiratorial as any Palestinian action is interpreted as coordinated, and secretly malevolent because it aims to undermine Israel. We can see how such right-wing conspiracy narratives do not simply evoke a challenge to Israeli identity. Rather, they draw on these identity-related anxieties to evoke a threat to Israel's survival, by using repeated references to war, ISIS and the like.

This discussion mixes with the right-wing belief that the West Bank, usually referred to by its biblical name Judea and Samaria, is rightfully part of Israel and with the anxiety that a Palestinian state would constitute a "suicidal" security risk (Phillips, 2020). Here, conspiracy narratives channel anxieties of potential conflict into a dangerous plot of Palestinians taking the land and establishing a state by secret means.

A key source for this theme is, once again, Regavim, which dedicates itself "to the protection of Israel's national" (Regavim, 2023). Alongside other organisations like Im Tirtzu and the Ribonut (Sovereignty) movement, Regavim narrates the view that the Israeli presence in Judea and Samaria, Israel's "biblical heartland," is threatened. For example, Regavim documents how the PA would illegally steal and take over Israeli land. These attempts are said to be intentionally concealed as infrastructure, environmental,

or development projects.[9] Douglas Altabef, Im Tirtzu Chairman warns that a "significant amount of Israeli land is illegally encroached upon by Arabs, Palestinians, Bedouins who fabricate flimsy buildings in order to fabricate flimsy claims to land pushing back Israeli borders" (Im Tirtzu, 2022b: 0.26-0.45). Regavim (2022a: 8) calls this a "mortal blow to Israel's security". Israel would lose control over Israeli land and be forced into the indefensible borders of the 1947 partition plan, next to a unilaterally declared "Palestinian terror state" (Regavim, 2022b: 0.12).

For Regavim, Israel is losing a hidden war against the Palestinians whose "goals remain the same: disinheriting the Jews of their land, acre by acre, town by town. […]." (Regavim, 2015: 1.26-1.34). This secret war is said to be a cunning Palestinian strategy, because with "terror […] Arab armies never succeed to occupy the Israeli land." But by "planting trees" building "illegal buildings: just like this, they [the Arabs] occupy. They build a school, or they plant olive trees, and then the IDF cannot tell them to go [away], because it's only trees. It's a school. And like this, they occupy the land" (Interview 2).

Overall, conspiracy narratives around this theme draw on deep anxiety derived from a challenge to Israeli identity as natives with a claim to the land. Those conspiracy narratives aim to resolve this anxiety by contesting Palestinian claims as the real natives and framing them as a deliberate attack and a significant security risk. This, however, only channels this anxiety into the fearsome picture of Palestinians as a threatening, plotting entity that follows in all its actions one secret goal: the destruction of Israel. As we will see in the next theme, this goal is carefully hidden behind a mask of moderation and diplomacy.

5.2.2 Palestinian moderation, diplomacy and unity

Israel's right generally claims that the Palestinian goal is the destruction of Israel, not a state in the West Bank and Gaza. One participant for example stated that in the official and widespread Palestinian perspective, be it among Hamas or the PA Israel is "a state without the right to exist […], not even on "one square centimetre on the seashore of Tel Aviv" (Interview 8). For the right, Israel's downfall implies a genocidal threat of a country free of Jews. What emerges in such views is the anxiety detailed in Chapter 4 of living in an environment that is not dominated by Jews, as well as the insecurity of years of conflict. These vague feelings become repacked via conspiracy narratives which construct Palestinians as secretly pursuing the goal of Israel's destruction, despite reassurances of key parts of Palestinian society to be interested in a diplomatic solution. Conspiracy narratives also describe

[9] Regavim points towards the Fayyad Plan adopted by the PA in 2009 which includes plans to build infrastructure across all West Bank areas (PA, 2009).

Palestinians as an almost monolithic actor, at least when it comes to the Palestinian desire to destroy Israel.

As detailed in Chapter 4, the Second Intifada became widely seen as a response to a generous Israeli peace offer, and therefore, analyses conclude, negotiations could never have been a serious endeavour in the first place. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak claimed after the failed negotiations and the start of the Intifada, that he had removed "Arafat's mask" (Elder, 2004). It was a claim that was eagerly absorbed by Israel's right. If peace talks were only a mask, what was the real goal of Arafat? Journalist Pinhas Inbari (2020: 103-107) explains:

> Yasser Arafat's greatest innovation […] was his success in transforming the peace process into a tool of war […]. Arafat's strategy was as successful as it was deceptive: [...] [It] enabled him to continue the PLO struggle to eliminate Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people […]. After Arafat's death, the tactics changed, but the strategy remained the same. The PLO, now led by Mahmoud Abbas, officially gave up the "armed struggle" ideal, that is, terror, but not its final aim: the elimination of Israel [...].

In the conspiratorial terms of Israel's right, advancing a two-state solution was based on a secret strategic decision by the PLO to fortify a Palestinian position from where Israel could be ultimately destroyed. Therefore, Inbari's quote is no outlier but part of a sustained, and fearful right-wing narrative. For example, Israeli historian and writer Moshe Dann (2022) warns: "The truth is that there is no 'peace process' and there never was. It was all a lie to advance the Palestinian agenda and […] those who seek to kill Jews and eliminate Israel."

Conspiracy narratives describe Palestinians as unified in this goal of destroying Israel, to the point where Palestinians almost appear as one single actor. For example, in a JPCA publication former Israeli Ambassador Alan Baker (2014: 7, highlights removed) writes:

> [T]he ongoing, intense, and concerted actions by the Palestinian leadership, media, clergy, academia, and others to manipulate virtually every international institution […] to delegitimize Israel […] and to incite the public […] to hate Israel and Jews, cannot, in any circumstances be deemed compatible with peace negotiations. Those […] who engage in such activities are not genuinely intent on seeking peaceful relations.

He thus, claims, that Palestinians might adopt the language of peace and moderation. Such statements cannot be trusted, at best they are lies, and at worst, masterful deceptions to undermine Israel. Such narratives construct the Palestinians as more threatening than traditional security threats, in so far as Palestinians would go to great lengths to hide their intentions and "manipulate" the world with their cunning rhetoric. Furthermore, narratives describe diverse Palestinian groups as cohesively pursuing their goal of Israel's destruction. At times, the Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives even describe

Hamas and the PA as working secretly together, despite their open rivalry. Moshe Elad, Lecturer at Western Galilee College (2022) warns that

> rumors of 'great hostility' between rival Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas have been greatly exaggerated. [...] they are working together on the Israeli issue and are, in fact, well-coordinated: Hamas is provoking Israel into operating in Gaza and the West Bank, and the PA continues to ram Israel on the international stage and tries to harm it in any way possible.

Overall, such conspiracy narratives explain right-wing feelings of anxiety and insecurity by constructing Palestinians as dark and evil figures, masking their real intentions when promising compromise, and consequently can never be trusted or accommodated. In the words of former Jerusalem mayor Nadav Shragai (2023b) even if briefly accommodated, the Palestinians "return to wickedness, evil, blood terror incitement, and hatred. In religious-nationalist circles, such notions are also, and since 7 October increasingly, captured with the religious term "Amalek", denoting the eternal evil that in each generation rises to destroy the Jewish people, a term that is often applied to the Palestinians (Botzum, 2023; Masalha, 2000). Such conspiracy narratives remove the Palestinian issue from the realm of politics and place it in an ahistorical threat that can only be repeatedly contested without any Israeli responsibility.

5.3.3 Palestinian propaganda: The Nakba, human rights and Pallywood

A common right-wing view is that propaganda activities are a key area of Palestinian actions against Israel. One participant emphasised that "the Palestinians are being paid by the UN agencies as refugees […]. I'd say the majority […]. So, they don't really work, […] they have a lot of time to invest in propaganda. That's what they do. […] the Palestinians work in generating propaganda […]" (Interview 16). Based on such views, we can discern a third sub-theme of conspiracy narratives. Such narratives evoke fears of alleged Palestinian lies and propaganda that is geared to morally undermining Israel's and Zionism's legitimacy.

These propaganda activities and lies that the right-wing detects can take many forms but would all seek to damage Israel's legitimacy and engineer Israel's collapse with other means than outright terror. Following from the assumption that Palestinians invented themselves for only tactical reasons, Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives claim that narratives central to the Palestinian identity were developed only to undermine Israel. The Im Tirtzu booklet *Nakba Nonsense* (Tadmor and Segal, n.d.) explains:

> "The concept of 'the Nakba' […] seeks to establish a false political myth […]. It's an enormous lie […] meant to undermine […] Israel's right to exist within secure and defensible borders. It is meant to criminalize Israel and to frame Israel of having perpetrated a crime which it did not commit. It's an attempt […] to whitewash the crimes of the Palestinian national movement with the aim of justifying its struggle to destroy Israel."

In those propaganda efforts, Palestinian NGOs are said to play a critical role (Atlan, 2021). Hence, Palestinian NGOs, human rights organisations especially, take a prominent place in Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives. A key source is NGO monitor as much of its activities address the perceived danger of Palestinian NGOs. NGO Monitor declares (2022) that it is "dedicated to promoting transparency and accountability of NGOs claiming human rights agendas […]. Our research exposes groups that misuse or exploit human rights values to promote anti-Israel agendas." The wording suggests that NGO monitor sees its role in unmasking organisations that disguise their work as human rights protection but are in fact undermining Israel. One participant equally emphasised the threatening role of NGOs in a conflict that is essentially about

> the legitimacy of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. […] NGOs are important, very important actors that determine agendas and influence policies, often directly, sometimes indirectly, in Western governments and in the United Nations. And a number of those actors are part of that objective of denying or reversing the legitimacy of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people […]. And it's not just Amnesty [International], it is Human Rights Watch, it's a wide range of Palestinian groups [...] (Interview 19).

Asked why they do so, the participant replied: "[…] in the case of the Palestinian organisations it is quite blatant" later implying that it is about the destruction of Israel. Founder and Director of NGO Monitor, Gerald Steinberg (2019) also warns in fearful terms of the dangers of a supposedly human rights agenda:

> Modern anti-Semites want […] a 'return' for millions of descendants of 1948 refugees, three generations later. These measures, wrapped in the language of justice and human rights, would mean that Israel, the nation-state of the Jewish people, would cease to exist. The language may differ from the blood curdling threats emanating from Tehran, but the goals are the same.

Thus, Palestinian NGOs are frequently seen as a covert attempt to hurt, attack and undermine Israel in a coordinated campaign or "political war" (Interview 6). These narratives carry clear emotional undertones of fear by constantly evoking and therefore discursively constructing a dangerous threat via words such as antisemitism, war and destruction.

Yet, conspiracy narratives accuse Palestinians of relying also on other propaganda tactics, including relying on "Pallywood". The term Pallywood, a portmanteau of Hollywood and Palestine, was initially coined by historian Richard Landes (Gur Arieh, 2013). Pallywood refers to Palestinian efforts to use actors and modern production techniques to stage media content "in front of (and often with cooperation from) Western camera crews, for the purpose of promoting anti-Israel propaganda by disguising it as news" (Blum Leibowitz, 2008). Many on the Israeli right seem to hold this view. Often cited is the shooting of Mohammad Al-Durah, a Palestinian boy killed in the crossfire between Hamas fighters and the Israeli military. Philippe Assouline (2014: 160) claims

> Palestinian propaganda has for decades staged distressing ‘news’ scenes […]. The heart-wrenching footage of the death of Mohammed Al Dura in September 2000 may be Palestinian propaganda's greatest coup […]. But it wasn't Israel that shot Al Dura. In fact, he may not even have been killed: Al Dura was said to have died of blood loss but the footage shows no blood; the picture of his body in a Gaza morgue was that of another boy […]. This phenomenon of scripted Palestinian 'news' scenes is ongoing and so rampant that it's been given a name: 'Pallywood’.

Right-wing individuals frequently use highly emotional language, such as “blood libel” (Interview 5) to describe the Al-Durah incident and often draw, as Landes (2022) and Assouline do, a straight line between Pallywood and a dangerous antisemitic world, whipped up by Palestinian propaganda.

While not everyone agrees that Palestinians actively manufacture footage, what is certainly widely agreed on is that Palestinians distort the truth as much as possible. For example, Hananya Naftali, working for Prime Minister Netanyahu as a digital advisor, regularly publishes content that “exposes lies” and shows “the truth”. In one video (2022: 0.13-3.18) talking about an incident where Israeli security forces entered the Al-Aqsa Mosque, he claims:

> The Palestinian media […] use this footage […] as propaganda […] in order to stir the Muslim world to start a war – that is their dream honestly, to start a war […]. Palestinian society has been poisoned [...] even Palestinian children are taught from a young age to hate Jews, to hate Israel […]. With the ongoing lies that they spread, someone has to tell the truth.

Israeli right-wing conspiracy discourse is filled with claims of “debunking”, “exposing”, “unmasking” and “busting” Palestinian lies, often creating a Manichean worldview between the (right-wing) forces showing the truth of Israel being a “light upon the nations” versus the lying Palestinians that do everything to tarnish and undermine Israel.

This narrative around the Palestinian ability to spin lies clearly surfaces with the issue of apartheid. Below, I will discuss in more detail who allegedly orchestrates the apartheid campaign, but for now, let us focus on the claim that apartheid is only practiced by the PA. Eugene Kontorovich, a professor of international law with Forum Kohelet frequently talks about the “absurdity” of the apartheid claim. After outlining the defining characteristics of apartheid, such as restricting the “disfavoured group to ghettos, he writes (2022): “All these policies are practiced in the West Bank and Gaza—by the Palestinian Authority government against Jews. What makes the ‘Israel apartheid’ meme particularly despicable is that is not just a lie, it is an inversion of the truth. […].” UN Watch (2022, highlights added) seconds this, writing that the PA “enforces a system of apartheid to ensure that every inch of territory under its control is strictly *judenrein*", deliberately using the Nazi term for an area free of Jews.

Overall, such right-wing conspiracy narratives conjure a dangerous world filled with "Jew-hatred and anti-Israel propaganda" (The Israel Guys, 2023). Such narratives draw on various forms of anxiety,

including the anxiety around Israel's "abnormality" as discussed in Chapter 4. Interestingly, what seems at play as well is anxiety deriving from an attack on right-wing identity that holds Israel as a morally just entity. Combined with the other themes about the Palestinians, such narratives channel such vague anxieties and construct the fearsome image of the Palestinians. Palestinians almost become "the Palestinian", a dark, and wicked figure aiming to destroy Israel, carefully masking his intention and employing a variety of devious tactics. Considering how those narratives are frequently repeated, they anchor an eclectic emotion and emotional belief in the dangerous nature of Palestinians among Israel's right.

5.3 Right-wing conspiracy narratives: The Globalists, the West and liberal, left-wing Israel

The second main theme captures the perceived plots of liberal and leftist Israeli groups, backed or directed by their European supporters, to destroy Israel and transform it into a non-Jewish country. It is possible to discern a variety of conspiracy narratives that relate to this perceived assault. They can be divided into four larger blocks: 5.3.1, the post-Zionist globalists, 5.3.2, the anti-Israel organisations, 5.3.3, the secret European war against Israel and 5.3.4 the role of the ICC.

5.3.1 The post-Zionist globalists and the deep state

A major fear constructed by right-wing conspiracy narratives is that Israel is secretly ruled by a deep state composed of liberal globalist elites. Those elites would detest right-wing political projects and harbour a radical postmodern agenda that clashes with the will of the people. This perceived clash is often framed as a deep threat to democracy and a battle of a large majority of the nation vs. the post-nationalist that is the post-Zionist elite.

Right-wing populist movements in various countries frame themselves as anti-globalisation in political, economic, as well as cultural terms (Steger and James, 2019). In the context of those populist movements the conspiracy narrative of the "new world order" emerged, claiming the existence of a global project aimed at a totalitarian world government, driven by those interested in "globalism", thus, called "globalists". For many, the term carries antisemitic connotations since Jewish figures, such as George Soros, are often identified as "globalists".

Its appearance in Israel might, therefore, seem surprising. Israeli right-wing thinkers, however, disagree. As Yoram Hazony (2022) argues, the term globalism is not antisemitic but crucial for capturing the attempt to establish a post-national "worldwide market governed by a single worldwide legal system":

> ‘globalism’ is the opposite of ‘nationalism’ […] The woke neo-Marxist cultural revolution […] wants to ‘cancel’ and prohibit the use of any word or expression that is useful in advancing a conservative worldview. […] If the woke had their way, words like ‘globalist’ and ‘nationalist’ would be cancelled […]. They want to make it impossible for us to express our views […].

Many on the Israeli right describe fearfully that Israel is secretly ruled by such a globalist elite, uniting in a deep state that “manipulates” the country […] behind the scenes” (Ben-Simon, 2023), opening the door for Israel’s enemies to “strike from within” (Greenfield, 2021). Various allegations exist regarding the composition of this deep state, although it is always associated with those who oppose right-wing visions. For example, one individual alleges that the deep state is “made up of the heads of security, the heads of the economy, former judges, the medical personnel, and the senior bureaucrats […]. They get together sometimes and plan […]. [T]his is the true focus of power in Israel today” (Rolef Hattis, 2023). However, the deep state is usually identified with the judicial system. As one participant stated:

> [A]n elite that has usurped power […]. We see the same phenomena in the United States, and in Europe, where a largely internationalist elite is struggling against the national majority by means of restraining democracy. Only here it went a little further. […]. They [the post-nationalist elite] […] are all connected to the same network of this judicial shadow state that, that includes the Supreme Court, the Court system, the Attorney General, the legal counsel to the executive, and all the legal advisors (Interview 9).

In particular, the Supreme Court is seen as the embodiment of this shadow state that “remains the last stronghold of the founding elite […]. From the time of former Chief Justice Aharon Barak, the Supreme Court has forced extreme liberal opinions on Israeli society” […] (Shine, 2020). This was possible because Aharon Barak “engineered” the judicial revolution to rule against the people (Dann, 2019)

Specifically, right-wing figures emphatically warn that the liberal deep state is “trying to de-Judaize us” as Chaim Shine (2020) writes. Liberal changes that especially the Supreme Court implemented (see Chapter 4) become described as a menacing plot. Public intellectual Gadi Taub (2021) explains this point further:

> In Israel, the Supreme Court has basically usurped sovereignty […]. They [the courts] are striking down repeatedly every attempt of Israel to defend its immigration policy. So, their target is the law of return […]. Globalism is a post-national ideal. So, what the Judges are doing is de-Judaizing […] the State of Israel, that is their long-term goal. […] Because their ideal is a liberal non-democratic ideal which views any kind of nationalism as illegitimate […] (9.41-49; 17.04-17.41).

Thus, right-wing groups - secular and non-secular alike - that are anxious about a diminishing role of Judaism understood as a religious ethno-nationalist concept draw on conspiracy narrative to blame such worries on an active effort of the deep state. In the process, such narratives do not alleviate such worries but rather create the fearsome image of the powerful, cunningly operating deep state. This narrative is

not restricted to the Supreme Court. For example, Roni Sassover (2023), a secular Israeli formerly running for the right-wing Yamina party voiced her fears:

> I started to realise something was going on […] you can't build the Sukkah, […] you don't go to on a trip to Jerusalem […]. Then you suddenly hear about the special project of [former education minister Yifat] Shasha-Biton about the preschool, non-binary, gender-neutral preschools [...]. This is crazy […]. They are taking out the Judaism, and putting in woke (26.07-27.45).

These changes would be implemented quietly, "under the radar" so parents would not object (Sassover, cited in Isaac, 2023). Furthermore, the changes are said to be funded by entities that have a radical left-wing agenda, especially the New Israel Fund which, according to Sassover, is "like an octopus sending its tentacles everywhere" (Sassover, 2023: 43.16-43.18). Sassover warns emotionally that if not reversed, Israel would be "heading for not [a] Jewish state anymore" (ibid: 50.39-50.33).

The second fear narratives express is that the deep state would attempt to unseat Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Criticism of the courts which has persisted for several years, came to the forefront of the political debate when prosecutors announced in November 2019 that Netanyahu would have to stand trial on three counts of corruption. Yet, Netanyahu convinced many on Israel's right, especially Likud supporters, that trials were a "witch hunt" and politically engineered coup (Eisen et al., 2023). As one participant emphasised:

> This is a virtual coup against a sitting Prime Minister […]. The whole thing is […], it's an info op. The idea is, the investigations are a mechanism for producing a smear campaign […] to hurt Netanyahu, […] they need to beat the drums of Netanyahu's alleged corruption in order to persuade the population that this is not a political coup which it is […]. [T]hey portray their coup as the saving of Israel from the terrible menace of Netanyahu (Interview 9).

It should not be underestimated how frequently such claims have become part of the public right-wing discourse, believing that "the prosecution and some prominent jurists, like Aharon Barak and his people, who play the puppets from behind the scenes, […] try to get rid of Bibi […]" (Interview 3). For the right, those attacks are, on the one hand, an attack on Israeli democracy, undermining the will of the people. On the other hand, those attacks are deemed dangerous because Netanyahu's right-wing government is perceived as the bulwark against those globalist forces that aim to transform Israel into a non-Jewish post-Zionist state. In fact, some of Netanyahu's supporters saw the charges as so dangerous that three of them formed a group dedicated to investigating the evidence the prosecution submitted. In several interviews, they repeat the "deep state" accusations. For example, one member of the group stated, "[T]his whole bill of indictment was a legal means to achieve a political coup" (Szabo, cited in Sadan, 2021).

Overall, the right-wing discourse is full of anxieties about a changing world, a postmodern world in which traditional identities are shifting and a Jewish identity, understood in religious ethno-nationalist terms is fading. We can see how conspiracy narratives channel these anxieties and attribute them not to structural developments, like globalization, but rather to specific agents, the "globalists", who pursue these changes intentionally and secretly to the detriment of Israeli society.

5.3.2 The anti-Israel organisations

Right-wing narratives also identify left-leaning human rights organisations as a serious, but hidden danger to Israel. Many perceive a so-called global "Delegitimization and Demonization" campaign against Israel (NGO Monitor, 2022; Ministry of Strategic Affairs, 2019). In general, international or Israeli NGOs critical of the Jewish State are seen by the right, as "propaganda" (Ach, 2021: 1.44), "ideological" (Balanson, 2016) and "political warfare" (Israel Hayom, 2013) organisations which under "the ruse" of humanitarian concerns and human rights pursue the ulterior agenda of destroying Israel from the inside (Cohen, 2018; Im Tirtzu, 2015a). Those "radical leftist-anti-Zionist organisations, as a participant from a right-wing NGO, told me "all adopted […] the Palestinian narrative, the Jews invaded, stole the country, expelled the Arabs, […] these [NGOs] are long-term threats, they don't kill Jews on the streets, [but] they have their agenda, questionable and hostile […]." (Interview 3).

This agenda is to destroy Israel and its legitimacy by cooking up charges, including the "apartheid lie" (Interview 21). Israel's political right sees the recent apartheid debate not as a legitimate criticism or a call to establish a different state. Rather, the debate is "annihilationist" (Interview 17) and a "call for destruction", driven by "malicious motives" (Interview 4). One participant explained this reasoning in detail:

> [I]f you say that national self-determination for the Jewish people in our homeland, a homeland that has ever been the home of any other people, is racist then what you're saying is that the Jewish people don't have a right to exist, and therefore, the claim that Israel is an apartheid state […] is a rejection of Israeli existence […]. Human Rights Watch or B'Tselem or other […] human rights organisations are simply about negating […] the human rights of the Jewish people (Interview 5).

These conspiracy narratives are full of ominous warnings, creating the impression that Israel is on the verge of collapse and the Jewish people facing genocide. Conspiracy narratives then construct those NGOs in deeply emotional terms as far more than just small organisations but as representing a fearsome threat from within the country.

NGOs are said to also devote significant resources to accuse Israel of violence against Palestinians. The NGO, Breaking the Silence which gathers testimonies from Israeli soldiers that detail the human rights

violations they witnessed or engaged in, is frequently said to lie and fabricate evidence (Ach, 2021). Similarly, B'Tselem is said to extract "false testimonies" from Palestinians "who claim they were tortured" (Akerman, 2017). Right-wing conspiracy discourse goes as far as claiming that organisations pay Palestinians to stir trouble to document Israeli violence. One participant claimed that "because Breaking the Silence came with EU Parliament members, to see the occupation and the vicious soldiers, […] they [the NGOs] pay Arabs to throw stones, so the Parliament members will […] see something." (Interview 1; see also Ronen, 2016).

Another way NGOs are said to smear Israel is by advancing malicious claims about settler violence. "The phenomenon of settler violence is an antisemitic invention […]. [M]ore than 90% of incidents come from Palestinians, and maybe 5% [are committed] by settlers (Interview 3). Or as Hillel Frisch (2021) claims: "The major difference between settler and Palestinian violence is that the latter is orchestrated […] in cooperation with […] NGOs funded by the European Committee." According to Jonathan S. Tobin (2021), allegations of settler violence are "intended to whitewash, rationalize and even justify violence against Jews" and "to support a cause whose aim isn't adjusting Israel's borders but to destroy the Jewish state."

Yet, while those NGOs loom in the dark, laden with threat, the right-wing conspiratorial discourse perceives an even darker hand behind them. According to right-wing groups, those NGOs, which receive much of their funding from European sources, operate on behalf of foreign actors and their hostile anti-Israel agenda. The latest book of Im Tirtzu Chairman Matan Peleg, State for Sale (Madinah l'makira) revolves entirely around this theme. In 2015, Im Tirtzu (2015b) also released a video that generated a significant debate. The video starts with the perspective of the viewer looking down a street underlined with dark ominous music, when a man comes closer, takes out a knife, stabbing the "viewer". Then the video, as if an intelligence briefing, shows the photos of several NGO members and narrates with English subtitles:

> Before the next terrorist stabs you, he already knows that Yishai Menuhin a planted agent belonging to Holland will make sure to protect him from a Shin Bet investigation. The terrorist also knows that Avner Gvaryahu, a planted agent belonging to Germany will call the soldier who tries to prevent the attack a 'war criminal'. He also knows that Sigi Ben-Ari, a planted agent belonging to Norway, will protect him in court. […] Yishai, Avner, and Sigi are Israelis. They live here with us and are implants.[10]. While we fight terror, they fight us.

[10] The Hebrew word is "Shtulim". It literally means "planted" but is also used to denote "moles".

Thus, the financing is tied to implementing a foreign agenda, the dramatic language, music and motives of the video create the spectre of Israeli NGOs, as willing traitors operating from inside Israeli society. Gilad Ach (2017: 5.37-5.59), Chairman of Ad Kan, details this foreign agenda:

> [T]here are European countries interested in any means to weaken the State of Israel. They've learned that the instrument of armament and weaponry that we encountered during the Yom Kippur war or the terrorist activity that we suffered 10 years ago are no longer effective. The impact needs to be upgraded from the inside. These people [of the human rights organisations] are Jewish people who are paid very high salaries […].

Overall, few on the right describe B'Tselem and others as genuine human rights organisations. Instead, the right-wing narratives portray them as evil traitors to the Zionist cause. This frequently combines with all sorts of conspiratorial language that explains how and why human rights organisations gather evidence that challenges the right-wing belief in Israel's goodness by alleging they pursue the ulterior goal of "destroying" Israel. In the most extreme form, human rights organisations are portrayed as foreign agents and supporting terrorism. Overall, left-wing human rights organisations become constructed as a dangerous threat from within.

5.3.3 The secret European war against Israel

The arguments about human rights organisations are closely linked to their foreign funding which mostly comes from European states. Some conspiratorial voices on Israel's right believe that Europe opposes a strong Jewish state and seeks to undermine or destroy it. In this view, Europe would no longer openly engage in the destruction of the Jewish people but adopt more subtle tools including outsourcing opposition to Israel to NGOs and the Palestinians. The European opposition to Israel is described as revolving around opposition to Israel's Jewish character, which, as outlined in Chapter 4, is seen especially in right-wing discourse as a serious threat and potentially genocidal.

To outline the conspiratorial discourse, it is useful to look first at what goal right-wingers attribute European countries when it comes to their Israel policies. The discourse generally claims that European countries intentionally pursue harmful policies, but that this goal – unlike in the past – is not carried out openly but implemented via perfidious tactics that undermine Israel's Jewishness secretly.

> When they [the European states and the EU] give money to organisations that try to block the Jewishness of the country[...] when they give money to organisations whose endgame, their vision is to bring inside Israel Arabs who fled [...] in [19]48, […] they are killing us softly, this is their endgame, this is what they want, they want to eliminate us (Interview 1).

Interviews often specifically referred to Germany, "which purports to maintain warm relations with Israel" (Beck, 2018), and that Germans have

> always spoken very well about their commitment to Israel, but […] they were supporting Palestinian terrorist organisations […] and they expanded their operations from there to the Israeli radical left […]. There is a history here of general European collusion. […] the goal of Germany's policy is to enable and facilitate Israel's eradication (Interview 5).

Thus, actions are hidden, often intentionally by employing supportive, but deceptive language, since "the Europeans, the foreign governments that give money to organisations here to erase the Jewish Character of Israel, they don't say it loud and clear. They are just doing it" via policies designed to undermine Israel's Jewish character (Interview 2).

Conspiracy narratives also detail what motivates European governments to seek the destruction of Israel. Conspiracy narratives propose a variety of reasons. The most immediate is simply continuous European, especially German, antisemitic sentiments that cannot accept "the image of the new Jew, […] someone who is not […] humiliated, not begging, [but] is strong" and attempt to subjugate the Jews once again (Interview 3) or a perverse reversal of victim-perpetrator logic, in which Germans decide to "erase" the Jews, as they constitute "the biggest reminder" for their guilt over the Holocaust (Interview 2).

However, most discourse centres on the meta-theme of left-wing postmodernism, which would not accept nationalism and nation-states, and thus targets Israel. Former Israeli Minister Nathan Sharansky explains:

> [P]ostmodernism, guided by the noble ideas of equality, human rights, and universal peace, […] sees nationalism as the obstacle to an ideal world without nations and borders. In this 'dream,' Israel as a Jewish national state is 'problematic,' and symbolizes the last remnant of colonialism and the dark past (Sharansky, 2020: 159).

As argued above, the right-wing discourse is replete with such references. Often, as in Sharansky's comment, it is not conspiratorial. While postmodernism is deemed a misguided and dangerous radical left-wing ideology, it is not described as purposely engineered. However, some parts of the Israeli right see the development of Europe's postmodernist opposition to Israel as no accident. As described above, an engineered take-over of the academy is stipulated as one cause. Another reference point is Bat Ye'or, the "doyenne" of the Eurabia conspiracy narrative (Bangstad, 2019). Ye'or claims that the "Western globalist strategy" aims "at replacing the democratic institutions of nation-states" (2016: 25). She also outlines how European technocrats – either coerced or willingly - engineered the Islamisation of Europe, which resulted in an embrace of "officially sponsored anti-Americanism, antisemitism/anti-Zionism and 'Palestinianism.'" (2006: 10, see also Nirenstein, 2021). One participant outlined the alleged "history" of

> Western European collusion with the PLO […] beginning in the 1970s. […]. [I]n 1982, the PLO carried out a terrorist attack against [Italian] Jews, […] in collusion with the Italian government, […] this was part of the deal that the Italian Government had made with the PLO, […] Italy wasn't the only country that made these sorts of deals with Arafat (Interview 14).

According to right-wing conspiracy narratives, European countries not only rely on NGOs and the PLO but also international organisations. Israeli right-wing discourse in general accuses various UN organisations of being deeply antisemitic (Bayefsky, 2005; Nirenstein, 2022). Yet, some narratives turn conspiratorial when they detail how proceedings in international organisations, for example by the International Crime Court (ICC), are orchestrated by the Europeans in their secret war against Israel.[11] The ICC in general is described in conspiratorial terms as created solely to go after Israel. One participant remarked that the ICC was founded "to go to war against Israel and the United States, […] there was no other agenda here" (Interview 5). As Eugene Kontorovich (2014: 82) claims, this would be evident due to the offence of "indirect transfer" "which was designed to make a war crime out of voluntary and free movement of Jews into the territories of Judea and Samaria." European countries driven by its "familiar", but now Marxist postmodern "antisemitism" (Sadan, 2019) would be the ICC's "puppet masters" (Glick, 2019). Caroline Glick (ibid.) writes in *Israel Hayom*, that the "European Union" and "the international left":

> understand that [the ICC investigation] is to advance their goal of rescinding international recognition of the Jewish state's right to exist as a normal, sovereign state. They also know full well that simply by holding show trials of Israeli Jews, they will legitimize and expand support for Hamas' goal – Israel's physical destruction.

By linking international proceedings to alleged European intentions, conspiracy narratives explain the widespread right-wing feeling that Israel stands alone in the world, being persecuted and singled out by the international community. Right-wing narratives, conspiratorial or not, often draw a straight line between the (rescinded) UN resolution A/RES/3379 that declared Zionism as racist and today's environment (Interviews 4, 5 and 6). Conspiracy narratives draw on these feelings and perceptions, utilising words such as "war" and "destruction" to construct European countries as the antisemitic conspirators behind such developments.

[11] At times right-wing conspiracy narratives see instead of the Europeans, Arab states or the Palestinians as the hidden force behind the ICC and its ongoing investigation (Davidovich, 2019; Eydar, 2021; Marcus and Hirsch, 2020).

Right-wing conspiracy narratives describe this perceived secret European war against Israel as devastating for Israel's situation, requiring vigilance and strength. As one interviewee told me: If they [the Europeans] wouldn't sponsor the conflict, we could find a way to compromise […] […]. What would happen if they would not [sponsor the conflict]? Then maybe some of the Arabs in East Jerusalem will choose, choose integration, will choose peace and not war (Interview 2). Or as another participant put it, Israel could be thriving much more. Instead, it struggles to and "must keep strong. Definitely forever" (Interview 16).

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented two main themes of conspiracy narratives prevalent in the Israeli right-wing discourse, the anxieties, insecurity and feelings of powerlessness they draw on and the fearsome image of the conspirators that they construct.

The first theme revolves around the machinations of the Palestinians. Conspiracy narratives describe Palestinians as non-native Arabs bent on destroying Israel via a series of plots. Palestinians are routinely described as having invented their nationhood and their history solely to oppose Israel. Palestinians would strategically hide their true intentions behind the language of national liberation, diplomacy, and human rights while working to undermine Israel by skilfully manipulating the international community with propaganda lies.

The second theme revolves around the attacks of Israeli and European left-wing groups in the firm grasp of postmodern ideology. These groups allegedly work to transform Israel into a non-Jewish state which in the right-wing narrative equals Israel's destruction. Conspiracy narratives allege the existence of a deep state, controlled by the left-wing Ashkenazi elites which aggressively works to de-Judaize the country. These efforts are flanked by the perceived machinations of left-wing NGOs, constructed as foreign agents working on behalf of European powers in their secret war to delegitimise Israel.

The chapter showed how the conspiracy narratives presented are grounded in the three sources of anxiety, insecurity and feelings of powerlessness prevalent on Israel's right. We saw several aspects resurfacing, sometimes more overtly, sometimes more subtly. First, narratives often emphasise the danger of genocide and annihilation. For the Israeli right, the Holocaust and a possible repetition are constantly lurking in the background. Second, narratives draw on a perceived threat to the legitimacy of Israel and Zionism, which is seen as almost inevitably leading to the annihilation of the Jewish nation. It is also perceived as a threat because it constitutes, third, a challenge to right-wing identity and values. Attacks on Israel threaten the right-wing identity as natives of the land as well as their positive

identification with Israel as being a morally just nation-state. Narratives heavily reflect anxieties of a decreasing relevance of Jewish religious ethno-nationalism behind which we can also read anxieties about living in a non-Jewish dominated environment, as well as a legacy of powerlessness of right-wing groups vis-à-vis the Ashkenazi elite. Overall, these feelings are less related to a military defeat of Israel, but rather to an ideological battle against postmodernism.

There should be no doubt that many of those narrating these conspiracy narratives believe the threats to be serious, and thus, convey genuine fear of an apocalyptic rupture. As one participant stated, many Israelis "miss the gravity of the moment, […] because they want to believe a certain narrative about the nature of the Arab or the Palestinian war against Israel, […] they want to believe a certain narrative about Europe, which is untrue" (Interview 5). Yet, it matters little if those threats are genuinely believed. What matters more is that these fears are publicly expressed, and thus over time create emotional beliefs, making fear of Palestinian and left-wing conspirators an eclectic and institutionalised right-wing emotion as we will see in Chapter 8.

Conspiracy narratives construct a very threatening picture of Palestinians as well as left-wing Israeli and European forces and their plots. With this, conspiracy narratives offer tangible actors that can be blamed for the anxiety right-wing groups feel. Conspiracy narratives construct Palestinians as wicked and cunning, as acting in almost perfect unity, despite overt differences and as more powerful than many realise, especially when they managed to take over academia and manipulate the international community. Left-wing groups are constructed as a fifth column, as shadowy figures working from within to implement their malicious pro-Palestinian agenda, supported by the antisemitic, postmodern Europeans who still have not given up their goal of destroying the Jewish people. Thus, conspiracy narratives postulate that these actors cannot be trusted or accommodated and must be forcefully opposed before it is too late. With this, conspiracy narratives create tangible fears that carry significant urgency. Thus, conspiracy narratives securitise these constructed threats, while framing the fight against these groups as a fight between a fragile Israel and the menacing coalition of Palestinians and left-wing forces. They do so, even though Israel is far more powerful than the Palestinians, and despite the firm political power of the right-wing camp inside Israel. Yet, by postulating secret forces and plots conspiracy narratives reject this reality and confirm the deep anxieties of right-wing groups.

The emotionally, fearsome image that those conspiracy narratives conjure is powerful. By drawing on anxieties, and channelling them into coherent fears, conspiracy narratives become politically useful and advance right-wing interests. However, I will fully explore this in Chapter 8. For now, I will turn to the Palestinian side.

Chapter 6 - Anxiety, Insecurity and Powerlessness in Palestinian Society

In this chapter, I aim establish the necessarily context that will form the basis to understand how contemporary Palestinian conspiracy narratives offer an explanation for widespread Palestinian feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness which linked to the colonial violence Palestinians continue to suffer.

To establish this, I pursue a dual goal. I describe the unfolding of historical events in Palestine, starting with the fateful year of 1917. This is important, because Palestinian conspiracy narratives bring in several historical arguments, often using British and Zionist colonialism as the starting point of the conspiracy taking place. To provide context for this, narrating the history of Palestine cannot be avoided. However, this thesis is not the work of a historian. As such, I am choosing those events that are relevant for the conspiracy narratives in the next chapter, which in turn implies a Palestinian-centred historical account.

Equally, I want to highlight the development of three sources of deep insecurity in Palestinian life. As argued in the theoretical framework, conspiracy narratives are grounded in anxiety, insecurity, and feelings of powerlessness. Palestinians engage with conspiracy narratives because such narratives allow Palestinians to explain such feelings and their circumstances largely dictated by forces over which they have no control. On the first level, many Palestinians experience on an individual level significant insecurity around personal safety, social, and economic well-being. On a second level, Palestinians experience collective insecurities due to Israeli violence towards Palestinians as a collective, including constant challenges to Palestinian dignity.

Related to those two levels, a third source emerges. I argue that Palestinian identity itself carries strong aspects of insecurity. Below, I will describe in detail the emergence and re-configuration of Palestinian identity that shows that Palestinian identity is closely tied to an oscillating process between hope, shattered hopes, and despair. Being Palestinian means hoping for a better future, being reminded of deep disappointments, and always anxious that their hopes will ultimately not materialise. This can also be interpreted as an underlying sense of powerlessness. In other words, identifying as Palestinian carries feelings that can be described as ontological insecurity.

Delineating the development of Palestinian emotions and identity, I do not aim to develop a full history of Palestinian emotions. Rather, I want to show how the feelings experienced today, are rooted in historic experiences and feelings. To do so, I am not simply relying on external accounts of political events in

Palestinian society. Rather, I reconstruct the emotional climate in Palestine via a mix of sources. I draw on historians, with a focus on Palestinian historians. I also draw on cultural expressions, such as primary accounts, literature and poetry, and the scholarship of such. This supplements and complements interview material gathered during fieldwork in the occupied territories. With this, Palestinian voices can describe the environment they experience and their emotions. Since the conspiracy narratives that I show in the next chapter emerged from the context of Jerusalem and the West Bank, the historical and emotional account centres on those two places as well.

Finally, this chapter necessarily provides a generalised account of Palestinian identity. However, individuals who identify as Palestinians experience vastly different situations that I cannot remotely capture here. Furthermore, I want to caution against reading the chapter as distilling a stable essence of Palestinian identity. To quote Laleh Khalili (2007: 2):

> Palestinian nationalism has the Nakba, the Intifada […], the chequered keffiyeh scarf, and martyrs' posters. But [...] none of these icons are stable, historically unchanging, or uncontested. National(ist) narratives – and the crucial symbols at their core – are challenged from within and without.

The chapter proceeds in six sections. The first section (6.1) anticipates the next sections, outlining the three categories of Palestinian anxiety just mentioned. The second section (6.2) then goes back in time and discusses the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the events that followed until the war of 1948. The third section (6.3) sheds light on the war of 1948 that caused the ongoing Nakba and exile, a period formative for modern Palestinian identity. The fourth section (6.4) outlines the developments between 1948 and 1987, most notably the idea of steadfastness in Palestinian discourse and the trajectory of the institutionalised political struggle of the Palestinians. The fifth section (6.5) details the First Intifada and the resulting Oslo Accords, paying attention to how the Accords created great hopes among the Palestinians, leading to disillusion soon after. The sixth section (6.6) summarises the situation of Palestinians in the West Bank today, investigating the intrusiveness of the occupation and the associated feelings of insecurity and powerlessness in detail.

6.1 The three levels of insecurity in today's Palestinian society

Before outlining the development of Palestinian society, identity and anchoring feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness and insecurity that persist in Palestinian society today in the historic experience Palestinians have undergone, I will categorise these insecurities.

To do so, I want to draw on one of my first interviews in Palestine. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I interviewed a well-connected businessman who also serves on the boards of several well-known

Palestinian NGOs. In the interview, he talked about the current situation in Palestine and what he sees as a pervasive atmosphere of anxiety. He calmly analysed the situation and outlined several levels of anxiety, that we can use as a starting point for investigating the emotional climate in Palestinian society today.

6.1.1 Personal insecurity

The first level of anxiety that he highlighted is "personal (in)security", it is experienced on an individual and daily basis, mainly due to the Israeli occupation and the complicity of Palestinian institutions in this reality. He stated:

> Today, people are very worried, people are very anxious […]. The first level is personal security the personal security of almost everyone is an issue. Today, you cannot [move] without finding a checkpoint […], I'm talking about going through a checkpoint […] with an M-16 pointed at you, with 10-15 cameras taking your picture […] the intrusiveness of the occupation is more than any observer from abroad can fully internalise (Interview 23).

Nearly every Palestinian participant, narrated deeply personal stories of insecurity around the various systems of control: checkpoints, residency permits, arbitrary detention, house searches and so on. For example, one young mother from East Jerusalem stated: "I really feel the tension, I notice them [Israeli security forces] pulling aside young men, young Palestinian kids and men […]. There is always this element of tension and fear." (Interview 32).

Such experiences are grounded in the power dynamics between the powerful occupier and the occupied. A resident of Kufr 'Aqab, nominally part of Jerusalem, but placed behind Israel's separation wall, told me of a recent incident when waiting for hours before Iftar in a queue close to Qalandiya Checkpoint. When an Israeli officer ordered Palestinians to move their cars for a military jeep to pass, she shouted in anger and frustration at the soldier. She then immediately realised the risk she was potentially putting herself and her kids in. "I was thinking […] what will he do now? Maybe […] when I come to Qalandiya, the actual checkpoint, they will take me and my children aside, and God knows what" (Interview 31). As a foreigner, I experienced the checkpoints during my fieldwork as a nuisance, but rarely as a threat. However, Palestinians related to me over and over, how often they think about potentially deadly consequences at the checkpoints. Thus, they purposely adopt a friendly pose, smile, and put both hands on the steering wheel while avoiding any sudden movements (Interview 26, 27).

6.1.2 Collective insecurity

The second category is the collective insecurity Palestinians face. This anxiety is tied to the political existence of Palestinians as a people. My interview partner (Interview 23) highlighted this: "the second part, […] is anxiousness in the political realm, […]. It is collective, [it means] the potential collapse of

the Palestinian political agency." This collapse is related on the one hand to the potential political vacuum that will open once the current authoritarian Palestinian presidency ends:

> There's a Palestinian president, who dismantled the Palestinian legislative branch, refuses to have elections, removed the independence of the judiciary, and is running the country […] by presidential decree, it creates high anxiousness, if you think you're going to hit a vacuum.

As I will show in the sections below, especially in section 6.6, Palestinians have little collective political agency. On the other hand, the internal political reality is compounded by the continuation of Israeli policies directed against Palestinians as a collective. The participant explains that politically aware Palestinians are anxious because "the Israelis are not being held accountable for anything". For him, this means that Israelis will continue to put "the ethnic cleansing program on a slow burner", slowly but systematically challenging Palestinian existence in Palestine. Indeed, this feeling is widespread, as a public figure from Bethlehem summarised: "You're always challenged, even your flag, it's being challenged, or even the question of your existence [as a people] is being challenged" (Interview 40).

6.1.3 Ontological insecurity

The last quote indicates another dimension of Palestinian insecurity as well. Throughout the chapter, I will highlight Palestinian ontological insecurity, insecurity stemming from the Palestinian identity itself. For example, one activist narrated her experience as a child during the First Intifada but reflected on how insecurity at that time also connects to the emotions carried by the Palestinian national identity, by being a Palestinian.

> With the First Intifada, soldiers came to my school, checkpoints, tear gas, settlers attacking us. A couple of times the gun was pointed directly at me […]. It's all trauma. And then on top of that, there's the inherited trauma, what you hear and read all the time about the Nakba. Nakba, the refugees, the keys [to the old houses], you feel in your heart that you're obligated to bring them back. It's part of your national identity (Interview 41).

As the above participant stated, Palestinian identity carries insecurity in two ways. Palestinian identity constantly evokes past, real experienced insecurity; be it in the experience of expulsion or continuing exile. This is not to say that Palestinian identity contains only negative emotions, but rather that even under the strong elements of resistance, the will to own agency, and the hope for a just future, lies a layer of insecurity, where Palestinians anxiously fear the shattering of those hopes. In fact, it seems that much of Palestinian history has been a cycle of hopes, shattered hopes, and despair. Second, the Palestinian identity is a challenged identity. Over the years, the Israeli state tried in various ways to deny the existence of the Palestinians as a people, and in many ways still does so. Palestinians are granted a form of self-government but not a state. Palestinians still need to struggle to have their history heard, and their

identity accepted. This essentially leads to ontological insecurity, a sense that their own identity is fragile.

The following sections will now show in depth, how those three elements of Palestinian insecurity are linked to the history of Palestinians as a people.

6.2 The beginning of the catastrophe: 1917 – 1948

The Palestinian national narrative cannot be separated from the Palestinian national catastrophe in 1948. This catastrophe takes centre stage in modern Palestinian identity and becomes a focal point of insecurity. From the Palestinian perspective, the story of the catastrophe starts oftentimes with the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Those two agreements are seen as the embodiment of European colonialism and the foundation for the rise of Israel and the expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland.

To clarify, if I would aim to detail a complete history of the Palestinian people, starting in 1917 would be an ill-designed approach. Scholars such as Rashid Khalidi (1997), Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal (2003), or Mohammad Muslih (1988), have convincingly documented a nascent Arab and Palestinian national consciousness before the devastating impact of Zionist settlements on the country's population. Such a nascent identity was rooted in specific factors giving at least the political elite, the class of “urban notables” a sense of unified destiny (Muslih, 1988: 1).

The Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration were not the beginning of the Zionist colonisation of Palestine. The first wave of Jewish-Zionist immigrants entered the area at the end of the 19th century. Aa that time, only some individuals of the Palestinian political elite fully realised the danger Zionism might pose to the local population. As early as 1899, Yousef al-Khalidi wrote to Theodore Herzl that “Palestine is now […] inhabited by others […], in the name of God, let Palestine be left alone.” (cited in Godfrey, 2020).

Over the coming decades, the local population of Palestine became increasingly drawn into the orbit of political events, and subject (and participant) to the Palestinian national narrative (Pappé, 2022: 52). Starting with the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and particularly with the beginning of the British Mandate over Palestine, Zionist colonisation increasingly affected the local population. The major impact was felt by Palestinian peasants, as the Zionist movement increasingly purchased land, usually from absentee landlords and often expelled the peasants working and living on the land (Khalidi, 2020: 21-25; Pappé, 2022: 68-84)

Thus, over the next few decades, Palestinian nationalism and anxiety over Zionism intensified. For example, in 1935, Palestinian poet Abd al-Rahim Mahmud underlined an increasingly realistic vision of losing the land:

> The Aqsa Mosque, oh Prince, have you come to pay reverence to it,
> Or to bid it farewell before it is lost,
> A sanctuary to be ravaged by every mutilated runaway slave,
> by every roving vagabond?
> And tomorrow, how near it is! For us nothing will remain but remorse and flowing tears"
> (cited in McKean Parmenter, 1994: 38).

Resistance to British policies and Zionist settlements did not remain in word only. Popular dissatisfaction regularly resulted in demonstrations, strikes, and violent riots (Norman, 2010: 17-20; Qumsiyeh, 2011).

Still, in today's Palestinian narrative, the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration are often seen as leading by design to the Palestinian national catastrophe. Both documents were and continue to be widely seen as an assault by European colonial powers on the Palestinian people and a betrayal of other promises. Rashid Khalidi makes this clear when he calls "Balfour's calibrated prose" the first declaration of war "by the British Empire on the indigenous population" (Khalidi, 2020: 29). Furthermore, the agreements symbolise the colonial protection and international support for the Zionist movement. Thus, the agreements encapsulate the strong feeling of powerlessness versus mighty external powers. Historian Avi Shlaim (2009: 13) writes pointedly, "The Arabs emphatically refused to recognise the Declaration, or anything done in its name, seeing it as […] an Anglo-Jewish plot to take over their country." Once we look at how those agreements came about and how they conflicted with British promises to Arab leaders, we see that these views are not without merit.

At the outbreak of World War I, Palestine was ruled by the Ottoman Empire which entered the war on the side of the Central Powers. By late 1918, British forces had captured Palestine. Once the Triple Entente believed that it would defeat the Ottoman Empire, the UK and France decided to negotiate a secret treaty that would outline spheres of direct control and influence in the Middle East, effectively carving up the Ottoman Empire (Barr, 2012; Berdine, 2018). While the Sykes-Picot Agreement did not determine the final borders that eventually emerged in the Middle East, it highlights the colonial influence in drawing their boundaries. The secret nature of the agreement underlines the colonial ambitions of the UK and France to expand their influence at the expanse of local aspirations (Barr, 2012).

Yet, already a few years before the Sykes-Picot Agreement, between 1915 and 1916, Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner of Egypt, exchanged letters with Hussein bin Ali, who as the Sharif of Mecca, commanded significant religious authority and acted as a key Arab figure at that time. In this exchange, McMahon, who eventually was informed of the Skyes-Picot Agreement and decided not to disclose it, promised Hussein an independent Arab state in exchange for an Arab revolt against the Ottomans (Barr, 2012). Hence, the Sykes-Picot agreement betrayed Arab ambitions to their own state.[12] For Palestinians, this was further compounded by the Balfour Declaration. In 1917, Zionist leaders acquired British support for their state-building project in Palestine. In the declaration, Arthur Balfour the British Foreign Secretary wrote on behalf of the government:

> His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country." (the Avalon Project, 2008a).

Importantly, the local Arab inhabitants of the land were not granted any political but only civil and religious rights (Shlaim 2009: 11). As Awan (2016) summarises "by this stage, the British had now promised roughly the same territory to both Arabs and Jews, while simultaneously double-crossing both parties, by secretly dividing up the land between the French and themselves." After the end of World War I, the League of Nations, spearheaded by the United States, established a "Mandate"-system, and assigned Britain the Mandate over Palestine, thus, formally cementing British colonial rule (Berdine, 2018). On paper, the goal of the Mandates included "administrative advice and assistance […] until such time as they are able to stand alone" (League of Nations, 1919: Article 22). Yet, the British rulers suppressed and criminalised Palestinian resistance. At the same time, the British provided - at least to a certain degree - support and protection to the Zionist movement (Kelly, 2017; Segev, 2001; Shlaim, 2005).

A clear example, of the British tendency of pro-Zionism was its handling of the Palestinian revolt of 1936. The revolt of 1936 came after decades of escalating tensions between the British, the Yishuv and the Palestinian community. Over the years, Palestinian objection against British and Zionist colonial violence led to various forms of resistance, often peaceful but at times involving violence. As Palestinian efforts proved futile, feelings of being deceived by merciless forces that were stealing the homeland only increased. At that time, Palestinian poet Ibrahim Tuqan captured this feeling: "You see what's

[12] Today the Sykes-Picot Agreement are widely seen as such a betrayal. Historically, however, it is unclear if that was the case as well. For a different view see Karsh and Karsh (1999).

happening, yet ask what's next? Deception, like madness, is of many kind. […]; Don't ever seek favours from someone; You tried and found to be heartless" (cited in Alshaer, 2019: 8-9).

Eventually, Palestinian frustration led to the revolt of 1936 (Kelly, 2017: 13-25). Initially, it largely consisted of a general strike and isolated occurrences of violence. However, it soon turned to organised violence and fighting, partially because of the unyielding British response. In 1938, to suppress the Palestinian uprising, British forces trained and armed Jewish squads to conduct counterinsurgency attacks on Arab villages. When the revolt eventually ended in 1939, the British had crushed the Palestinian political elite to such an extent that their ability to organise Palestinian society never really recovered by the time of the Nakba (Bauer, 1966; Hughes, 2015; Kelly, 2017).

British double-dealing and colonial ambition involved in the Sykes-Picot Agreement play a large role in today's Palestinian narrative and conspiracy narratives in particular. Thus, at the heart of Palestinian (conspiracy) narratives, we find a deep suspicion of British and Zionist colonialism. Furthermore, the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration encapsulate a Palestinian feeling of being powerless in the face of colonial interference in Palestine and the region at large.

6.3 The Nakba as a keystone in Palestinian identity: 1948

The war of 1948 marked the end point of British rule in Mandatory Palestine. Once the British government decided to leave Palestine, it attempted – one last time – to solve the conflict. In 1947, the UN introduced a plan that proposed to divide Mandatory Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state. The proposal favoured the Jewish side. Despite owning only 6-7% of the land and constituting only 33% of the total population, the proposal would have put the Yishuv in control of about 55% of the area (Pappé, 2014a: 40, Qumsiyeh, 2011: 94). With the Yishuv accepting the plan, at least tactically, and the Palestinian-Arabs and other Arabs states opposing the plan, the track was set for war (Slater, 2021: 75). In fact, the Arab states officially declared war on Israel the day after Israel proclaimed its independence on 14 May 1948.[13]

However, at the end of November 1947, several months before the end of the Mandate, the country had already slipped into a civil war between the Jewish and Palestinian forces. The war lasted from November 1947 – June 1948. For the Palestinians, the unfolding events constitute a catastrophe of great proportions, called al-nakba. The Nakba constitutes the single most important aspect of the Palestinian

[13] This is not to say that the Palestinian leadership sought war. Simha Flapan (1979) describes that local Palestinian leadership attempted to find peaceful avenues and prevent war.

national narrative and identity, creating deep-seated emotions that until today shape the interpretation of the world.

Throughout the war, especially from April 1948 onwards, Jewish troops expelled hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. While a great number of Palestinians, especially the more affluent middle class fled the country early, a total of around 750'000 Palestinians were forced to leave. The academic consensus is that Israeli troops engaged in a – more or less systematic – campaign of ethnic cleansing. What is disputed are the drivers and conditions under which this cleansing took place (Khalidi, 1988; Masalha, 1992; Morris, 2004a; Pappé, 2014a; Slater, 2021: 81). Palestinian historians, including Rashid Khalidi (1988; 2005), Nur Masalha (1992; 2000) and Elia Zureik (2016: 55) argue, the cleansing followed the clear Zionist logic of establishing a Jewish state with a Jewish majority. Once the war ended, the Jewish community controlled about 75% of the area of Mandate Palestine (Manna', 2013: 91). Critically, the new-born Israeli state did not allow Palestinians to return. Thus, 80% of Palestinians who had lived in newly born Israel became refugees, amounting to a total of about 60% of the Palestinian population at that time (Abu-Lughod and Sa'di 2007: 3). This massive and forced exodus meant that much of Palestinian "communal life was ended violently", resulting in countless harrowing stories of personal loss (ibid: 3). For example, Nooran Al-Hamdan (2019) recounts her family's history of the Nakba

> The village had gathered in a pre-celebration of a much anticipated wedding […]. Despite […] [the] recent political upheaval in Palestine, Qazaza remained a simple place […]. The air was pierced by a sudden shout; […] Three men appeared in front of the gathering. […] 'get out' [they shouted]. Abdulla, the soon to be groom, stepped forward […] No, we won't leave. […] The words barely left his mouth before a gun appeared, then a bullet, then the sound of the shot. It reverberated between the hills […]. [M]y grandfather told me the story […]. I had never seen my grandfather cry before. He shrank into a boy who had just witnessed his older brother be shot by the Haganah on the night before his wedding.

The events and memories of 1948 kept alive in stories carried insecurity deep into the fabric of Palestinian collective identity. Yet, while the Nakba led to the destruction of the Palestinian society of 1948, it crystallised a unique sense of Palestinian identity. Palestinian scholar Ihab Saloul (2012: 2) writes pointedly: "nothing forged Palestinian identity as adamantly, it seems, as the loss of Palestine." Every social stratum, despite varying experiences before (and during) the catastrophe was deeply affected. Thus, the year 1948 constitutes "an existential and profoundly transformative rupture" for Palestinians until today (Doumani and Winder, 2018: 7). Over time, the Nakba became constructed as a temporal line between two radically distinct eras. The time before the Nakba became idealised, memorised as a peaceful and idyllic life, and the land that had provided the livelihood for most Palestinians acquired an almost mythical status (Sa'di, 2005). Sari Nusseibeh (2007: 67), Professor of Philosophy and former PA representative describes how his mother narrated the Nakba:

> Her words were about the idyllic innocence of a magical dreamland. She told me about oranges I envisioned as the sweetest on earth growing on a plantation stretching all the way to the gently swelling waves of the Mediterranean […]. Then came the intrusion by the foreigners, the struggle with the British, the depredations of the Zionists, and the terrorized flight on foot.

However, the 1948 war abruptly and violently shattered this imagined idyllic life and inaugurated a new and continuing period of painful and insecure exile. The Arabic term al-nakba exemplifies this identity significantly better than the English translation of Nakba with catastrophe. While the Nakba indeed means catastrophe or calamity, the basic form of the corresponding verb (nakaba) denotes dislocating one's shoulder joints. In this etymological sense it implies "an ill-fitting link between the limbs and torso" (Badarin, 2016: 14). Thus, Nakba translates into tragedy but implies broken links between the Palestinian people and their homeland. This links to another key concept that describes Palestinian identity: Exile (ghurba). Al-ghurba literally means alienation or estrangement. Both concepts, the Nakba and al-ghurba are fundamentally constitutive of Palestinian identity, in the sense of both the actual experience but also, and especially, how they became viewed in Palestinian discourse (ibid: 7). Their dual importance lies also in their linkage, emphasising the continuation and ongoing nature of tragedy and loss, of suffering and pain. As Palestinian scholars Abu-Lughod and Sa'di put it: "the Nakba meant the destruction in a single blow of all the worlds in which Palestinians had lived" (Abu-Lughod and Sa'di, 2007: 9). Furthermore, the Nakba is not a single event of tragedy, but rather a continuous experience. As long as return and freedom are not realised, the Nakba and connected exile continue (Kretzschmar, 2019: 80).

The Palestinian narrative inevitably highlights Palestinian insecurity, both during the Nakba, but also in its aftermath. Badarin (2016: 15) underlines the daily insecurity in the aftermath of the Nakba experienced and expressed by many Palestinians. Ghassan Kanafani remembers a winter in a refugee camp in Jordan, marred by deep insecurity and a daily struggle to survive, relying on meagre food rations provided by the Red Cross:

> I […] stood with the hundreds of children, all of us waiting for our turn. A clean starched nurse gave me a red square box. I ran 'home' without opening it. Now, nineteen years later, I have completely forgotten what was in that dream box. Except for just one thing: a can of lentil soup […]. I remember nothing except the cold, and the ice that manacled my fingers, and the can of soup (cited in Alshaer, 2019: 12).

Yet, the condition of insecure exile was imagined as temporary. From the beginning, Palestinians shared the fragile hope of return. First, during the war and directly after the war, Palestinians hoped to return to their homes. Once Israel prevented Palestinians from returning, Palestinians hoped that justice would soon prevail. However, as the remainder of the chapter will show, the feelings expressed in the

Palestinian narrative kept oscillating between hopes and shattered hopes. Thus, behind the hopes Palestinians express in their narrative lurks an insecurity that their hopes will never materialise.

I am emphasising this, to argue that the "precarious conditions of exile and refugeeness generate fragile identities", as Badarin (2016: 17) writes. I would specify, however, that it is not necessarily the identity itself that is fragile, but rather that being Palestinian means feeling and facing insecurities and carrying a legacy of collective (and personal) suffering forward. This theme is compounded by attacks on the Palestinian identity itself. After the Nakba, Palestinians ceased being Palestinians and became, in many cases state-less, refugees catered for by aid agencies, as just described by Kanafani. The few Palestinians that remained in Israel became described as Israeli-Arabs. Palestinian historian Elias Sanbar (2001: 87) argues:

> 'The Palestinian people does not exist', said the new local masters, and henceforth the Palestinians would be referred to by general, conveniently vague terms, as either 'refugees', or in the case of the small minority that had managed to the escape generalized expulsion, 'Israeli Arabs'. A long absence was beginning.

In fact, once Israel occupied the West Bank, Israel banned Palestinian national symbols and even systematically replaced the term Palestinians with Arabs in documents such as schoolbooks. Thus, considering Israeli measures to Hebraicize the country and ban Palestinian collective symbols Palestinians fear not only their physical destruction but also the erasure of their identity (Cohen and Kliot, 1992; Hasan, 2019; Masalha, 2012; Shafir, 2017: 33-36). Mournfully Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish captures the simultaneous loss of homeland and identity writing "the moment they arrived on your land, they defined the parameters of their existence and those of their children. And at the same time they defined yours. The moment they became natives you became a refugee." (cited in McKean Parmenter, 1994: 96-97). Thus, the ongoing Nakba and exile symbolise not only individual insecurity but also collective insecurity. Overall, the "Palestinians sustained a perception of threat against their particular identity - the 'Palestinian personality'" (Badarin, 2016: 17).

6.4 Perseverance, resistance and the PLO: 1948 - 1987

The period between 1948 and 1964 is often described as the "lost years" of Palestinian society and as the "hiatus" of the Palestinian national movement (Khalidi, 1997: 178-179; see also Shemesh, 2004: 89; Gerber, 2008: 187-191). Due to the intense rupture and shock of displacement and flight Palestinians needed time to adjust and reorient themselves in their new, often hostile, environment, often forced to relocate various times (Ghanem, 2013: 16; Litvak 2009: 103). Many Palestinians were simply "immersed in the problems of everyday life" (Said, 2007: 250), taking a heavy personal toll. As Edward Said describes:

> "the faces which I had once remembered as content and at ease, […] now were lined with the cares of exile and homelessness, […]. Many families and individuals had their lives broken, their spirits drained, their composure destroyed forever in the context of seemingly unending serial dislocation" (cited in Alshaer, 2019: 44).

But Palestinians were also fragmented collectively. While most Palestinians found themselves in the West Bank under Jordanian rule, a smaller percentage (150,000) were allowed to remain in the new Israeli state, while others came under Egyptian rule in the Gaza Strip. Others had fled to Lebanon and Syria. In all those places, to different degrees and in varying ways, Palestinians faced marginalisation and discrimination region. Palestinian society had also lost much of its political leadership, as the traditionally leading families, the Nashashibis, Husseinis and Khalidis were discredited, dispersed and lost much of their resources (Sayigh, 1997: 35-40). The absence of a credible and functioning elite meant at a minimum that a coherent Palestinian narrative was not visible.

However, the 1950s witnessed a major re-emergence and development of Palestinian identity. Yet, while not always outwardly visible, Palestinians continued to express their identity as Palestinians, or rather formulated "a reconstitution of an independent Palestinian identity" and thus, the 1950s constituted the formative years of the new Palestinian national movement (Khalidi, 1997: 179). The above-outlined concept of exile originates to a large extent in this period. Palestinian literature in the 1950s repeatedly highlighted the image of the desert, as a symbol for their exile. One Palestinian poet expresses: "I am a friendless wanderer in the deserts, behind the wires of injustice is my home." (cited in McKean Parmenter, 1994: 51) As McKean Parmenter explains, the images of the desert represent:

> not so much a real desert as a symbol of want, insecurity, emptiness, and death. […] The desert is thus a real environment for many Palestinians in exile. [It] involves the loss of boundaries, distinctive features, and internal structure which give character to place. The desert space contains no centers of meaning or framework or significance as did the Palestinian's own land.

Yet, even the 1950s saw some Palestinian attempts at political mobilisation, such as the Arab Nationalist Movement founded in 1951 and Fatah in 1959 (Sayigh, 1997: 71). However, they did not exercise much gravitational pull at that time, even though Fatah, developing around Yasir Arafat, would become the most influential Palestinian party, a status it still occupies today. The Palestinian cause became more visible with the founding of the PLO in 1964. Yet, until 1967 Pan-Arabism completely enveloped "Palestinianism". In fact, the PLO was created on the initiative of Egyptian President Gamal Abd Al-Nasser, to utilise but also to strictly control Palestinian nationalism according to Egyptian ideological needs (Chamberlin, 2022: 102). Thus, the PLO's first national charter, the Qauwmi-Charter (al-mīthāq al-qaumī), put the Palestinian struggle squarely into the framework of Pan-Arabism, seeing the Palestinian people as part of the Arab nation and thus, the liberation of Palestine was seen as foremost

an Arab duty (IEPQa, n.d.). However, the Arab defeat in 1967 shattered Pan-Arabism, and the Palestinian voices that had been critical of the Arab governments, most notably Fatah, now gained dominance inside the PLO. Thus, the revised national charter, the Watani-Charter (al-mīthāq al-watanī) of 1968 states: The Palestinian Arab people believe in Arab unity […], however, they must, at the present stage of their struggle, safeguard their Palestinian identity and develop their consciousness […]." (IEPQb, n.d.).

The PLO articulated a coherent political version of Palestinian national aspiration that captured the support of the Palestinian refugees. A Fatah supporter later recounted the meaning of the Fatah and the PLO, recounting: "the Palestinian people 'had been forced to forget its own name,' but Fatah 'reawakened Palestinian national identity and brought it back to life'" (Baumgarten, 2005: 33). This identification with the PLO was also due to the positive emotional message that the organisation offered. Addressing the dominant theme of insecurity in exile, the PLO offered the heroic image of the resistance fighter instead (Khalili, 2007: 113-117). The guerrilla fighters and their operations energised such narratives and found their culmination in the heroic account of the Battle of Karameh in 1968, in which a small number of Fedayeen – literally those willing to sacrifice themselves for the struggle – fought the Israeli Army (Sayigh, 1997: 179).

The PLO saw their struggle as part of a global wave of national liberation movements. In 1962 Algerian fighters succeeded in driving the French settlers out of the country, the Vietcong fight against American-supported South Vietnam was underway and in 1959 the Cuban Revolution had overthrown the right-wing regime of Fulgencio Batista. The PLO saw itself in the same vein, with the PLO guerillas forming the avant-garde of the left-wing revolutionary Palestinian national movement. This ideology drew heavily from the anti-imperial, anti-colonial revolutionary literature. Liberation literature from anti-colonial writers, including Franz Fannon, Mao Zedong and Che Guevera proliferated in Palestinian refugee camps, and the PLO adopted much of their analytical perspective (Chamberlin, 2012: 19; Khalili, 2007: 15). The revised PLO charter of 1968 makes this ideological perspective visible (IEPQb, n.d.):

> Zionism is a political movement organically associated with international imperialism and antagonistic to all action for liberation and to progressive movements in the world. It is racist and fanatic in its nature, aggressive, expansionist and colonial in its aims, and fascist in its methods. Israel is the instrument of the Zionist movement, and the geographical base for world imperialism placed strategically in the midst of the Arab homeland to combat the hopes of the Arab nation for liberation, unity, and progress.

The PLO also adopted the concept of the armed struggle as a tool for liberation. Following Fanon's perspective on violence, the PLO saw the armed struggle not only as a tool to liberate Palestine but also

to build the national consciousness of the Palestinian population. Furthermore, as highlighted by Fanon (1963), the violent confrontation of the coloniser, would allow the colonised to shed their inferiority complex. Thus, the PLO saw violence as a liberating tool both in the material but also in the psychological sense (Pappé, 2022: 178; Sayigh, 1997: 91). While over the years, the PLO moved away from armed resistance, the anti-colonial language stayed, and remains an important aspect of Palestinian narratives and conspiracy narratives.

Yet, the June 1967 war constituted a decisive Israeli victory over the surrounding Arab states. During the war, Israel conquered and subsequently occupied the West Bank and Gaza, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights. The war itself constituted another shock to the Palestinian community and became known as the Naksa (al-naksa) meaning setback. The war displaced another 200,000 Palestinians who mostly fled to the East Bank of the Jordan. However, in the Palestinian narrative, the Naksa plays only a minor role, dwarfed by the Nakba. In a way, the Naksa only represents another step in the ongoing Nakba (Manna', 2013).

For Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, one occupying regime was replaced with another. Yet, it also meant the unification of large parts of the Palestinian population inside one political entity, even if Israel continued to place Palestinians under various political and hostile frameworks (Manna', 2013: 94-96). The Israeli occupation, that the regime tried to frame as "enlightened occupation" included massive repression and the total absence of any Palestinian collective political rights. When confronted with resistance, the occupation forces reacted with brutal force. Initially, the Israeli occupation regime attempted to direct the daily life of Palestinians. However, over time Israel repeatedly tried to grant limited self-autonomy to Palestinian leaders who cooperated with Israel. This included attempts to set up the "Village Leagues" in the 1980s (Tamari, 1983). In some ways, these attempts functioned as the blueprint for the co-optation of the PA after the Oslo Accords. Israeli leaders also made attempts to revive Jordanian control over Palestinian population centres or to declare Jordan as the real Palestinian state.

The 1967 war opened the West Bank to Israeli colonisation. Only weeks after the Israeli victory, the first Israeli settlements were established, as described in Chapter 4. As a reaction to the threat of expulsion during the 1967 war and the constant Israeli encroachment on Palestinian land in its aftermath, Palestinians developed the notion of steadfastness, or sumud (ṣumūd). Sumud does not refer to a fixed set of practices and does not involve active or armed resistance. Rather, sumud denotes a form of everyday resistance that rejects passive submission to Israeli occupation by clinging to the land, not

giving in to pressure, and continuing to stick to a Palestinian identity. Rijke and van Teeffelen (2014: 87) summarise the development of the concept:

> In the popular awareness of Palestinians […] sumud […] had been a matter of existential urgency during the war in 1967, when many once again faced a decision whether to stay or to leave. Remembering the flight in 1948, families chose to cling to their homes and land so as not to become refugees (again), lose everything, and leave the Palestinian land for the Israelis to take over. […].

Sumud highlights the stubborn perseverance of Palestinians to remain Palestinians. The Palestinian literature and poetry of the 1960s and 1970s also reflected the Palestinian defiance and attempt to cling to their identity. For example, Mahmoud Darwish writes facing Israeli attempts to shore up their historic claims: "The archaeologist is busy analyzing stones; Searching for his eyes in the rubble of legends; In order to certify; That I am merely a passer-by on the road; […]; But I go on slowly planting my trees, Singing about my love [for Palestine]!" (cited in McKean Parmenter, 1994: 96-9). Yet, sumud remains intricately linked to insecurity. Sumud gains significance as other "avenues" of resistance seem fruitless, and potentially entail "complete annihilation […] [as] a real possibility." (Khalili, 2007: 99). Sumud, like other concepts, such as the concept of the Right of Return, encapsulates the two sides of the same coin that contains hope and despair.

Preserving the Palestinian identity as part of sumud also includes keeping the desire to return to the lost homes alive and pass the memories of lost Palestine on to the following generation. To draw on Palestinian historian Elias Sanbar (2001: 90), Palestinians, being denied their identity in the present and having their "aspirations and their future forbidden", occupied a "space made up of both a past preserved by memory afflicted by madness and a dreamt-of future which aspired to restore time." Restoring time, became the key ideological demand, phrased as the Right of Return that the PLO embraced. Up until today, the Right of Return symbolised by the keys of their old homes that many families still preserve, is a central Palestinian demand.

In the following two decades after 1967, Palestinian civil society developed significantly. While the PLO was based first in Jordan, then Lebanon and finally Tunisia, Palestinian society developed strong independent civil institutions, especially around the universities and trade unions. Other groups, such as women's committees and relief organisations established a wide network (Pearlman, 2011). In a way, this shows the contradictory impulses of the Israeli occupation between a liberal and repressive approach. Israel allowed institutions to exist, as long as this did not mean collective resistance to Israeli rule. This (neo)-liberal tendency was also reflected in the integration of the OPT into the Israeli economy. By 1987, 40% of the (official) Palestinian workforce in the West Bank was employed in Israel or its

expanding settlements (Kimmerling and Migdal, 2003: 275-286). Due to the influx of salaries by Palestinian workers, and remittances from Palestinians working in the rich Gulf economies, the OPT achieved moderate levels of prosperity. However, this never meant proper economic development, but rather an increasing dependency on the Israeli economy and its institutions (Shafir, 2017: 33). The West Bank became a lucrative market for Israeli companies while providing cheap labour, and unilateral trade barriers prevented Palestinian companies, especially farmers exporting competitively into Israel. In other words, Palestinians were not only politically at the mercy of the Israeli state but also economically.

The endpoint of this era was the First Intifada in 1987. The Intifada precisely showed the violence inherent in Israeli colonialism. On the one hand, a build-up of frustration with the ongoing occupation and its repressive tactics exploded. On the other hand, an economic crisis in Israel directly hit the Palestinian economy, wiping out any moderate gains Palestinians had made (Pearlman, 2011: 96, 101). As is often the case with economic crises, the effects were felt acutely by the most vulnerable people in the economic system: Palestinians, and especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, for example, day labourers in Israel.

6.5 The First Intifada and the Oslo Accords: 1987-1999

The First Intifada, as the first Palestinian uprising is called, broke out in December 1987. Intifada (intifāḍah) literally means the act of shaking something off, such as the shaking off dust from garments. In other words, Palestinians called their uprising an attempt to shake off the occupation from their lives. In December 1987, popular unrest quickly extended throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, evolving into a comprehensive uprising that reshaped the dynamics of Palestinian-Israeli relations, and shifted the perspectives held by international observers regarding the occupation (Naser-Najjab, 2020: 62). The frequent image of the Intifada, that of children armed with stones resisting armed Israeli soldiers turned the narrative of a fight "between David and Goliath, part of Israel's national mythology of a small community pitted against giants, on its head", (McKean Parmenter, 1994: 2, see also: Collins, 2004: 2) highlighting the intrinsic violent nature of the Israeli occupation, both inside Israel and to the wider world.

In the years of the "'enlightened occupation'", the "Israeli narrative […] denied the existence of the Palestinian 'Other'" as Menachem Klein (2019: 18) writes. While a strong claim, it is certain that the Palestinian issue was rarely understood to be an issue of denying a people their right to nation- and statehood. Sari Nusseibeh (2007: 104) writes about the Israeli left: "we [the Palestinians] hardly existed in the minds of these fine people. This absence wasn't the product of malevolence or ill will […]. Their

humanism never had to face us". While Nusseibeh indicates this might have shifted with 1967 and an extended occupation, I argued in Chapter 4 that this attitude persisted on a general level until the Intifada.

The Intifada hit Israel by surprise. However, the PLO, since 1974 internationally recognised as the sole representative of the Palestinian people was equally astonished. In 1987, the PLO leadership was based in Tunis, struggling to build organised PLO structures in the West Bank and eager to improve its declining relevance in the Palestinian struggle. After the battle of Karameh in 1968 the PLO and its associated factions, most notably of Fatah, saw their reputation soar (Sayigh, 1997: 179; Terrill, 2001). However, since 1970 the PLO's story has been everything but a success. Confronting the Jordanian military in 1970, the PLO had to flee its Jordanian base. Decimated it found refuge in Lebanon. After painfully rebuilding its semi-state-like institutions and support, the PLO continued operating from southern Lebanon until the Israeli invasion of the country ended with a decisive military defeat of the PLO in 1982. Thus, the PLO exiled in Tunisia was away from the daily life of Palestinians in the OPT. Yet, it remained the most potent symbol of nationalism Palestinians had.

Despite the absence of a clear political leadership inside the OPT, the Intifada did not remain a spontaneous outburst of violence (Pearlman, 2011: 94-100). Rather, local Palestinian groups, under the quickly emerging Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) diligently organised a campaign of non-violent protest, that included demonstrations, civil disobedience, and economic and institutional boycotts of Israeli businesses and institutions. Violence, most notably the throwing of stones occurred too. The UNLU regularly issued public communiqués to direct the efforts of the Intifada for the next two years. In general terms, the leaflets insisted on non-violent means of opposing the Israeli occupation. They aimed at a negotiated solution between Israel and the Palestinians, in the framework of the 1967 borders. Thus, they called for a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital, not for the liberation of all of Palestine. While not directed by the PLO, each leaflet was signed in the name of the PLO (Salem, 2008: 187-189).

From the onset of the Intifada in 1987 to the early 1990s, the Intifada leadership aided by local committees showed resilience in the face of escalating Israeli repression. These included violence against protestors, curfews, fines, house demolitions, deportations, and thousands of arrests. Over time, Israeli tactics paid off. The local leadership started to splinter, and the Intifada was losing direction and steam. Arguably, this resulted in less coherent protests that lacked discipline, became more susceptible to political infighting, and ultimately took a more violent turn (Pearlman, 2011: 116).

Part of the infighting was the rise of a new Palestinian party: Hamas. Hamas, the acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement (ḥarakat al-muqāwama al-ʾislāmiya) was established in 1987. Aligning with the

local Intifada leadership, the PLO took a more explicit stance towards non-violence and a two-state-solution-oriented paradigm based on recognising Israel. In fact, in 1988 the PLO issued a declaration of Palestinian independence, officially endorsed the 1947 United Nations partition plan, and accepted UNSCR 242. Using worldwide solidarity to build momentum, Arafat spoke before the United Nations General Assembly and explicitly recognised Israel (Baumgarten, 2002: 142-146). Hamas, however, established itself as an actor opposing any compromise with Israel and dedicated itself firmly to armed resistance and the liberation of all of Palestine. Yet at the time, Hamas only captured the support of not more than 15% of Palestinians (Byman, 2011: 99).

While ultimately the Intifada failed and did not result in “shaking off” the occupation, it altered the existing equations. The First Intifada visibly showed that Palestinians, after traumatic displacement and decades of occupation, had still not given up national self-determination. While overshadowed by the rise of Hamas and its violence, the Intifada showed a sense of national cohesion, that mobilised all of society, which seems a long way from a focus on the armed struggle by male fighters. Furthermore, as described in Chapter 4, many Israelis concluded that open-ended occupation over another people was not only costly but also immoral (Goodman, 2018: 32, 46-47), shifting Israeli politics towards negotiations with the PLO, especially since the PLO had recognised Israel.

Together with international shifts around the end of the Cold War and the Iraq War, the Intifada produced the first openings in a diplomatic process, a "peace process" that found its first crowning moment in the Oslo Accords of 1993. While the Intifada pushed Israel towards diplomacy, the PLO's isolation both internationally as well as in the Arab world after supporting Saddam Hussein in its invasion of Kuwait in 1990, left the PLO no choice, especially as it approached financial bankruptcy (Mattar, 1994). The First Intifada as well as the international developments resulted in the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991 and the first time Israelis and Palestinians, later being part of a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, conducted direct negotiations. While the Madrid conference remained largely symbolic it built further momentum allowing the Israeli Labour Party to campaign and win the election in 1992 with the promise of peace).

In September 1993, the PLO and Israel signed the Declaration of Principles (DoP), the first step in a negotiation process with several agreements that became known as the Oslo Accords. Israel and the PLO agreed on four essential points. First, as a major achievement, both Israel and the PLO formally recognised each other as part of an international treaty. Second, a new Palestinian Authority (PA) was to be established to exercise some form of Palestinian self-government in the West Bank and Gaza. Third, the West Bank and Gaza were to be divided into Areas A, subject to full PA oversight; Areas B,

where security matters were under joint Palestinian-Israeli control; and Areas C which would be solely under Israeli control. Fourth, both Israel and the PLO committed to initiating permanent status talks addressing the thorny issues of Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, water, and the shape of the borders no later than May 1996. The talks were scheduled to conclude in a final peace settlement by May 1999. (Baumgarten, 2002: 177-180; Parsons, 2005: 72-106; Watson, 2000: 41-54).

The signing of the DoP came as a surprise to most Palestinians, as the negotiations were held in secret. Even a Palestinian delegation in Washington that was engaged in official negotiations with Israel was not fully informed of the process and even less of its content. Besides Arafat, only a handful of people were kept fully appraised (Sayigh, 1997: 653). Once the content of the Oslo Accords emerged, prominent Palestinians levelled fierce criticism against it. Pearlman (2011: 121) summarises: "The signing of the Declaration of Principles on the White House lawn, followed by Arafat's call on all Palestinians to 'return to ordinary life,' was the symbolic end to an uprising whose dream of unity had already died." As one Palestinian activist of the later heavily disappointed generation of the First Intifada expressed "The revolution is started by the courageous, exploited by opportunists, and its fruits are harvested by cowards." (cited in Pearlman, 2011: 121).

The reasons for such feelings are clear. The PLO had offered Israel everything it wanted: recognition inside the pre-1967 borders and a promise to reign in armed attacks. Thus, the entire accords were based on what Israel framed as its security needs while postponing decisions on crucial Palestinian demands. It established Palestinian control over a fragmented territory, while in key functions, such as taxation, remained dependent on Israel. An independent Palestinian state would depend on the final negotiations. Furthermore, the agreements did not mention settlements, effectively allowing Israel to alter facts on the ground. Overall, the Oslo Accords replicated the massive power imbalance between the Israeli and Palestinian sides (Naser-Najjab, 2020). As Kimmerling and Migdal (2003: 356-358) argue, the Oslo Accords frontloaded Israeli benefits and backloaded (potential) Palestinian benefits, without incentives for Israel to conclude negotiations in the future. Furthermore, following the tradition of the Villages Leagues, Israel established a Palestinian agent that could impose order on Palestinian society, and thus reduce the costs of occupation, further lessening Israeli incentives to withdraw (Ghanem, 2010: 90; Geist Pinfold, 2023b).

However, for most Palestinians, the Oslo Accords constituted – at least at first – a wonderful break with the past, the endpoint of the struggle for recognition, and an independent Palestine within reach (Baumgarten, 2002: 176). Palestinians remember an atmosphere of jollity, with people dancing on the streets, and children handing out sweets and flowers to by-passers including Israeli soldiers. When

Arafat landed in Jericho, ending the exile of the PLO of the West Bank, a massive crowd welcomed him, chanting and celebrating. Many of my Palestinian participants, remembered this hope.

> I do remember [the] Oslo [Accords] clearly. At that time, we went out to the streets, and we celebrated having an independent country. And even the [Israeli] buses that were going across Shu'fat [in East Jerusalem], at that time my village, we started throwing flowers and sweets at them and smiling, laughing. Life was all flowers. For me and my family, we started going to Tel Aviv and the West Bank, and we were like khalas [it is over], we have peace with one another. There's no reason to be afraid [anymore] (Interview 31).

Happiness and hope took centre stage for many Palestinians. When Arafat arrived in Gaza after a life-long exile he was greeted by celebrating masses. However, Palestinian ecclectic emotions underwent the typical cycle of going from hopefulness to shattered hopes and despair. To continue the above quote: "But the thing is, slowly, […] when the Palestinian Authority was established, I thought Oslo was a disaster." (Interview 31).

6.6 The Second Intifada and the entrenchment of the occupation: 2000 - 2023

While hope might have lingered for a while and occasionally received a boost from new negotiations, Palestinians could see that the peace process stalled and finally collapsed. Furthermore, Palestinian life did not improve, both in terms of personal and economic security. While income levels first declined, they stabilised at pre-Oslo levels around 1997 (Parsons, 2005: 214). However, wealth increasingly became unevenly divided, with people with close contacts inside the PA enriching themselves (Khan, 2004). Crucially, consecutive Israeli governments continued to deny Palestinian national aspirations and continued colonisation of the OPT. For example, Israeli governments continued settlement construction, with settlers in the West Bank and Gaza doubling between 1990 and 2000 (Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde, 2020: 47-49; Slater, 2021: 236). At the same time, Israel started to develop an intricate system of control over Palestinian daily life via checkpoints throughout the West Bank and increasingly established by-pass roads to connect settlements with Israel. Beyond security functions for the Israeli state, the PA's authority remained heavily curtailed (Parsons, 2005: 199-204). Even though negotiations continued, after the failure of Camp David in 2000, the Oslo period came to a violent end when the Second Intifada broke out.

The Second Intifada showed that "the hope and optimism of the First Intifada" had been "replaced by anger and frustration", and a pervasive "anti-Israeli cynicism" (Norman, 2010: 30). Triggered by a provocative visit of Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, and the use of deadly force against Palestinian protestors, Palestinians groups carried out violent attacks on Israeli targets. The violence quickly spiralled out of control, leading to an extended period of armed confrontation between the army

and Palestinian militant groups. Hamas was especially active in adopting violent strategies, increasingly relying on suicide bombings, that were soon adopted by other Palestinian factions. The Israeli army used live ammunition and sniper fire on protestors, targeted assassinations, air raids, curfews on entire villages and towns, mass detention of Palestinians and finally full-scale military invasion of Palestinian cities, including Ramallah and Jenin (Allen, 2008; Parsons, 2005: 265; Pearlman, 2011: 150). In Ramallah specifically, the Israeli army occupied the city but also the Palestinian Presidential Palace, isolating Yasir Arafat, who in the mind of many but certainly not all Israeli politicians and security officials was directing the Palestinian armed resistance, and thus, was seen by many as directly responsible for suicide bombings (Klein, 2019: 17). While Israeli operations lead to a drop in suicide bombings inside Israel, the undermining of the PLO leadership increased the relative power and popularity of other parties, most notably Hamas.

The legacy of the Second Intifada was highly destructive. It involved mostly armed Palestinian groups, consisting predominantly of male fighters, while much of society remained passive. Thus, the inclusive non-violent model of the First Intifada was replaced with the assumption that only violence would force Israel to deliver on the promises of the Oslo Accords. Yet, when the Second Intifada ended, more than 4000 Palestinians and 1000 Israelis had been killed (Eldar, 2013). Palestinians of all ways of life recount the Second Intifada as an especially intense phase of insecurity that turned the lives of Palestinians upside down. One Palestinian teacher in East Jerusalem interviewed during the Intifada stated “The Intifada has affected all normal ways of life, not that life was so normal to start with. But even the normal of the abnormal was at least partly normal.” Or as a woman from Bethlehem put it: “This Intifada is having an impact on the entire society. [...] a big part of the Intifada is completely arbitrary violence. There is a four-year-old from the next village [...]. He walked outside and got hit by a bullet in his eye.” (cited in Pearlman, 2004: 12, 32-33).

The violence experienced by Palestinians during the Second Intifada destroyed any remaining hope for most Palestinians in achieving national independence via the PA. Obvious was the fact, that the PA could not resist Israel’s armed incursions. Furthermore, the Intifada ended when Mahmoud Abbas took over the presidency from Arafat after his death. Abbas promised Israeli Prime Minister Sharon to reign in rogue elements in the PA security forces that had joined armed groups in their armed struggle against Israel. Abbas’ policies to restore calm damaged his legitimacy, even though most Palestinians were relieved that the daily violence stopped. 2005 also coincided with Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, the result of the Israeli shift towards conflict management (Chapter 4, see also Ghanem, 2010: 21).

In many ways, the Oslo Accords presented themselves as a perfect tool to follow this approach. As outlined, the Accords did not incentivise Israeli politicians to make concessions, while at the same time, the division of the West Bank and the existence and cooperation of the PA which effectively relied on Israel for its existence, allowed Israel to disengage from Palestinian population centres. While the Second Intifada challenged this Israeli approach, the end of the Intifada and the continuing PA cooperation reaffirmed it. The logical conclusion of this “disengagement but control” approach was the disengagement from Gaza in 2005, and the separation wall between the West Bank and Israel. However, because of the wall, many Palestinian villages found themselves cut off from land or neighbouring towns and villages that constituted their centre of gravity, most notably Jerusalem and Ramallah.

As stated, this approach worked so well, because Israel can rely on the PA to police the Palestinian population. Thus, the reality for Palestinians today is not only the Israeli occupation, but also the PA’s partake in the very occupation it claims to oppose (Farsakh, 2021: 7). In a way, both governing systems fused, creating a repressive, opaque, and unresponsive system for Palestinians, their daily needs, not to speak of national ambitions. This becomes evident when we look at how the PA evolved and digressed.

From the creation of the PA onwards, the Palestinian political leadership attempted to carry out a complex state-building process, building political institutions typical for a "modern" nation-state. This required that the PLO finish its transformation from a revolutionary actor in charge of an aspiring state. This involved a systematic change in narratives as well (Badarin, 2016, 188-195; Farsakh, 2021: 7; Sayigh, 1997: 663). However, from the very beginning, the PLO state-building process remained incomplete, producing only a partially democratic system that has since shifted into a de-facto authoritarian state. The developed system remained a highly fragmented, top-down system held together by neo-patrimonial ties between Arafat and various officeholders (Ghanem, 2010: 90; Klein, 2019: 93-100; El Kurd, 2020: 9-15). At the same time, however, the PA held general elections, created a semi-independent judiciary, and developed a Palestinian parliament, the Palestinian Legislative Council that tried to exercise some form of control over the government (Lindholm Schulz, 2002: 37). However, when Arafat was forced to step down as president, the system increasingly disintegrated and, amidst the ongoing Second Intifada, the popularity of Hamas soared, while Israeli military actions weakened Fatah and the PA.

In the PLC elections in 2006, the last elections held since, Hamas achieved a decisive victory. However, Israel, the US and the EU pressured the Fatah-led PA to either force Hamas to recognise Israel or to be removed from government altogether (Khalidi, 2020). This ultimately led to clashes with Fatah and a Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007, while the West Bank remained under the control of the Fatah-

led PA. Since then, various reconciliation attempts between both parties have failed. The Hamas-Fatah split is meaningful for Palestinian feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness. The factional split presents Palestinians with another layer of complexity in a political situation that over time became more and more opaque. The split between Fatah and Hamas led to a multitude of suspicions, each side accusing the other of secretly working for Israel or outside forces against the national aspiration of the Palestinians. At the same time, the split and the threat the other faction poses for the rule of their area drives factionalism, and even more preferential treatment for their loyalists to the extent that many Palestinians feel they cannot rely on any parties or institutions (Allen, 2016; DCAF, 2024; Saeedi et al., 2024).

Furthermore, consecutive Israeli governments were able to use the split to justify the absence of any negotiations, while pursuing de-facto expansionist policies in the West Bank. The split also paralysed the political system of the PA. Without any further elections since 2006, President Mahmoud Abbas has now been in office for 18 years. Since the PLC's mandate ended in 2010, the PLC does no longer convenes. However, Abbas continues ruling, largely via Presidential Decrees. Abbas represents an old elite that still has a grip on power, while the median age in the West Bank is 20. Yet, young people are completely underrepresented in formal political institutions, without opportunities to have their voices heard, with deep patronage structures in place that give little room for independent political platforms outside of Fatah (Høigilt, 2016; Klein, 2019: 93-102; El Kurd, 2020: 13-15). Under Abbas' leadership the Palestinian institutions gradually disintegrated: "What remained was a forceful isolated power centre with the president at its top." (Klein, 2019: 94). Considering very little popular support from Palestinians, Abbas' rule shows an increasing reliance on coercion via the PA's various security forces which absorb 30% of the PA's entire budget. However, the PA is not simply another authoritarian state. What contributes to the repressive, anxiety-inducing situation Palestinians experience and what contributes to the abysmal image of the PA among the population is the one-sided security cooperation with Israel. This entails that PA security forces arrest Palestinians wanted by Israel and suppress Palestinian protests against Israel (Tartir, 2017).

The PA's willingness to act as an extension of the Israeli occupation is connected to the fact that PA and Israeli interests are intertwined if not completely aligned. In the absence of much domestic legitimacy, the PA has an interest in suppressing opposition actors, like Hamas, who are simultaneously opponents of Israel. Thus, Israeli actions against Hamas are, at least partially, to the advantage of the PA. Furthermore, the existence of the PA and the connected benefits of power, privileges and potentially

wealth, are primarily dependent on Israel. Agha and Khalidi (2017) summarise the situation and its impact on Palestinian society pointedly:

> Insofar as security cooperation is seen as an auxiliary function to the occupation, it has added to a sense of helplessness and loss of agency and has focussed popular anger and frustration away from the struggle for freedom and independence. Whether the Palestinians would be better served in raw contact with the occupation without the mediating influence of the P.A. is open to question, but the cumulative corrosive impact of the P.A.'s role as shield and security subcontractor to the occupation is undeniable—especially with no accompanying political returns.

Yet, Palestinian forces not only cooperate with Israel in arresting Palestinian citizens, but they also remain passive in the face of Israeli state or settler violence. The expansion of settlements and frequent attacks by radical settlers contribute to the heightened sense of insecurity. The Israeli wall fragments the West Bank, a constant display of the exercise of power over space and people. Checkpoints fragment the West Bank further, making travelling not only complicated but also frequently fearful, with arbitrary measures that cannot be comprehended or anticipated (Shafir, 2017: 50). The Israeli army conducts raids, arresting suspects at will, holding Palestinians in administrative detention without charges or trial. To exert control, Israeli intelligence agencies have penetrated Palestinian society, gathering intelligence through informants and collaborators and extensively monitoring various forms of digital communication. For West Bank Palestinians, the occupation is not an abstract or distant concept but a lived reality, with violence seeping deep into the daily lives of Palestinians. As Harker (2020: 144) observes: "Everyday performances of colonial violence […] are cloaked in bureaucracy, law, and security discourse". Constant changes in procedures, a maze of regulations and arbitrary bureaucratic processes contribute to deepening experiences of insecurity, uncertainty and ultimately powerlessness.

This complex, disempowering and cruel reality has left most Palestinians with shattered hopes and despair. Palestinian journalist, Dalia Hatuqa (2023), encapsulates the mood among the current younger generations when writing with deep cynicism: "All the Palestinians Got From Oslo Was KFC [Kentucky Fried Chicken]". Most young people share this attitude. Menachem Klein (2019: 125) analyses: "Young qualified professionals […] emigrate, their dreams of modern state-building and liberation […] shattered from all sides: radical Islam, Abbas' Palestinian Authority, and the occupation."

A minority of young people join new armed groups outside the traditional Palestinian parties, others join Palestine's still strong civil society, and even others migrate. Most, however, are simply disillusioned, passively enduring the colonial violence, anxiously hoping for a better future. Sadly, this completes the emotional cycle of hopes, shattered hopes, and despair.

6.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided the historical and emotional context in which Palestinian conspiracy narratives must be placed. Conceptually, the first section of this chapter divided these feelings into three categories: personal anxieties, collective anxieties, and ontological insecurity. The remainder of the chapter outlined the development of these feelings throughout modern Palestinian history. I did not want to argue, however, that today's feelings are simply the accumulation of past feelings. Instead, past experiences are transmitted and shaped via narratives and identity and become publicly ingrained. Notwithstanding the Palestinian agency in shaping such feelings, these feelings are directly linked to the colonial violence perpetrated by the Zionist movement and later the Israeli state.

For Palestinians, the beginnings of the colonisations are closely tied to the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration both of which betrayed earlier British promises to allow the establishment of an independent Arab state. The Balfour declaration made especially clear what was to be expected from the British colonial rulers: the furthering of the Zionist aspirations at the expense of the local Palestinian population. As a reaction to these colonial agreements, Palestinians established an anti-colonialism discourse that continues today. Yet, the failed revolt of 1936, and the lost war of 1948 with the Nakba put an end to much of politically organised Palestinian resistance. The Nakba that saw the forced displacement of 750,000 Palestinians from their home, shattered the Palestinian community, fragmented and dispersed it over various contexts, while introducing deep personal and collective insecurities in the life of Palestinians. Memories of the expulsion, flight and subsequent suffering in exile were and continue to be kept alive in Palestinian collective memory.

Hence, key concepts of the Palestinian identity developed in the response to this catastrophe. Thus, the Nakba that nearly destroyed the Palestinians as a people, became its defining moment, allowing the forging of a Palestinian national identity. Thus, Palestinian identity remains connected to the ongoing Nakba and the feeling of exile, al-ghurba. In terms of emotions, the discourse around the al-nakba and al-ghurba serves as a constant reminder of experiences of anxiety and insecurity and transports such feelings forward.

Yet, Palestinians imagined that the condition of insecure exile could be overcome with resistance and, thus, would be temporary. The PLO, founded in 1964 became the main political vehicle for Palestinians to realise and fight for their return and the land they lost. While Israel kept the PLO at bay and extended its control over Palestine after the victory in the war of 1967, Palestinian national consciousness continued to develop inside and outside Palestine. A key concept that developed in the aftermath of that war was the notion of sumud, to stubbornly cling to the Palestinian land and identity I argued, however,

that even Palestinian narratives and identity elements, such as sumud, that emphasise hope and agency, are underlined by insecurity. Because such elements emphasise hopefulness in the face of overwhelming odds, they contain the anxiety of being disappointed. Furthermore, I argued that the Palestinian identity itself is frequently perceived to be under threat, mostly due to Israeli actions aimed at erasing it. While Palestinian identity become reinforced by Israeli attempts to undermine it, Palestinians still feel that they constantly have to reaffirm their identity, as Palestinians, as a people.

However, this is not to say that Palestinian anxieties stem primarily from their identity. To a large, extent Palestinian anxieties and insecurities today, stem also from the daily experience of ongoing colonial violence that is compounded by the partial collaboration of their own increasingly authoritarian government with the Israeli regime. This oppressive realty is rooted, paradoxically, in the First Intifada. As a result of the Oslo Accords in conjunction with international developments that pressure both Israel and the PLO, the two parties concluded the Oslo Accords. The Oslo Accords only led to a more entrenched and reconfigured occupation in which Israel simply relied on the newly created Palestinian Authority to police the Palestinian population, while fragmenting the West Bank with an expansion of the settlement project. While Palestinians relied in the First on largely non-violent means of resistance, the continuing occupation after the Oslo Accords exploded in the violent Second Intifada. In the years after the Second Intifada, the PA, further regressed into an authoritarian neo-patrimonial state, and saw the fateful split between the Fatah-led PLO and Hamas as a new contender to power in the West Bank and Gaza. Today, Palestinians must navigate an opaque, environment detrimental to Palestinian needs and national ambitions. In this environment violence is frequent and intrusive, highly personal, but also directed against the Palestinians as a collective. In this environment, it becomes hard to discern what "side" actors stand on, and what interests they serve aside from their own, usually highly personal and material interests.

To connect this conclusion to the larger argument: Contemporary Palestinian conspiracy narratives are closely related to the emotional experience of Palestinians today, in particular experiences of insecurity, anxiety and powerlessness. Those emotions, in turn, are rooted in the contemporary Palestinian experience, in historical events transmitted via narratives and identity, and lastly in the identity itself. Conspiracy narratives allow Palestinians to make sense of those emotional experiences, explaining them via perceived conspiracies that supposedly took place or are taking place.

Chapter 7 – Palestinian Conspiracy Narratives in the West Bank and East Jerusalem

This chapter will highlight the conspiracy narratives that exist in the Palestinian discourse in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. As in the Israeli case, those narratives carry the tri-part structure that classifies such discourse as conspiracy narratives, alleging a conspiracy by referring to a) the secret plans or actions, b) hedged by a powerful group, c) based on malicious intents. Such discourse effectively crosses the line from critical analysis or cynicism to conspiracy discourse. The chapter will highlight the main themes of these conspiracy narratives, what feelings they draw on, and what threats they emotionally construct.

The analysis uncovered conspiracy narratives mainly related to three themes: (1) fear of great power politics and control of the Middle East and Palestine specifically, (2) fear of Israeli actions and plans, and (3) fear of plots hatched by ruling Palestinian parties, be it Hamas or Fatah.

The chapter will show that Palestinian conspiracy narratives can be understood as a reaction to the underlying anxieties, deep insecurities, and feelings of powerlessness that are prevalent inside Palestinian society in the West Bank and East Jerusalem today. Such feelings are intimately related to the experience of Western colonialism, international and regional power politics, and Israel's continued settler-colonial project. We will see how conspiracy narratives draw on the daily insecurity due to the occupation, political anxiety around the collective existence of the Palestinians as a nation rooted in a specific geographic location, and an experience of powerlessness in a political environment where political decisions are made far away from the ordinary Palestinian.

Yet, conspiracy narratives are not only a reaction to Palestinian emotions but also emotionally construct a certain perspective on Palestinian life. Conspiracy narratives not only draw on a feeling of powerlessness but also reproduce it by creating the fearsome image of powerful, almost omnipotent colonial powers, including Israel, that cynically scheme to dispossess the Palestinians. The emotion of fear, the threats evoked by Palestinian conspiracy narratives, are, however, often less explicit compared to the Israeli case. While we have seen Israeli conspiracy narratives warning of the potentially imminent destruction of Israel, Palestinian narratives emphasise the continuity and inevitability of Palestinian suffering. Thus, they are more focused on the explanation and sense-making of anxiety rather than channelling these emotions into concrete action. What conspiracy narratives subtly reaffirm is an emotional commitment to sumud by invoking some vague hope of an end to the current situation.

The fragmentation of Palestinian society

While there are other conspiracy narratives in Palestinian society, I am limiting myself to those conspiracy narratives that have some connection to the conflict and resonate with large parts of the interviews and the online data. A major exclusion is narratives that focus on the involvement of Arab regimes in the conspiracy against Palestinians. For example, I am not discussing material regarding the Abraham Accords. While they are strongly related to the conflict as well, they seem less relevant to show how Palestinian and Israeli narratives compare and react to each other.

As explained in Chapter 3, I focus on Palestinian conspiracy narratives in the context of the West Bank and East Jerusalem only. The context of Gaza still appears in the sense that Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem form conspiracy narratives about Gaza. As mentioned, the interviews contained also Hamas functionaries in the West Bank. Yet, I will only draw on official Hamas material only when relevant to understand and bolster what participants in the West Bank and East Jerusalem mentioned. Including the Hamas voices from the West Bank and East Jerusalem, next to those of civil society members and the Fatah-elite, will show that despite this variety something akin to a national consensus exists, at least on some topics and themes.

Despite those themes being some form of consensus, it is important to remember that not all Palestinians will identify with all conspiracy narratives and their various versions that I am presenting. The analysis is further complicated by the fact that the Palestinian discourse is hard to separate from a larger Arab discourse, with media functioning often across borders and social media even more so. Yet, this is not to say that a specific Palestinian discourse does not exist. To uncover the Palestinian discourse and its specificities, I rely solely on Palestinian voices or Palestinian media, not lumping Arab voices together as previous scholarship.

The usage of conspiracy in the Palestinian context

The Palestinian Arabic discourse constitutes a different semantic context than the English Israeli discourse. The main terms for conspiracy in Arabic used by the participants as well as the analysed online content are mūåąmara and its gerund (ta'āmur). The usage of the term is, unlike in English, widespread in certain political discourses. While it carries the same meaning as in English, referring to a hidden and malicious plan, the negative connotation seems to be weaker. It comes closer to the usage of conspiracy that also occurs in English in the context of criminal law. In criminal law, a conspiracy is defined as "an agreement between two or more persons to commit a crime at some time in the future". Thus, in the Palestinian context the term conspiracy is used to indicate the planning or past implementation of some immoral crime.

Furthermore, on certain topics, especially around Israel it is almost normal to assume a conspiracy took/is taking place. In my interviews, at times, the interviewees voiced surprise when I asked questions about conspiracies in the Palestinian context. This indicates that the existence of a conspiracy is almost a given. Again, to give an example: "Let's assume that there is no conspiracy against the Palestinian people […] What happened? How did they occupy us? How did they take our land? How to answer this question?" (Interview 38, own translation).

Due to this, the term conspiracy is used frequently in Palestinian Arabic discourse.[14] This is not because Palestinian society is dominated by extremist worldviews but rather because the term conspiracy often carries little meaning, aside from showing condemnation versus a certain plan or policy. To be clear, however, the word conspiracy is still often indicative of a conspiratorial narrative as I defined it. Yet, in this chapter, I will dwell less on instances in which the term "conspiracy" is used, but rather analyse where and when narratives carry the tri-part structure of conspiracy narratives.

Interestingly, maybe more so than in the Israeli narratives, Palestinian narratives seem to be based on often well-founded suspicions, despite their overt "conspiracy" language. The point here is once again, not to separate truth from untruth as a criterion for conspiracy narratives but follow the three elements. In call cases, what separates a power-centric discourse from conspiratorial assertions are the often only hidden, implicit and subtle assumptions. For example, Hamas is not only described as receiving Qatari money with tacit approval from Israel, but rather having an explicit deal in place with both Qatar and Israel to keep the latter safe and thus only "pretends" to be a resistance group.

The question of antisemitism

The few works of scholarship, that I critiqued as highly orientalist, such as Daniel Pipes' work (1997) as well pro-Israel groups (e.g. Palestinian Media Watch, or MEMRI), assert or imply that antisemitic conspiracy "theories" in Palestine are extremely widespread. To recall, according to Pipes and others, Palestinians would frequently believe that the world is secretly controlled by the Jews who play nations like puppets, akin to what has been outlined in the infamous antisemitic forgery the "Protocols of Elders of Zion".

It is certainly true that some individuals, including PA and Hamas officials, embrace such ideas. Antisemitism has been and arguably is deeply engrained in Hamas discourse. The most notable example constitutes the former Hamas charter of 1988 that relied on deeply conspiratorial antisemitism (The Avalon Project, 2008b). Yet, Israeli right-wing organisations like Palestinian Media Watch have

[14] In the English discourse the term conspiracy is usually not mentioned, indicating both different audiences and connotations.

highlighted and overemphasised and overgeneralised such instances. Nevertheless, I came across such themes as well. For example, one participant highlighted:

> They [the Jews] are the ones controlling the decisions, […] who will be president in America now, not only in America, in more than one place, they are spread around the world. You have the Jewish families that are controlling the wealth, […] who appointed the president of France? […] The Jews are the rulers of the whole world. (Interview 33, own translation)

However, most of the time Israel is seen as a tool of the West. Participants regularly highlighted that not the Jews control the world, but rather that Israel is acting at the behest of the West. In other words, the main theme is anti-colonialism and not Jewish world control.

It is, however, noteworthy that antisemitism manifests itself in other forms. At times, it is related to diminishing the Holocaust or attributing responsibility for antisemitism to the Jewish community. For example, some participants subtly indicated that Jews were detested due to their social behaviour:

> They [Jews fleeing from Eastern Europe to the West] were poor, disgusting, they carried flees and insects, they engaged in begging and prostitution due to their poverty and consequently spread diseases like syphilis (Interview 28, own translation).

The implicit meaning of this passage seems to suggest that (those) Jews are dirty and possess questionable morals, considering how poorly prostitution and dirtiness are viewed in general, and in the Arab world specifically. They should certainly be classified as antisemitic remarks. Yet, it is important once again to put this in perspective: These were a few remarks, that almost always were subordinate to the anti-colonial narrative that I analyse below. Furthermore, in line with the longstanding PLO tradition to call Israel "the Zionist entity", participants would very often explicitly state that they have no issue with Jews as followers of religion, but rather with those Zionists that colonise Palestine and oppress Palestinians. This is primarily anti-Zionism and not necessarily antisemitism.

7.1 The meta-narrative: Cynical power politics and the clash of civilisations

I want to place the three following themes of conspiracy narratives into an overarching narrative framework. This meta-narrative very clearly reflects the Palestinian feeling of being a truly powerless pawn in the hands of foreign powers that ruthlessly pursue their interests and that have little regard for the Palestinian people and their wishes.

The first component of this overarching meta-narrative can be labelled cynical power politics. This term captures the view that international relations are solely driven by the unrelenting pursuit of power and self-interest at the total expense of ethical considerations. In such a view, moral concepts such as human rights are solely self-serving tactics employed by actors to advance their interests.

Palestinians frequently describe the Western promotion of normative values as double standards and hypocrisy. They highlight that the West would apply certain values, such as human rights, only to certain people. This sentiment was shared by PA President Mahmoud Abbas at the UN event commemorating 75 years since the Nakba when he stated that in the West even animals receive more rights than Palestinians do (Abbas, 2023a). However, this neglect is usually not seen as an unintentional, albeit revealing bias, but rather as a deliberate policy that shows how the West is employing such concepts to further its own interests.

> They [the West] ignore whoever they want [including human rights organisations and researchers] according to their interests. It is becoming clearer day after day that most of the international organisations […] defending human rights and freedoms are merely tools of oppression directed against those who stand against the West's […] interests (Interview 39, own translation).

What, thus, matters in (international) politics are interests, often defined in geo-strategic and economic terms. In this political game, solely "the logic of power" (Interview 37, own translation) applies, as "the world doesn't deal with the weak" (Interview 34). Or as one Palestinian journalist states, quoting the Melian dialogue: "Right and wrong […] has been surrendered to the coloniser's logic: 'The strong do what they will, and the weak suffer what they must.'" (Ahmed, 2020).

Global politics is, therefore, a competition between different actors. In this competition, the Middle East and Palestine are seen as a critical region, due to their strategic location and proximity to areas with an abundance of natural resources. Bassam Barhoum (2023) a journalist for the PA-affiliated newspaper *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* expresses this as follows:

> [T]here are crises and wars that do not stop in the Middle East, specifically in Palestine, which throughout history has been vulnerable to invasion for reasons related to its location […] as happened with the Crusades, and now from the Zionist colonial project (own translation).

His statement also reflects that this power struggle for Palestine and the Middle East is not a new phenomenon but goes back to the crusades if not longer. Thus, Western powers would have tried for centuries and in various forms to wrest control over the area from its rulers.

This relates to the second component of this meta-narrative, the idea of a clash of civilisations, of a timeless war between the West and the Arab world, a "conflict as old as history […] between the East and the West" (Interview 28, own translation), a conflict that included "defeat of Turkey, the division of the region, and the establishment of the Zionist project on the land of Palestine" (Interview 37, own translation). These views are not an embrace of Samuel Huntington's thesis. On the one hand, many Palestinians state that "rejecting the other" is the "mentality" (Interview 39, own translation) of the West, and thus, it is the West that has adopted Huntington's thesis. On the other hand, while the discourse

among more religious Hamas-affiliated Palestinians injects a religious undertone into the discussion, many Palestinians reject the idea of an Islamic civilisation, insisting on a strictly secular interpretation of this conflict.

7.2 Colonial schemes against the Palestinians

The first theme of Palestinian conspiracy narratives revolves around the colonial machinations of Western powers. The key allegation is that Western powers would aim to colonise Palestine, drive out the local population and control the surrounding region via their Israeli proxy state. While usually not openly expressed, anxiety regarding the status of the Palestinians in the land is underlying these narratives, as well as the feeling of being the object, rather than subject, of history.

The Western powers that are usually seen as involved in the deliberate effort to control Palestine and the region are the UK and the US. As is typical for conspiracy narratives, especially when told by various people, the plot is seldomly clear, actors are at times vague, and it becomes unclear who is holding the threads of the conspiracy.

For example, Journalist Hala Salame (2020) links the US and the UK together in implementing the Balfour conspiracy against the Palestinians:

> The Balfour Declaration, drafted and approved by US President Woodrow Wilson, […] was nothing, but an American decision 'supervised' [supervising its implementation] by Britain when it was the mandate power in the region. What Trump announced as the so-called 'Deal of the Century" in 2017 is nothing but a continuation and reinforcement of this declaration [...] (own translation).

In other words, some Palestinians claim that the US directed the establishment of a Jewish state in the region by "approving" the Balfour Declaration and then outsourcing the supervision of this project to the UK. The quote also indicates the longevity of the American strategy, perceiving a direct link between the Balfour Declaration and Trump's plan. Placed in Palestinian discourse, the quote draws on Palestinian anxieties of dispossession, while framing colonial scheming as a continuous danger, analogous to the ongoing Nakba. The narratives construct the colonial powers as powerful and strategic actors in a process where outcome matches intention, subtly highlighting Palestinian powerlessness.

The Palestinian consensus is that Israel would be a colonial implant. The beginning of the State of Israel is usually traced back to the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Through a conspiratorial lens, the Balfour Declaration, promising the Zionist movement a Jewish "national home" in Palestine is described as a strategic move in the colonial struggle for influence over the region. The arguably dominant view

attributes this conspiracy not to specific powers, like the UK, but describes it as a large collaborative Western plan to control the region.

The main reason for this coordinated but secret Western plan to create a base via the Jewish state-to-come are said to be two-fold. First, the Middle East would be essential for Western economic interests. On the one hand, the region is rich in resources, especially oil and on the other hand, many important trade routes traverse it. Second, Western powers would have known very well that the next major challenge to Western domination would come from the Arab world. To do so, it would have been paramount to control the region.

> Everyone acts in their own interests. […] European countries, Britain, France […] said that the Arab region is the most dangerous civilisation to be faced in the future. […] Therefore, the Arab homeland must be divided and fragmented. It must live in a state of imbalance and instability until its internal forces are exhausted, and it must be divided. Now, [you see] why they issued the Balfour Declaration? (Interview 34, own translation)

According to Palestinian conspiracy narratives, this division was achieved on the one hand via loyal Arab regimes, and on the other even more efficiently, through Zionist colonialism in the most crucial region, Palestine. What the conspiracy discourse nearly always cites is the secretly signed Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 between Britain and France which easily serves as proof for colonial collusion to divide the region. For many, the Sykes-Picot Agreement constituted only "the first step towards the Balfour Declaration" (Interview, 41), or as Aisha Subeih (2018) writes:

> the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 was the culmination of the colonial understandings aimed to divide the Arab region […] by creating new political entities which had as its goals to distract the Arab people from facing the real and imminent danger of the Zionist threat. This highlights that the Sykes-Picot Agreement was nothing but a prelude to the Balfour Declaration (own translation).

Arguably, the Balfour declaration carries from the Palestinian perspective even more weight as proof for the colonial conspiracy. Some sources mentioned also the so-called Campbell-Bannerman report of 1907, allegedly signed at the Imperial Conference of 1907, which would state that "a foreign body should be planted in the heart" of the Arab nation "in such a way that it could exhaust its powers in never-ending wars. It could also serve as a springboard for the West to gain its coveted objects." (Political Islam, n.d, see also: Al-Aloul, 2023)

The creation of Jewish settlements in Palestine is seen as having served another purpose. Conspiracy narratives describe that Zionism and Jewish settlements in Palestine were designed to solve the European "Jewish question". As narratives rightly observe, Ashkenazi Jews in the Russian Empire, Eastern

European Ashkenazi Jews migrated due to persecution increasingly to Western Europe.[15] Conspiracy narratives highlight how migrating Jews were not welcome in West-European societies. As one participant stated, those Jews were "dirty and poor" (Interview 35, own translation). This would have compounded the existing antisemitism in Europe and especially the established rich Jewish families (such as the Rothschilds to whom the Balfour declaration was conveniently addressed) would have felt threatened. These families either approached or were sought out by different governments to support the establishment of a new Jewish home, serving colonial interests on the one hand, but also to "export" the Jews from Europe on the other hand.

According to the narratives, the Zionists colonial "master" (Al-Ghoul, 2022b) directed the settlers to acquire land step-by-step, "the whole purpose was to erase Palestinians and replace them with settlers" (Interview 26). As such, the colonial logic would have dictated ethnic cleansing, underscoring the threat to the Palestinians that conspiracy narratives highlight. Thus, the Nakba was not a result of the war that erupted in 1948, but rather a strategy adopted from the very beginning of the colonial takeover. As British power faded, the US took over the leadership of the Western world and the sponsorship of Israel. As we have seen, some Palestinians say that the US had already done so decades before by tacitly embracing or drafting the Balfour Declaration. Others point towards the US embrace of the Palestine Mandate in 1919 and the UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/181(II) to divide Palestine in 1947. In other words, Israel is "a British baby but was adopted by the Americans" (Interview 32).

The importance of Israel for Western colonialism is frequently underlined. For example, some participants pointed towards Joe Biden's remarks, who said stated in 1986 and again in 2023: "If there wasn't an Israel, we'd have to invent one" (The White House, 2023). However, because Israel is said to be a Western project, it is essentially seen as an artificial state without a linkage to the region. Some narratives highlight this extensively, "80% of the Israelis, they carry foreign passports, any time they feel their downfall comes, they will […] run", hence "we don't have hope", but "we have a deep trust" that the occupation will end." (Interview 29). Conspiracy narratives emphasising the Israel's artificiality, carry an emphasis on the purpose of enduring the occupation until it will eventually end, therefore emotionally underscoring the notion of sumud.

Because of Israel's paradoxical fragility, the state would be anxious to serve the interests of its Western sponsors. While Israeli and Western interests would usually coincide, there are occasions when they

[15] Arthur Koestler's book "*The Thirteenth Tribe*" (1976) is a common reference. According to Koestler's main thesis, Ashkenazi Jews are not Semites but descendants of Turk people who converted to Judaism only in the 10th century. For Palestinians who cite this discredited book, it underlines how the Zionist settlers would have no connection to Palestine.

would come into conflict. However, “the moment, they [the Zionists] must choose between their interests and the West's interests, they will certainly choose the West's interests because if their Western sponsor raises its hand against them, they will not be able to survive.” (Interview 28, own translation). Israel would have no choice but to obey the West.

Hence, it is the US who is seen as calling the shots of Israeli policies. In that interpretation, it was the US that forced Israel into peace negotiations to end the First Intifada. The US did so to protect “Israel’s image”, and by doing so maintain its own “investment” in the area (Interview 25). Yet, at times, the West would care more for Israel than the Israeli Jews do themselves. This would be because:

> Israel […] is fundamentally a colonial project, supported by the entire Western world [...]. The European and American support for Israel will not stop because it is fundamentally their project, larger than the issue of the Palestinian cause. It's related to the clash of and confrontation between civilisations, and it's related to the entire Middle East. Therefore, the problem is much bigger […] for those who truly understand the depth of the conflict (Interview 35, own translation).

In summary, a strong theme in Palestinian conspiracy narratives revolves around the scheming of colonial powers, which greedily implement their interests by using Israel as their strongest tool to keep the Arab world weak and divided. Such conspiracy narratives draw on the feelings of powerlessness Palestinians experience and reinforce them. Drawing on these feelings, the conspiracy narratives construct a fearsome image and the emotional belief of Western powers as masterfully strategizing and successfully implementing this grand plan. The narratives emphasise—in line with the Palestinian narrative on the ongoing Nakba—the continuation of colonial plots as well as Palestinian endurance. They serve less as emotionally charged warnings and more as tools for emotional sense-making. Through the coherent grand strategy that such narratives attribute to the perceived collusion of colonial powers, Palestinians can explain and critique why the Zionist movement overcame Palestinian resistance, why Palestinian factions are engaged in "chaotic" infighting, and why Western countries remain complicit in the perceived Zionist crimes.

Palestinians observe very closely the Western and Israeli, including comments and proposals of how Western countries should address the region. Frequently, such comments and proposals are understood as plans to divide and conquer the region. Aside from the above documents, narratives also point to the Yinon-Plan of 1982, Zbigniew Brzezinski’s arc of crisis proposal of 1978, the non-existing Bernard Lewis Plan, the Clean-Break report of 1996, the comments around a “New Middle East” by the administration of George W. Bush, Imagining a Remapped Middle East by Robin Wright (2013) and Ralph Peters Blood Borders proposal (2006). All documents would outline colonial plans to divide the

region for the sake of Western goals and control (Ahmed, 2023; Al-Haya Al-Jadida, 2022a; 2022b; Al Tamimi, 2013; Haqiqatjou, 2023; Khan, 2015; Perle et al. 1996; Ottaway et al., 2008).

Those policy discussions are used by conspiracy narratives to interpret the unfolding of historic and contemporary events in the region. For example, an American hand is seen in the Arab Spring or in Sudan's civil war. Similarly, Western influence is assumed to have ousted Tunisia's Ennahda. For example, PLO Revolutionary Council member and one of the most prolific columnists for the PA, Muwafiq Matar (2022a), only slightly alters Condoleezza Rice's term "constructive chaos" to describe American influence in regional events that also came to impact Palestine via the destructive role of Hamas: "We believe that the radical changes brought about by the American creative chaos through the forces of the so-called 'Arab Spring' and the empowerment of the Muslim Brotherhood to rule […]". Or as another author claims, the "Arab Spring" would be the "most prominent" example revealing the malicious intentions of this American "chaos-manufacturing strategy", extending into Palestine (Rajab, 2022). More recently, the Abraham Accords are equally mentioned by Palestinian conspiracy narratives towards this end.

In summary, a strong theme in Palestinian conspiracy narratives revolves around the scheming of colonial powers which greedily implement their interest by using Israel as their strongest tool to keep the Arab world weak and divided. Such conspiracy narratives draw on the feeling of powerlessness Palestinians experience and reinforce them. Drawing on such feelings, the conspiracy narratives construct the fearsome image and the emotional belief of the Western powers as masterfully strategizing, as well as successfully implementing this grand. The narratives emphasise – in line with Palestinian narrative on the ongoing Nakba – the continuation of colonial plots, as well as Palestinian endurance. They come less as emotionally charged warnings, but as a tool, for emotional sense-making. Via the coherent grand strategy that such narratives assign the perceived collusion of colonial powers, Palestinians can explain and critique why the Zionist movement overcame the Palestinian resistance, why Palestinian faction are engaged in "chaotic" infighting but also why Western countries remain complicit in the perceived Zionist crimes.

7.3 The unified agenda of Israel

The second theme of Palestinian conspiracy narratives centres on Israel. Palestinians harbour deep disillusionment with Israeli politics, amplified by the experience of outright oppression and intrusive feelings of insecurity endured under all governments, and creeping annexation, despite the liberal rhetoric of peace. As one participant stated, "I've never felt safe in Palestine" (Interview 26) Conspiracy narratives in this theme attempt to explain these constant background feelings and experiences by

theorising about Israeli actions and intentions. Israel becomes constructed as a homogeneous, malicious and highly duplicitous actor that desires to rid itself of the Palestinians while expanding further into the Middle East.

7.3.1 Homogeneity of the Israeli political system

I frequently encountered the assumption that the Israeli political system is homogenous. Palestinian interlocutors frequently described that no difference between left-wing or right-wing parties exist. The Israeli political landscape would be "singular". There would be no element deserving of the term left, as in the end "all Israeli governments are extremist, only carrying different names" (Interview 44).

All governments would follow the same goal, often described as settler-colonial, of "maximal geography with minimal [Palestinian] demography" (Interview 23). The difference between different parties would, therefore, only lie in their employment of different methods to attain this goal. While left-wing parties would speak of "so-called" humanist methods of encouraged migration, right-wing parties would prefer straight-out ethnic cleansing or even mass killings. One participant detailed:

> It's different tactics […]. It's left within the Zionist project […], it's about shall we kill them? […] make them live in a ghetto? This is the difference. There is no fundamental disagreement [between Israeli parties] on the logic of elimination and expansion (Interview 32).

Israeli politics is, thus, seen as unified, with only minor differences. This view is certainly unsurprising, considering that irrespective of the ruling party, Palestinians have suffered, and continue to suffer regardless of the ruling coalition. Conspiracy narratives explain that difference do not matter, by declaring that there must be some secret collusion between the Israeli left and right. For example, participants alleged, "They play a game, the left pretends to oppose the right, but when it comes to us, they have some joint plan [...], they always [had such a plan]. [...] look [...] Rabin issued the break-their-legs-policy, he was the one from the left, the one with Oslo" (Interview 44, own translation).

This logic is extended to other institutions, including the Supreme Court. Many Palestinians believe that the Supreme Court is part of a strategic game the Israeli system is playing. When the Court orders a settlement's demolition this would be part of a wider strategy to cleverly grab as much Palestinian land as possible:

> the concern with regards to outposts is that Israel wants to strategically build them […]. They criminalise an outpost because they want to have a discussion [about strategic factors]. And they grab Palestinian lands that have water, or that can be used for an industrial area or a specific area that would cut off this Palestinian city from this Palestinian city. […] It's about a broader strategic way of how and when to build these settlements (Interview 26).

The Court's decisions would further enable Israel to claim a veneer of Liberalism, introduce a hollow distinction between legal and illegal outposts and overall reduce pressure from the international community. To convince the international community, "cover up its crimes" and hide its "real face" (Interview 26), Israel would overall engage in massive propaganda activities, talking about peace, and democracy while branding Palestinians as terrorists. This would effectively hide the reality of Israel's policies designed to spread "terror" and to "break our will", so "we no longer think about […] self-determination". Such "well-thought out" policies would contain calculated acts of humiliation, arrests, torture as well as the targeted killing of Palestinians including children and journalists (Interview 26; 31; 44). Such conspiracy narratives clearly draw on the insecurity that every Palestinian experiences. The narratives channel those feelings into the fearsome picture of a smoothly operating violent system that strategically designs all its action to crush the Palestinians. While narratives produce suspicion of every Israeli action, they also subtly emphasise, "we are still here" (Interview 23).

Furthermore, the Israeli system is purposely creating tensions and conflict with the Palestinians as a pretext to weaken the Palestinian national movement, justify expansionist measures camouflaged as security measures, and evade international scrutiny. One way to do so is by deliberately weakening Palestinian moderates. Sari Nusseibeh (2007: 325) faintly indicates this when recalling how the arrest of PLO-affiliated moderates in the wake of the First Gulf War led Palestinian politician and later chief negotiation Saeb Erakat, to say this "is a message to us Palestinian moderates […] Israel's message is You can forget about the negotiations after the [Gulf] war because we are going to make sure there is no one to talk to".

Others build a full-blown conspiratorial account of secret Israeli planning and collusion with extremist elements of Palestinian society, especially Hamas. For example, one Palestinian activist remarked that Hamas was not only tolerated and tacitly supported by the US and Israel in its early years, but rather that Hamas was "very well-funded by the Americans" and propped up by the Israelis. She recounted a particular memory from her childhood:

> I was 16 years old [...], I saw the Mishmar Hagvul [Israeli border police] […] it was midnight, we heard the jeeps, we looked from the window […], they were sending these [Hamas] pamphlets which were very well written, very well printed […]. it's actually part of the planning from the beginning, empowering Hamas, sending them to exile in Lebanon and giving them all the access to Hezbollah [...] and then bringing them back (Interview 42).

Muwafiq Matar (2022b) of the Fatah elite similarly outlines how Israel deliberately empowered Hamas to create a terrorist entity in the Gaza Strip:

> When Ariel Sharon decided to withdraw […] from the Gaza Strip, the plan to replace the occupation and settlements had matured […]. The […] goal was to break […] the Palestinian national project and prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state […]. Hamas's bloody armed coup […] was a chapter in the plan of the Israeli international conspiracy implemented by Hamas […] (own translation).

We can see in such narratives the mentioned construction of Israel as an extremely strategically operating actor, controlling events in all details. In this environment Palestinians themselves have little agency with little responsibility for failures in the diplomatic arena, as well as in the inner Palestinian conflict.

Overall, the conspiracy narratives from the West Bank and East Jerusalem construct Israel as a coherent, strategic system that maliciously aims at crushing the Palestinians while managing to hide this intention from the rest of the world. Such narratives draw on the insecurity created by Israel's colonial policies that, especially faced with an opaque governance system for Palestinians, are hard to explain without stipulating an overarching intention and plan.

7.3.2 The peace process as a sophisticated scam

The Oslo Accords is another area of conspiracy narratives. Narratives allege the agreement to be simply another instance of Israeli double-dealing, obscuring real goals with noble language. From the beginning, Israel would not have been "interested in peace, and the two-state solution" (Interview 29, own translation) since Israel did not "come to the table to give us [the Palestinians] a state" (Interview 42). Thus, the question remains, why did Israel engage in the peace process and sign the Oslo Accords? For many Palestinians, it is very clear that the process was another strategic move by Israel. Such conspiracy narratives attempt to resolve Palestinian anxiety and insecurity by explaining what caused the current situation of oppression. Conspiracy narratives essentially stipulate that outcome equals (Israeli) intention, emphasising the idea of strategic planning, as well as continuity of Palestinian suffering.

The Oslo Accords brought an end to the First Intifada that drew significant attention outside inside Israel towards the inhumane practices of the occupation. According to conspiracy narratives, on the immediate level, Israel would have engaged in negotiations only to protect its image on the world stage, while reducing costs of the occupation and was thus, "a plan ready in the drawer, waiting to be implemented" (Interview 37, own translation). Thus, Israel created the PA to control the Palestinian population more easily. Long-term, as Ahmed (2020) writes:

> [a]ll such [peace] efforts played a performative function to advance the slow erasure of Palestine off the map […]. Peace plans have been nothing more than new staging grounds for the mounting of fresh attacks on the Palestinian national movement.

According to such conspiracy narrative, the Oslo Accords were designed to further the goal of Palestinian erasure. Conspiracy narratives point to the massive expansion of settlements that happened during and following the negotiations as evidence:

> During […] the first five years of Oslo 100,000 [settlers] came, just in the first five years, and then double or triple of that in the following years. Oslo was using the time of calm and peace […] to take more land and build the settlements […]. all we could get [was settlements]. […] it took me […] just a few months to realise, peace is a scam, that i never was supposed to bring peace (Interview 31).

Thus, Palestinians today are mostly in agreement: the Oslo Accords were solely signed to "serve as a tool of the Israeli occupation, to kind of weaponize a political process, using the occupied themselves" (Interviewee 1), while convincing the world that Israel harbours only peaceful intentions. Thus, we see that conspiracy narratives equate outcome with intention. Israel must have planned the exact result Palestinians suffer from today, as "the Israelis are masters of the language of peace, but they do not want peace", we hoped, but "did not see anything from peace other than killings, arrests, displacement" (Interview 44, own translation).

With such language, Palestinian conspiracy narratives draw on the history of hopes, shattered hopes, and despair outlined in Chapter 6, closely related to Palestinian identity per se. Such feelings that no political process will ever actually bring peace are easily channelled by Palestinian conspiracy narratives into concrete fear of any Israeli actions, be they diplomatic or not. Conspiracy narratives easily explain all Israeli actions within a comprehensive framework of malicious intent. Hence, even those Israeli actions that (temporarily) created positive effects for Palestinians are said to be secretly malicious. Thus, conspiracy narratives cement the emotional belief that Israel can never be trusted. Suspicion becomes a natural state, serving as an emotional shield to protect against the shattered hopes.

7.3.3 Greater Israel

A very frequent Palestinian narrative is that of Israeli expansionism linked to the concept of Greater Israel (Eretz Yisrael Ha-Shlema, literally: the whole Land of Israel). However, the term is vague. Looking at the religious text, such as the Torah, the exact borders of the short-lived ancient Israelite kingdoms were not clearly delineated. Historical records are not conclusive either. In the early years of Zionism, the revisionist movement around Ze'ev Jabotinsky used the term to refer to the Mandate area and Transjordan as the desired final borders of a Jewish state. [16] However, over time the right-wing interpretation shifted, and the key concept became simply Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel) which includes Israel, Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

[16] The Revisionist movement's slogan was "a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan." (Jewish Library, n.d.).

In Palestinian narratives, however, Israel is seen as an entity that since its "inception [...] continues its aggression and expansion towards the establishment of the Greater Israel with the complicity of the US, under its protection and with its finance and armament." (Kazak, 2020).

While a clear consensus in Palestinian discourse maintains that Israel desires control of all of Palestine (Eretz Israel), conspiracy narratives state that Israeli colonial expansion will not stop there but strives to expand far into the Middle East. The first point that is raised to sustain this argument is that Israel would be the only existing state which does not have defined and fixed borders:

> The colonial project is ongoing, […] look at settlement expansion, […] the consistency of doing this policy continually is blunt evidence that annexation is ongoing. […] It's an ongoing process of solidifying the Israeli-Zionist project, at the expense of the Palestinians' rights. […] and if we don't define borders, why would it stop there [at the West Bank]? Seriously, why would it stop there? I don't think it would. I mean, look at any country in the world, the fact that everybody has defined borders, makes me […] anticipate that it [Israeli expansion] would not stop there (Interview 24).

Undefined borders are therefore a strategic omission, as Israel plans to expand further. The reason it has not is usually credited to Arab and especially Palestinian resistance. As such, Palestine is described as the frontline of the conflict between Israel and the Arab world, and Palestinian steadfastness has so far spoiled Zionist ambitions. Omar Al-Ghoul (2022a) regular columnist for *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* emphasises how Israel is not only a threat to the Palestinians but to the entire Arab world:

> Daily, they [the Israeli government] threaten Palestinian Arabs, first inside Israel, and second in the Palestinian territories occupied since June 5, 1967, and third, Palestinian refugees and immigrants worldwide, as well as all Arabs from the sea to the Gulf, not just from the Nile to the Euphrates (own translation).

In the above quote, Al-Ghoul mentions the Nile and Euphrates, which is another reference to Greater Israel. Often the Palestinian narrative on Israeli (intended) expansionism is supported by pointing towards religious texts and national symbols, as well as isolated quotes of Zionist leaders.

Commonly, conspiracy narratives draw on what they see as evidence for Israel's Greater Israel plan. Conspiracy narratives draw on religious texts that parts of the Zionist discourse indeed draw on. This includes the Hebrew Bible that contains several passages that describe what area God promised Abraham. For example, Genesis 15:18 specifies the "land between the river of Egypt and the great river, the river Euphrates." Deuteronomy 11:24 similarly states "from the wilderness [the Sinai desert] and Lebanon, from the [...] River Euphrates, even to the Western Sea, shall be your territory" (KJV, 1769/2024). Conspiracy narratives often point to Theodor Herzl as well who would have demanded that

the Jewish state should extend "from the Brook of Egypt to the Euphrates.[17] Other narratives point to the Israeli flag with its two blue stripes that allegedly would represent the "Euphrates and the Nile" (Interview 44). One participant, very sceptical of the Greater Israel narrative, summarised the discourse:

> The idea of the Greater Israel? […] everybody talks about this, […] I keep hearing you know, the Israelis or the Zionists, they want to destroy the Arab world, look at what happened in Iraq, and Egypt, Jordan, look what's happening in Syria because basically […] Israel is behind everything that's happening […]. We would analyse their flag for example. The flag is two stripes which is the river Euphrates and the sea (Interview 41).

Such ideas are not new. In fact, they have been suggested by Palestinian leaders for quite some time. For example, in an interview Yasser Arafat (2006) opined:

> Look at the slogans they use: that the land of Israel is from the Euphrates to the Nile. This was written for many years over the entrance to the Knesset, the parliament. It shows their national ambition, they want to advance […]. Do you know what the meaning of the Israeli flag is? […] It is white with two blue lines. The two lines represent two rivers, and in between is Israel. The rivers are the Nile and the Euphrates […].

In other words, Israel is often suspected of harbouring secret intentions and plans to further expand, often beyond Palestine itself. This theme reflects Palestinian anxieties of staying on the land as Palestinians.

Conspiracy narratives channel these feelings attached to the Palestinian experience of dispossession to construct Israel as a truly imperial power, striving to expand deeply into the Middle East. While this certainly emphasises the threat Israel constitutes and, therefore, produces some degree of fear, the theme subtly highlights sumud. Even though participants did not talk about active resistance, unlike Arafat did in the quoted interview, they stressed their Palestinian identity and, therefore, the Palestinian stubbornness to exist despite Israeli imperial ambitions.

Yet, this theme should not be read as antisemitic as sometimes suggested. As Daniel Pipes (1989) reminds us "the only debate is whether they [the Israelis] aspire to this [Greater Israel] for their own sake or as proxy for the Western powers", a debate that in the larger framework of Palestinian conspiracy narratives in East Jerusalem and the West Bank is resolved in favour of the latter option.

Overall, the theme around Israeli plots and actions revolves around hidden motives obscured by noble language. On one hand, this reflects the insecurity of daily violence, making it seem natural to assume a secret order behind the often seemingly arbitrary measures. On the other hand, it reflects political

[17] This refers to an entry in Herzl's diaries. The full entry adds more context, showing that Herzl captures suggestions made by Max Bodenheimer, another influential figure in the Zionist movement, that Herzl deemed "in part excellent" (Herzl, 1960: 711).

anxieties about self-determination and national existence. Conspiracy narratives construct a threatening image and emotional belief of Israeli as deeply reaching into the political and everyday life of Palestinians. Israeli actions are portrayed as coherent and strategic, never truly about security needs but solely about control and expansion. This can be interpreted both as an emotional emphasis on Palestinian resistance (sumud), highlighting that despite Israeli power and intentions, Palestinians still exist, and as a critique of the rhetoric and responsibility of Israeli society as a whole.

7.4 The collusion of Palestinian institutions

A final theme of conspiracy narratives revolves around Palestinian institutions and their deceit, selfish greed, and collaboration with Israel against the interests of the population. This theme closely follows partisan lines, with Fatah supporters being mistrustful of Hamas, Hamas members accusing Fatah, and unaffiliated Palestinians accusing both. This theme is strongly rooted in the fact that Palestinians experience insecurity not only from Israeli colonialism and occupation but also from their own ineffective and corrupt leadership, as well as infighting between the different Palestinian factions. This reality confronts Palestinians with an opaque, oppressive system where hypocrisy seems omnipresent.

7.4.1 The status quo and the two-state solution

Most Palestinians feels that their situation has worsened since the Oslo Accords, as Israel's reliance on the PA has only further entrenched the occupation.[18] The PA has increasingly adopted an authoritarian leadership style. It cracks down on perceived critical voices, while the elites amass great wealth. Palestinians are suspicious about the PLO's signature, and the PA's implementation of the Oslo Accords. Palestinians are also deeply sceptical about the will of the current parties to challenge the status quo. As one activist put it:

> the status quo is beneficial for both Palestinians and Israelis, [with change] the PA […], a lot of them will lose their benefits and their money [that comes] through the European Union and the USA [….] it's a conspiracy, the PA works with and for Israel, it's not only security cooperation. They talk about the Nakba, resistance, statehood […] but that's empty talk. It's bullshit. And that's what explains the statistics of more than 60% of young Palestinians, they don't trust any political party […] (Interview 30).

Thus, when the PA or Hamas announces its continuing opposition to Israel, relying on all sorts of nationalist rhetoric and diplomatic initiatives, Palestinians suspect that such announcements are solely designed to pacify the domestic audience, while in reality leaders would work to strengthen the status quo. Conspiracy narratives excessively use and produce feelings of suspicion, questioning the motives

[18] A majority of 77% of West Bank Palestinians believe that the situation in the West Bank today is worse than before the Oslo Accords (PSR, 2023: 4).

of all parties involved, but often carry a lingering sense of powerlessness, of a that seems inescapable: "what can we do? [Israeli] occupation and [PA] tyranny. […] all they [the PA] do is work for the occupation" (Interview 39, own translation).

Several participants claimed that the paradigm of a "two-state solution" was an Israeli tool. Because Palestinians have no illusions that Israel benefits from entrenching (and slowly shifting) the status quo, they question why the PA would still cling to the Oslo Accords. In conspiratorial terms, some Palestinians suspect a secret agenda behind the PA's dedication to the two-state solution. One established political figure and activist described the furthering of the two-state solution as a deliberate plot to de-politicise and weaken the Palestinian identity, to acquiesce the Palestinian population while benefitting from the status quo:

> [I]t's by design, […] to change the identity of the Palestinians, the whole project of the Palestinian Authority is totally dependent on the two-state solution. So, this has been pushed at us since 1993. […] before the PA, it was stronger, the sense of dignity, the sense of identity, the goal of ending the occupation. After the Palestinian Authority came into the picture, it completely marginalised the local leadership on the ground (Interview 42).

Overall, Palestinian conspiracy narratives build on the widespread assumption that Palestinian elites are currently very comfortable. Yet, conspiracy narratives go further, alleging a planned agenda and secret collusion between the PA and Israel, beyond the publicly acknowledge security cooperation. While the Palestinian leadership would overtly announce their attempts to resist and liberate Palestine, both the PA and Hamas are seen as having no desire to work for these aims. On the contrary, they are seen as actively working against the hopes of ordinary Palestinians. Such conspiracy narratives draw on the sense of hopelessness and powerlessness widespread among Palestinians, explaining the situation as intentional, attempting to expose the hypocrisy of the Palestinian factions in the process.

7.4.2 The signing of the Oslo Accords

The next theme brings us to beginning of the Oslo negotiations. Several participants referred to Arafat's and the PLO's efforts during the First Intifada as a political attempt to increase their relevance, described as "distant leaders" (Interview 31), "hijacking" (Interview 42) the Intifada to stay relevant, and to amass wealth and power. The PLO sometimes justified the Oslo Accords as a multiple-stage process, being able to return to Palestine and being to resist the occupation from the inside. While this period is seen generally seen as controversial in Palestinian discourse, conspiracy narratives often describe the signing of Oslo itself as the result of a plot. Participants pointed to different schemes that participating actors allegedly developed.

Yasser Arafat is arguably the most important figure in Palestinian history, even after his death, he remains a legendary figure in Palestinian society. Yet, conspiracy narratives of why he signed the Oslo Accords circulate widely. The primary narrative that I encountered alleged that Arafat was misled by those close to him about the exact details of the Oslo Accords. A group of Palestinians led by current PA president Mahmoud Abbas, did so to further his own corrupt interests at "directed by Israel" (Interview 46, own translation). For example, when asked if Arafat was to blame, one activist replied:

> Did he [Arafat] sell us out? No, […] he wasn't the one to betray us in the Oslo agreement. If you read all the diaries of everybody who was in the Oslo agreement, you'd understand that whoever's in leadership now was the one [to betray us]. When he [Arafat] realised it, and he understood that the Israelis were fooling him, he flipped the whole equation [and started the Intifada] (Interview 30).

However, other stories circulate as well. In those stories, Arafat knew exactly what he was doing, giving up Palestinian demands to survive politically:

> What was the function of Oslo, the function of Oslo for Yasser Arafat? […] It was not about demanding this and that. No. […] It was not about Jerusalem, and Refugees, about nothing but […] political survival. He sacrificed the highest national and patriotic interests in exchange for his political survival. This is the conspiracy (Interview 43, own translation).

In a way, these narratives are the outgrowth of scrutinising the Oslo Accords and its role in today's unbearable situation. Palestinians rightfully ask who is responsible. Conspiracy narratives conjecture that those who profit– at least materially - from today's situation must have been doing so intentionally, how could the Oslo Accords that proved from the Palestinian perspective so devastating, have ever been signed otherwise? The language is as in many conspiracy narratives we have seen fairly neutral, as if participants were treating their suffering as a fact to silently endure, in a way confirming the "normality", that is the continuity of the colonial reality.

7.4.3 The death of Arafat

Despite some of those conspiracy narratives, Arafat remains an honoured figure in Palestinian society. His death during the Second Intifada in 2004, after a period of severe illness and the fact that the PA did not demand an autopsy, furthered speculation and created a variety of conspiracy narratives. The suspicious consensus of conspiracy narratives is very clear. "Everybody knows that" Arafat "was assassinated with the collaboration of a few Palestinians" (Interview 30). According to polls, over 50% of Palestinians believe someone close to Arafat carried out the killing at the behest of Israel (PSR, 2022: 5).

The blame for collaborating with Israel in Arafat's assassination is placed by such narratives mostly on the current PA leadership, including currently serving PA President Mahmoud Abbas and former Minister of Security Mohammed Dahlan. According to the conspiracy narratives,

> when Arafat realised that he had no option left [after being betrayed in the negotiations for the Oslo Accords, he tried to save himself and returned to opposing Israel [with the Intifada], […] and was eliminated. The decision [to kill him] was taken in 2002, but Mahmoud Abbas was not yet ready as a replacement (Interview 28, own translation).

The call to start the process to get rid of Arafat is often seen as having been made by US President Bush, who in 2002 called on the Palestinians to change their leadership, after it became clear that Arafat was in the way of their plans (Ajaj, 2018) and "settlement expansion" (Interview 46, own translation). Then in 2004, Israeli Prime Minister would have given the order to kill Arafat (Palestine Today, 2011) relying on Palestinian collaborators (Isa, 2017a; 2017b). Such accusations of PA and Fatah involvement in Arafat's death spread quickly. However, they are not just considered a historic episode but continue to carry significance in the national discourse and continue to resurface. At the end of 2022, when hundreds of testimonies and documents of an eventual PA investigation into Arafat's death were leaked, the debate ignited once more. For example, Palestinian writer Iyad Al-Qara (2022) voiced his suspicion in an interview:

> The size of the conspiracy that killed Arafat is astonishing, the Fatah leaders […] participated […], the Palestinian Authority was never a real authority, but always just a group of criminals […] collaborating with the [Israeli] occupation.

Yet, according to Palestinian conspiracy narratives, Israel continues to plot against Palestinian leaders if they have exhausted their usefulness: "Today Mahmoud Abbas is in his last days when a replacement is ready, he will be gone in 24 hours." (Interview 28). Conspiracy narratives around the death of Arafat once again construct Israel as almost omnipotently directing political events, as a large looming force in all of Palestinian life. Such narratives omit or reduce Palestinian agency as directed by Israel, and reproduce feelings of powerlessness, while attempting to explain political events and the corruption of the own system.

7.4.4 The secret dealings of Hamas

The above narratives deal with Fatah and the PA. However, Hamas appears equally as a central actor in Palestinian conspiracy narratives. Among non-affiliated Palestinians, the accusations focus mostly on an alleged Hamas-Israel deal, in which Israel "empowers Hamas" (Interview 24) and Hamas propagating resistance solely as a smokescreen. Israel would allow the transfer of Qatari cash in return for quiet in the Gaza Strip, with Hamas agreeing to keep Israel safe from any real resistance. One of my interviewees explained the agreement in detail:

> [W]hy Qatar is paying 10, 15 million [USD] every month? Amadi their ambassador, he carries the money in a bag […] and the money is for Hamas to keep the security of Israel. Everybody, of these people, their main and top priority is the security of Israel (Interview 25).

Furthermore, many Palestinians suspect the Hamas-Israel deal to go further than providing a calm situation. Rather,

> [E]very single time that Netanyahu was in trouble, something would happen with Gaza, every single time, and Hamas would literally save Netanyahu's ass. […] people are starting to talk that Netanyahu and his extreme right-wing government actually has a deal with Hamas (Interview 41).

Thus, Hamas bails Netanyahu out whenever there is a domestically tense situation by engaging in rocket fire and a limited conflict with Israel, all the while Israel would engage Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, both to shore up internal support and rally Israelis around Netanyahu.

Fatah-affiliated commentators provide an even more comprehensive narrative on Hamas. The split between Fatah and Hamas alongside the geographical split between Gaza and the West Bank is seen as a deliberate attempt to weaken the Palestinian national movement. In such an Israeli-/American-led effort, Fatah sources see Hamas playing an active role. For example, Muwafiq Matar (2023) writes:

> [Hamas] undermined the PA's effort to enhance the security, stability and development of the […] Palestinian security and economic state institutions […]. This is the most horrific crime against Palestinian patriotism […]. But what is surprising is that Hamas' leaders actually believe the occupation system's promises to enable them to seize the West Bank just as they enabled them to seize the Gaza Strip in a military coup in 2007. Therefore, we see them trying to prove their commitments […] to the Netanyahu government (own translation).

Hamas is described as a tool that Israel employs to weaken the PA and the Palestinian national project. However, Hamas is being played by Israel, believing Israeli promises, and happily taking Qatari money via Israel. At the same time, Hamas is described in the PA discourse as following an Islamist agenda that tries to attack all nation states in the Middle East, and that Hamas follows the agenda of its outside "masters" (Al-Ghoul, 2023) the Muslim Brotherhood and, for this purpose, foolishly cooperates with Israel.

Overall, the theme of internal collusion closely reflects the suspicion and insecurity in an opaque authoritarian system that has experienced numerous internal, often deadly, power struggles, sometimes encouraged from the outside. Furthermore, it reflects the anxieties of ordinary Palestinians who not only have to fear Israeli actions but also cannot trust their own government officials and agencies, being at the mercy of two powerful organisations. These conspiracy narratives aim to resolve such anxieties by pointing to a conspiracy as the cause of this complex situation, attributing their predicament and feelings to the intentional actions of Israel and the Palestinian elite.

7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed three themes of Palestinian conspiracy narratives, highlighting the emotions they evoke and the emotional imagery they create. I began by detailing the meta-narrative that underpins these conspiracy narratives. This meta-narrative suggests that Western politics are driven purely by self-interest, involving a cynical competition for supremacy among civilisations, where the weak have no place. Based on this, I explored three specific themes.

Palestinian conspiracy narratives in the West Bank and East Jerusalem draw on Palestinian feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness, as historically encountered, and endured today. These feelings are especially the powerlessness in the face of colonial powers and Israel, as well as the long experience of dispossession and insecurity through colonial violence and the intrusive measures of the occupation. We have seen how conspiracy narratives explain those feelings and experiences by stipulating them to be the result of various conspiracies. The first theme asserts that colonial powers like the UK and US conspired to create Israel as their client state in the Middle East to dominate and divide the region, which involved taking over Palestine and ethnically cleansing it. The second theme focuses on Israeli intentions and actions, depicting Israel as a unified, strategically operating, yet malicious entity bent on expanding and expelling Palestinians, often using duplicity to achieve its aims. This includes the deceptive peace process, seen as a strategy to take over Palestine in a more cunning manner.

Conspiracy narratives, therefore, explain the Palestinian experience as the result of intentional, but secret machinations of foreign powers. These experiences are not framed as isolated acts of various powers but as a long and still unfolding conspiracy, hence emphasising continuity and not a looming rupture. Hence, conspiracy narratives mirror the Palestinian view of the ongoing Nakba. At the same time, these narratives foster fear, particularly through deep suspicions about the intentions of Israel and Western powers, and by portraying the colonisers as malicious and nearly omnipotent, manipulating history to their advantage, leaving little room for Palestinian agency.

The third theme revolves around the collusion of Palestinian political actors in the reality of the occupation. As such, the theme draws on Palestinian anxiety and insecurity as well. This time stemming from the opaque, hypocritical environment Palestinians face internally, with their own institutions being deeply complicit in the occupation, rarely challenging the status quo, seemingly benefiting from it, while claiming to actively work for Palestinian liberation. Conspiracy narratives attempt to resolve this anxiety by alleging that intentional action and secret dealings with Israel by Palestinian political actors have led to today's situation. Such narratives portray different political actors as deeply cynical or outright traitors to the Palestinian cause.

While I argued that conspiracy narratives emotionally construct dangerous, almost omnipotent enemies that perpetuate Palestinian suffering, I have shown that the presented conspiracy narratives are not only producing fearsome images. On the one hand, they entail criticism of foreign powers, complicit or responsible for the colonial violence. On the other hand, they also entail an emotionally positive assertion of Palestinian identity. They construct Palestinians as powerless victims; however, they paradoxically also portray Palestinians as enduring and passively resisting, a nation that refuses to be broken, reflecting the Palestinian narrative of sumud. To summarise this in the words of one participant: But I will tell you a final word, […] the occupation will not last forever (Interview 44, own translation).

These observations will be fleshed out in the following chapter, where I will shed light on the emotional function conspiracy narratives play in both Palestinian and Israeli societies.

Chapter 8 - The Functions of Israeli and Palestinian Conspiracy Narratives

I set out to determine the function of conspiracy narratives in Israeli and Palestinian society. In the previous chapters, I have shown how Israeli and Palestinian society experience specific anxieties, and what conspiracy narratives are prevalent in each society. In this last chapter, I will show the function of conspiracy narratives.

As a reminder, with function, I mean in what social and political phenomena they are involved in. This should not be confused with causality. Conspiracy narratives, as narratives in general are difficult to conceptualise as a cause, for example as a cause for certain policies. But, as I have discussed, narratives are a cornerstone for groups to make sense of their environments. At the same time, narratives can be employed strategically by political actors to deliberately shape how others make sense of their environment. Narratives are often employed to lend legitimacy to actions or negate the legitimacy of others. Propaganda is the most obvious application of using narratives for political gain. Thus, in short, they are intertwined in the exercise of power. In fact, political power could hardly be exercised without them, as power, at least in Hannah Arendt's sense of group action, relies on support from others, and thus ultimately on legitimacy.

Conspiracy narratives can thus be thought of as taking on functions along two axes. On the one hand, how groups adopt them to make sense out of their environment. On the other, how this process is not random, but connected to the exercise of power, and thus, connected to those who do exercise power. Or in other words, how the political elite that spearheads narratives might use them for specific political purposes.

Thus, overall, in this chapter I am bringing together the initial theoretical reflections on the potential impact of conspiracy narratives, with the contextual information on anxiety in both societies and with the presented conspiracy narratives, considering their involvement in the exercise of power.

I separate the chapter into three major sections. I will discuss both sides separately, starting this time with the Israeli side (8.1). I will outline three specific functions of Israeli conspiracy narratives. I will then move to the Palestinian side (8.2) and discuss three functions as well. In the third section (8.3), I will finish with a comparison of the narratives and their function that overall shows that right-wing Israeli conspiracy narratives are hegemonic tools, while Palestinian conspiracy narratives play a largely counterhegemonic function.

8.1 The functions of Israeli conspiracy narratives

Conspiracy narratives always come cloaked in the language of counter-hegemonic discourse. After all, conspiracy narratives claim that a powerful, if not superior, group or alliance of actors is secretly developing plots against the ingroup. Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives are a case in point. Two constellations in right-wing Israeli conspiracy narratives illustrate this.

First, Palestinians are said to be engaging in a secret war against Israel. While the PA, has publicly renounced terrorism, Palestinians still fight Israel via a variety of means that look benign and come cloaked in the language of moderation, diplomacy, and human rights, but in fact are aimed at destroying Israel, as the well-coordinated "delegitimization campaigns" would show. In themselves, the Palestinians might not be superior to Israel, even though right-wing groups often depict the Israeli state as sleeping, unable or unwilling to act against such threats and thus, might be temporarily weaker. But conspiracy narratives seldom see Palestinians as acting alone. They are either backed by powerful Arab states that, for example, pour money into Palestinian propaganda or backed by Western states that equally fund anti-Israeli activities. In sum, Israel is standing more or less alone against a threatening coalition of outside and inside forces. The case is similar to allegations against the perceived deep state run by the Ashkenazi elite. The conspiracy narratives frame right-wing governments as opposed by a malicious alliance of liberal forces, the media, the judicial system, and occasionally the top brass of the military and intelligence community that reject political projects and values of the right. This makes the deep state powerful, if not more powerful than the elected government, which justifies the intended judicial reform, as restoring the balance of power. Yet, this deep state is a globalist elite, connected to the globally operating post-modernist elites. As Avi Bareli (2021) put it:

> The State of Israel and the Judaism Zionism has politically revived stand in opposition to the globalists' plan to root out the sovereignty of democratic nation-states. They are an obstacle in the path of those who seek to 'regulate' the world through expert-led international organizations like the ICC and international corporations that are not held accountable to any public.

Maybe Israel has some friends, some would say, including the United States. But even this seems for Israel's right uncertain. Already in 2007, Katz wrote that

> the struggle for 'greater Israel' is not a neo-conservative or rightist cause, but actually the front line today in the battle against globalization. […] Globalization today undermines […] national sovereignty […]. Those of us who truly oppose injustice can […] halt […] globalization in the Middle East through opposing America's current attempts to shrink Israel.

Unsurprisingly, the United States, especially certain administrations, notably the current Biden White House, are often blamed for working against Israel. So, once again, Israel's right stands alone in a hostile

world, fighting large forces. Hence, Israeli conspiracy narratives wrap the right in the counter-hegemonic mantle of the underdog.

Claiming to be counterhegemonic also entails the return to, or maintenance of an idealised condition of state and society that is acutely threatened. I described how conspiracy narratives evoke an apocalyptic rupture, that, however, can still be prevented. If we follow Regavim's rhetoric for example, Israeli control over the West Bank is under serious threat as Palestinians are accelerating their "occupation" of Israeli land, and if not prevented, Israel will be driven out of the West Bank and will face destruction. Or, in the case of the alleged globalist elite, already implemented changes in the education system would demonstrate that as a Jewish State, Israel is in peril, inevitably leading to mortal danger for its Jewish inhabitants.

Yet, while Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives make counterhegemonic claims, they are deeply involved in demonstrating and implementing political hegemony, justifying the rights' political projects and maintaining the status quo versus the Palestinians. Israel is, like other countries, subject to large structural changes, such as globalisation that by default produce effects, for example in local culture that governments can only partially control. Yet, Israel's right has been effectively shaping the country for three decades at least. The right benefitted from the public shift in its direction, but it also successfully induced this shift. Thus, while the power of religious nationalism has never been uncontested, as I have shown in Chapter 6, it exercises political hegemony today. Conspiracy narratives function in three ways in aiding Israel's right to exercise this political hegemony.

8.1.1 Emotional protection and denial of responsibility

The first function of Israeli conspiracy narratives is their ability to offer emotional protection against attacks on group identity. As has been frequently outlined by cognitive dissonance theory, information that challenges existing beliefs about oneself and one's group is perceived as highly threatening, creating anxiety. As I outlined in Chapter 4, much of what Kelly terms "causally primary" (2019: 6-7) violence of the Zionist movement has been denied and framed as reactive, as defensive, hence, carefully constructing a positive self-image. Thus, claims by Palestinians, human rights organisations or scholars that the Yishuv and Israel engaged in actions described as war crimes or ethnic cleansing do not fit with the self-view Zionists have of themselves. Furthermore, the fundamental attacks on Zionist identity as a "national liberation movement" (Interview 4), and Israeli identity as a liberal democracy are challenged by descriptions of Zionism as a settler-colonial movement and Israel as an apartheid state (Stein, 2021).

Denial is a strategy groups adopt to deal with such identity attacks. As Milburn and Conrad (1998: 2-3) note in their book *The Politics of Denial*, "We dare not feel the pain or face the potential for evil within us […]. [W]e fail to see or hear evil because doing so is too painful and challenges the very basis of our assumptions about the world and ourselves. […]." This denial operates not only on the level of the individual but "Nations, in fact, operate on the basis of such shared reconstructions of reality much of the time […] our official life as a nation is built on a shared denial of painful realities and the suffering they engender."

Denial "is also achieved by the more subtle process of minimization" (ibid: 8). Both outright denial and minimisation have been consistently employed by the Zionist movement and Israel. Masalha (2003) for example, describes in detail how Israeli institutions have consistently denied responsibility for the ethnic cleansing in 1948 and downplayed the number of Palestinians that "fled".

Conspiracy narratives can be a form of denial or rather an extension of the denial strategy. They not only outright deny the validity of certain claims but delegitimise the actors producing the claims. For example, right-wing conspiracy narratives claim that human rights organisations forge evidence for setter violence, thus, denying their validity. Yet, human rights organisations produce such claims daily, making it difficult for Israel's right to claim that such reports are solely honest or unprofessional mistakes. If they were simply mistakes, they would not be systematic and consistent. Conspiracy narratives, however, not only deny the reports but describe the evidence as deliberately manipulated, as intentional lies. Because this conflicts with the self-descriptions of those organisations as dedicated human rights organisations conspiracy narratives must assume a hidden, sinister agenda; how could the consistent claims perceived as an attack on the right's identity be refuted otherwise? In other words, conspiracy narratives extend denial by constructing those that are perceived as attacking right-wing values and identity as dangerous conspirators. By doing so, conspiracy narratives are an emotional tool to shield Israeli right-wing society from dealing with challenges to the current status quo of Israeli hegemony over the Palestinians, and right-wing hegemony inside Israel.

8.1.2 The creation of eclectic fear and securitisation

Conspiracy narratives channel vague feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness and bind them to specific objects, essentially transforming those vague feelings into particular fears of specific objects and their plans. By doing so, they emotionally construct those objects as threatening not because of our fear, but because of the intrinsic properties of the described object. As generally with social constructions, emotions that are socially constructed in such a way seem to confront us as an objective reality that simply exists, lending credence to claims that the dangers are real and must be addressed.

This is especially the case because the fear that becomes attached to the objects fades from view, hiding behind technical language. Israeli conspiracy narratives construct in this way a variety of dangerous objects, Palestinians, left-wing post-Zionist groups, and European powers.

Palestinians are described as a monolithic, powerful and evil group. Conspiracy narratives might acknowledge different Palestinian actors, such as the Fatah-led PA, Hamas or civil society groups, but describe them as all working together to fulfil their one goal: the destruction of Israel. This destruction is in right-wing, mainstream Israeli terms, understood as entailing the physical destruction of Israeli Jewry, or at the very least their brutal subjugation. The danger of the Palestinians is not only their goal, but also their devious tactics, convincing the world that moderate Palestinians including the PA accepted the two-state solution, or that Palestinian NGOs are devoted to human rights, while in reality, these official positions serve as a cover to attack Israel. In essence, Palestinians are a dangerous and cunning enemy.

This image that conspiracy narratives contribute to is very widespread. Their role in this construction can hardly be understated. Only conspiracy narratives can “unmask” Palestinian moderates, as this necessarily requires the stipulation of a secret, coordinated agenda. Thus, what conspiracy narratives excel in, is explaining in detail how certain aspects that seem not to conform to the worldview of the dangerous Palestinians, actually do. Palestinians, aided by conspiracy narratives, became closely connected to the Nazis, the new Nazis, or even the true instigators behind the Holocaust. Netanyahu recycled claims of earlier Israeli commentators (Zertal, 2005: 99-101) and others (Spoerl, 2014) when he alleged that the Palestinian leader, Haj Amin al-Husseini, convinced Hitler not just to expel but to exterminate the Jews (Haaretz, 2015). Mostly in circles of Israel’s far right, Palestinians have become connected to the notion of the Amalek, an eternal evil that attempts to annihilate the Jews across successive generations (Goldberg, 2008b; Horowitz, 2008: 107-145; Masalha, 2000). Here we draw on Timothy Snyder's (2018: 8) concept of "politics of eternity", as described in Chapter 1: The cyclical rise of an eternal evil that absolves any responsibility of the self, because "the enemy is coming no matter what we do".

Internally, left-wing organisations, especially those with post-Zionist outlooks, but also others, that become lumped together, also become constructed as threats. As I quoted above: they might not kill Jews on the street, but they have a hostile agenda. Left-wing post-Zionists are portrayed as evil, and monolithic, acting in secret while hiding their hate for Israel behind seemingly honourable motives. Consequently, they are frequently labelled as traitors, or self-hating Jews.

The construction of Palestinians and left-wing post-Zionists echoes what Brian Klug (2003: 124) contends about the construction of the figure of the Jew in typical antisemitic conspiracy discourse:

> He [the person identified as Jew] ceased to be a mere mortal and became, in a way, timeless: a cipher of the eternal Jew, an expression of 'Jewish spirit' and 'Jewish consciousness'. He became powerful, wealthy, cunning; rootless and cosmopolitan [...]. He became a member – and agent – of a people apart, a state within a state, […] this powerful, wealthy, cunning group infiltrates society, pursuing its own selfish ends […].

These constructions of Palestinians, as well as left-wing Israelis as "cunning" threats are taken seriously. In 2018, a Knesset committee investigated if Palestinian activist Ahed Tamimi, 17 at the time, was an actress paid to undermine the Israeli military, and not a genuine Palestinian protestor (Wootlif, 2018). Israeli activists have been increasingly targeted as well:

> In 2014, with [Operation] Protective Edge. […] it was the first time that we had […] rockets over Tel Aviv in central Israel, and people were really afraid. […]. I think it was a very peak point of us being hated […]. We had a demonstration, […] and a right-wing [counter] demonstration. The police were separating [us]. […] the minute the police left, the right-wingers came at us […] and chased us throughout the streets. We ran into a cafe to hide, they broke into the cafe, they threw chairs and tables at us. […] It also happened the same way in Haifa and other places. It happened [because] of the language of traitors and foreign agents, they started talking about treason, which was very much led by right-wing organisations and adopted by the [Likud] government (Interview 10).

Lastly, conspiracy narratives cast European states and international organisations into the role of enemies. This position is, among the three threats, probably the most controversial among Israel's right. Yet, the right-wing consensus is certainly that Israel cannot count on Europe and needs to limit its influence.

The various actions taken against Palestinians or left-wing groups make sense if we understand how they have been constructed as deeply dangerous. By doing so, however, conspiracy narratives contribute to a climate of fear, that further hardens the right-wing siege mentality and mandates the reliance on the exercise of brutal military power or oppressive internal policies. Thus, the results of such fearful constructions are devasting.

Yet, the fears work on a deep basis. The construction of those groups as dangerous works well because of the deeply embedded anxieties that I outlined in Chapter 6. To quote a participant, the creation of fears:

> Easily works here because of past and present Jewish persecution […]. We know that antisemitism is a real thing. And the state built its existence and power on this basis. The […] feeling of being prosecuted is so deep in the nation's DNA, […] and the notion that the only thing that stands between us and a second Holocaust is the state, and the Jewish state, not just a state that we are safe in, [but] a state that is a Jewish centre, a state for the Jews, and a Jewish state (Interview 12).

Yet, even if right-wing groups are genuinely anxious and afraid, emotions are often intentionally directed and adopted, becoming eclectic emotions. The construction of such specific emotions is inherently linked to furthering certain, often material interests. For example, Regavim is connected to the settlement movement and in a way manufactures fear to justify Israel's control over Palestinians and the West Bank. This is not only Regavim, but politicians skilfully channel vague anxieties onto specific objects as well, often to justify specific policies, which I will explore next.

8.1.3 Justification for specific policies and policy initiatives

The construction of dangerous enemies and emotionally securitising them are related to justifying and pursuing specific policies while delegitimizing divergent views. Conspiracy narratives play an important role in this regard.

Conspiracy narratives allege that the Palestinian identity as a nation was only tactically invented to frame the struggle against Israel as a struggle for national liberation from colonial oppression. This conspiracy narrative legitimises Israeli expansionism and settlement policies, while also refuting any evidence Palestinians offer in support of their narrative. As described above, conspiracy narratives claim that Palestinians fake cultural heritage. Furthermore, claiming that Palestinian identity is not only non-existent but also dangerous, an attack against Israel and its claims makes denying Palestinian claims important, not just for the sake of truth, but for the sake of Israeli security. By framing Palestinians as inherently dangerous, it mandates hard-line Israeli responses and legitimises settlement policies, as morally acceptable, after all, Palestinians don't exist - but also necessary for reasons of security.

While right-wing conspiracy narratives can be tied to legitimising Israeli settlement policies concerning Palestinian land and the Palestinians, such policies have been applied consistently, more or less, by all Israeli governments, including the left-wing governments since the early 1970s, as well as the Rabin-led government between 1992-1995. This indicates that there are other drivers than just conspiracy narratives, including ideological and material interests at play. Thus, what I am suggesting is less that conspiracy narratives act as a clear cause, but rather help frame and legitimise interests and policies.

Sometimes conspiracy narratives endorsed by members of the right-wing elite are pressuring Israeli policymakers to take more hardline positions or lend credence to those that have already adopted such

positions. A noticeable example was how the constant conspiracy narratives pushed by high-profile organisations such as NGO Monitor and JCPA, enabled the Israeli government to designate six prominent Palestinian NGOs as terrorist organisations. The decision has been rejected by European countries, as well as the US. But the Israeli government implemented what NGO monitor and others had been outlining for a while: those six Palestinian organisations are only superficially dedicated to human rights investigations but are actually terror organisations. The Defence Ministry stated, "Those organizations were active under the cover of civil society organizations, but in practice belong and constitute an arm of the [PFLP] leadership, the main activity of which is the liberation of Palestine and destruction of Israel" (cited in Boxerman, 2021).

The timing of the Israeli decision came in the wake of the publishing of the Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports accusing Israel of engaging in apartheid policies. Thus, beyond conspiracy narratives, Israel had an interest in applying pressure on those Palestinian organisations that provided a significant amount of data for those reports. However, conspiracy narratives laid the ground for Israelis to perceive those organisations as a threat but also supplied the arguments as well as legitimacy to the decision reached. Thus, the government essentially allowed conspiracy narratives to inform policy.

On the internal level, conspiracy narratives have led to political actions as well. As described by several participants, politicians adopted the discourse spearheaded by organisations such as Im Tirtzu around Israeli left-wing NGOs being traitors. This led to various official accusations and probes into those organisations. To cite some high-profile examples: In 2016, former Likud Defence Minister, Moshe Ya'alon, ordered a probe into Breaking the Silence for potentially committing treason by acquiring and leaking classified information (Lappin, 2016). Similarly, in 2017 Ayelet Shaked Justice Minister from the religious-Zionist Jewish Home party, directed a probe into Breaking the Silence Members (Leifer, 2017). In the same year, Avigdor Lieberman, Leader of the right-wing Yisrael Beitenu Party charged that both B'Tselem and Breaking the Silence were traitors, funded by the same foundations that fund Hamas" (TOI, 2016). Eventually, the Knesset passed "the NGO law" making it mandatory for Israeli NGOs receiving more than 50% of their funding from abroad to declare so in any public advertisements, statements as well as in any communication with officials. 25 of the 27 NGOs that the Israeli Justice Ministry believed to be affected by this law were human rights organisations (BBC, 2016). The law came only months after the Im Tirtzu video cited in chapter 7, which directly called Human Rights activists foreign agents. In 2023, the current right-wing coalition attempted to further introduce restrictions on left-wing organisations but scrapped the planned bill after heavy complaints by Western governments.

Another internal policy development that is strongly built on conspiracy narratives is the ongoing judicial reform package, first introduced in January 2023. As shown in Chapter 6, the judicial system has since the 1990s drawn the ire of right-wing groups. Since 2014, Im Tirtzu has advanced conspiratorial claims against the judicial system (Im Tirtzu, 2014). When in November 2021, Netanyahu was charged with alleged corruption, he adopted the conspiratorial language and combined it with the US discourse of the deep state. Netanyahu consistently started referring to a "deep state" (TOI, 2021), claiming that there is "no democracy here, but a government of bureaucrats and jurists" (cited in Weitz, 2020).

The judicial reform builds on exactly this conspiratorial language, trying to undermine the separation of powers in favour of the executive and legislative, two organs that have been dominated by the right, and Likud especially (Gidron, 2023; Gross, 2023). Conspiracy narratives continue to be important in the adoption of those policies.

Effectively, we can note the same development that Yablokov (2018: 3) observes for Russia, where "political authorities, with the help of the media and public intellectuals […] had found a way of transforming these [conspiracy] theories into an essential element of official political discourse that strengthened their legitimacy and helped keep society under control."

This is also observed by political scientist Naomi Chazan, and former Director of the left-leaning New Israel Fund who was personally attacked by Im Tirtzu. Writing about an increasingly illiberal trend in Israel visa-vis- left-wing organisations by right-wing organisations Chazan (2012: 11) argues:

> These forces have carried out a systematic, well-planned and extremely sophisticated campaign against those who dare to diverge from the dominant discourse. Instead of dealing with the content of the criticism raised by progressive civil society organizations, purveyors of the new nationalism consistently question their loyalty.

Thus, by branding left-wing organisations as "enemies from within," conspiracy narratives entrench the current coalition in power and reduce the chances of any significant political change, but also purposefully nurture a climate of fear. Overall, Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives are deeply intertwined with maintaining the status quo.

8.2 The functions of Palestinian conspiracy narratives

As noted, conspiracy narratives constitute by default counterhegemonic claims. While Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives are justifying political hegemony, the case is different for Palestinian conspiracy narratives.

Overtly, all Palestinian conspiracy narratives are counterhegemonic. Most narratives address either powerful colonial powers, be it the UK or the US which are said to have established Israel for their colonial interests in weakening and controlling the Middle East. Alternatively, Palestinian conspiracy narratives focus on Israel as a powerful occupying power. In both versions, the powers are described as skilfully and ruthlessly following their interests at the expense of the Palestinians. Their power is seen as so immense that they often achieve anything they want via concerted and strategic actions, that only get thwarted with heroic Palestinian resistance. Unlike Israeli right-wing narratives, Palestinian conspiracy narratives are indeed developed from a weaker position, being the narratives of often powerless actors who face daily oppression. Thus, they are knowledge claims that criticise, challenge and aim to transform the current power relations. Yet, at times Palestinian narratives, like their Israeli counterparts, maintain current power relations and thus are hegemonic despite the rhetoric. This is especially true when political actors, such as the Fatah-controlled PA draw on conspiracy narratives to protect their position.

I will outline three functions conspiracy narratives play in Palestinian society that illustrate their largely counterhegemonic function, but also show how Palestinian political parties use conspiracy narratives to sustain the status quo.

8.2.1 Sense- and meaning-making: Explaining anxiety, suffering and the Palestinian identity

As outlined in Chapter 1, conspiracy narratives can be tools to make sense of threatening and destabilising situations. As Douglas and van Prooijen (2017) describe, anxiety, insecurity and feelings of powerlessness arising from crises lead people to rely on conspiracy narratives as a sense-making tool that helps to identify the causes of their feelings and what to expect from other actors in the future. Thus, conspiracy narratives function as a specific way for Palestinians to make sense of their anxiety, insecurity and feelings of powerlessness. They explain the contemporary insecurities under Israeli occupation, the PA's complicity and the historical suffering of the Palestinian people.

As detailed in Chapter 4, Palestinians experience daily forms of insecurity that extend to all strata of society, including the often materially well-off elite. The daily insecurities Palestinians face combine with a high degree of unpredictability. For example, Israeli forces unexpectedly close routes or establish flying checkpoints in irregular spots. Palestinians face a "bureaucratic maze", regarding residency permits where regulations are confusing, hard to verify and often changing seemingly at will of the authority (Collins, 2011: 94). Nearly always the Israeli state justifies its action via a discourse of security. Similarly, Palestinians might experience sudden encounters with the often corrupt authorities of the PA. Thus, Palestinians resort to conspiracy narratives to understand their feeling that power is ubiquitously

exercised against them, often in opaque ways where neither actions nor intentions can be reliably predicted (Allen, 2016). Put simply, conspiracy narratives are tools to self-rationalise why Palestinians have little to no agency over their everyday lives.

Unsurprisingly conspiracy narratives focus on deciphering the intention behind the actions of Israeli and Palestinian institutions that systematically lead to the oppressive exercise of power against Palestinians. As we have seen conspiracy narratives claim that Israeli policies are all designed to “gain as much Palestinian geography as possible with the least amount of Palestinian demography" (Interview, 23). Conspiracy narratives see this Israeli desire consistently behind all policies, even if Israel claims otherwise. For example, conspiracy narratives would claim that Israeli actions are geared towards the “protection of illegal settlers” but presented under the pretext of enabling “greater security and safety”.

In this sense, as in the Israeli case, Palestinian conspiracy narratives construct an emotionally charged image of the Israeli state, institutions and society whose actions are always interpreted to be intended to harm the Palestinians, and ultimately designed to get rid of them and take their land. From the point of view of this image, every Israeli action must have those evil intentions, be it overtly or in secret. Even those Israeli actions that do not affect Palestinians, or at least seemingly do not produce adverse effects for Palestinians are interpreted as following secretly some evil intent. This simple explanatory framework helps to explain the unpredictability of the Israeli occupation.

To explain this unpredictability, conspiracy narratives not only must explain those Israeli policies that oppress Palestinians but are framed as security measures but also the cases where the Israeli state is sometimes retreating, granting more freedoms or removing settlers. It is precisely that system of mixing overt and partially concealed repression with bureaucratic tactics coupled with the surprising granting of certain privileges that makes the occupation system so difficult to comprehend. When Palestinian conspiracy narratives describe Israeli institutions deliberately pursuing a unified agenda, they explain exactly the constant tension in Israeli policies as a strategic plot. For example, I have shown conspiracy narratives to link decisions of the Israeli Supreme Court that declare an Israeli outpost illegal and order its evacuation to be a deliberate strategy of expansionism, and collusion between the Court and government. Similarly, conspiracy narratives theorise the creation of the Oslo peace process and the subsequent re-configuration of the occupation in which the Israeli state practically utilises the PA for its interests, as the result of a deliberate strategy from the very beginning.

Being suspicious towards all Israeli actions follows from the emotionally constructed image of Israeli actors as pursuing the goal of Palestinian destruction. However, this lens provides a comprehensive explanation of all Israeli actions and is thus able to give sense to Palestinian feelings of insecurity. Such

an overarching explanation that rests on Israeli coherence and maliciousness must essentially draw on conspiratorial elements. Otherwise, how can actions that in their initial effect are not harmful, be secretly designed to be setter-colonial in intent?

Furthermore, conspiracy narratives offer a simple explanation for the oppression of their own Palestinian institutions, such as the PA and Hamas, as well as their complicity in the Israeli occupation and the maintenance of the status quo. Emotionally this is crucial, because, unlike Israel which is assumed to be a national enemy, the PA and Hamas are supposed to work for Palestinians and their liberation. Conspiracy narratives describe Palestinian institutions as fundamentally co-opted by Israel. This, however, is not the result of a superior power that incrementally pressured and undermined Palestinian institutions, in which Palestinian institutions have often little leeway, resist at times, and at other times happily support the status quo, and target the political opposition. Rather, conspiracy narratives claim that PLO members strategically utilised the Oslo Process to safeguard positions and wealth while selling out the Palestinian population. Thus, conspiracy narratives explain all facets of the current landscape of insecurity that Palestinians face.

Palestinian conspiracy narratives not only explain contemporary insecurities but offer historical accounts of the history of the Palestinian people, and thus, an explanation for the Palestinian identity that is so closely connected to the outlined cycle of hopes, shattered hopes and despair. In fact, conspiracy narratives offer a version of Palestinian history and identity where being Palestinian means being subject to a historic, extensive and ongoing conspiracy of larger powers. That the term conspiracy is used causally by Palestinian elites indicates a consensual understanding of the existence of a conspiracy against the Palestinians by Zionism and its international allies. Palestinian professor Salma Jayyusi (n.d.) highlights the importance of understanding the importance of an historic but ongoing conspiracy against Palestinians, arguing that Palestinian literature before 1948 neglected the dangerous "global Zionist strategy" and was pre-occupied with

> the dominance of social problems over political problems […], in a society new to modern life. […] [However,] The Nakba of 1948 produced a deeper awareness of the global conspiracy in general, and the Western one in particular, a conspiracy that surrounded Palestinian life throughout most of the twentieth century (own translation).

This underlines a nexus of identity/conspiracy/Palestine that many Palestinians understand and share. For example, former Hamas-appointed Prime Minister Mohammad Awad (2010) told reporters that continuing to rule in Gaza "despite the challenges, conspiracies, and tight siege […], remaining steadfast in the face of Israeli […] and American measures is another achievement […]. The Palestinian existence is always threatened by aggression from Israel […]" (own translation).

When conspiracy narratives describe such a constant and large conspiracy, they also endow the Palestinian struggle with importance and significance. Conspiracy narratives can allow groups to perceive themselves as part of a "small resistance who fight against some Great Evil that is responsible for the current state of the world, and thus bring meaning to their life." (Schöpfer at al., 2023: 8). Palestinian conspiracy narratives anchor motivations for the conspiracy against the Palestinians in grand-strategy type scheming of foreign powers, that generally target the Middle East, and thus, Palestine becomes the forefront, the avant-garde of the struggle against colonialism, endowed with significant symbolic power. Palestinian elites often emphasise that without Palestinian resistance Israel would have easily expanded further into the Middle East. I quoted a participant saying:

> The colonial project is ongoing […]. It's an ongoing process of solidifying the Israeli-Zionist project, at the expense of the Palestinians' rights. […] and if we don't define borders, why would it stop there [at the West Bank]? Seriously, why would it stop there?

Another example is Ibrahim Abu al-Naja (2022). The former PA governor of Gaza explained in an interview in 2022 that only "the start of the Palestinian revolution stopped the Israeli dream of expanding from the Nile to the Euphrates". The younger generations of the Palestinian elite which usually remain politically non-affiliated see those claims as less credible. As I have shown participants know the discourse but often do not embrace it. But the consensus remains that Palestine is at the forefront of today's anticolonial struggle, with the "Zionist settler-colonial conspiracy" committed against the Palestinians being the "mother of all crimes" (PRC, 2020: 7:17-7.19). As we have seen in Chapter 7, conspiracy narratives subtly emphasise the stubborn holding on to Palestine and a Palestinian identity in the sense of sumud. In other words, anxieties are not only explained but also endowed with significance, reassuring Palestinians that their struggle has a larger meaning. This struggle does not have to entail active resistance.

8.2.2 Holding actors to account

Conspiracy narratives advance hyper-agent-centric accounts of events or history. Because of their focus on agents, conspiracy narratives are deeply political. By definition, they entail claims about how agents hold and exercise power, specifically for what purpose. As shown in Chapter 1, Nefes calls them political narratives "par excellence." Because they propose a certain view of the exercise of power, they can constitute somewhat of "productive political work" (Allen, 2016: 709). Based on this, Palestinian conspiracy narratives critically acclaim power structures in two ways. First, they hold powerful actors accountable for the effects of their actions, despite actors' rhetoric. Second, because conspiracy narratives see outcomes as "the undisturbed realization of intentions" (Groh, 1987: 3), they essentially equate historic responsibility and complicity with intention.

Palestinian conspiracy narratives are anti-colonial narratives that highlight the power exercised by Israel or foreign actors against Palestinians and in the region. Conspiracy narratives hold Israeli institutions accountable for their actions that harm Palestinians, even then when Israel is claiming otherwise. For example, a recent report by Palestinian NGO Al-Haq states about a new bypass road close to the Palestinian village of Beita, "is being constructed for the protection of illegally transferred in settlers and presented under the pretext of 'enabl[ing] a quiet and comfortable fabric of life for the two populations and contribut[ing] to greater security and safety'" (AlBajeh, 2024, changes in original). Suspecting alternative motives behind Israeli actions is natural in an environment where Israeli authorities and actors work hard to justify their actions in the best light possible.

Conspiracy narratives also hold those accountable that are complicit in the oppression of Palestinians. To refer to the example of the High Court once more, conspiracy narratives see the High Court as playing a dedicated strategic role in Israeli expansionism. By alleging this, conspiracy narratives highlight how the court's decisions have implicitly and explicitly allowed the domination of Palestinians. Furthermore, they hold the Court accountable for its general complicity in maintaining the Israeli regime. As scholars (Ayyash, 2023; Ram, 2018b: 95; Zureik, 2016: 64) have highlighted, Israel's liberal elements, such as the rule of law and democratic rights often function as a fig leaf Israeli political actors draw on to shield Israel from criticism. At the same time, liberal left-wing elements in Israel remain wilfully ignorant of Israeli policies in both past and present. To emphasise, linking such institutions to a large Israeli conspiracy is a crude way to hold those institutors accountable for the de-facto role they are playing.

Conspiracy narratives also address Palestinian actors, highlighting the co-optation of the Palestinian elite and its interest in maintaining the Status Quo. Thus, Palestinian political leaders are said to be prepared by and eventually placed into positions of power by Israel, supported by the international community. Similarly, Hamas is allegedly working with Israel, either deliberately empowered to weaken Palestinian unity, or simply having comfortable deals with Israel in place. Both are said to intentionally use the language of resistance, national liberation and the rights of Palestinians while in fact secretly colluding with Israel. One participant, for example, stated about the PA:

> Resistance, right of return, self-determination, these are cliches sentences for the national community, which means nothing to Palestinians. These sentences have to be used to convince a national community that they [the PA] are doing something [when they are not]. […] many things they do, […] because Israel holds their money (Interview 30).

Conspiracy narratives challenge the claim of the ruling parties and by doing so reaffirm the value of national resistance. By expressing suspicion about the goals and methods of Palestinian actors, conspiracy narratives push back against authoritarianism. Conspiracy narratives, thus, function to show

what Palestinians deem the empty rhetoric, hypocrisy, as well as duplicity of both Israel and their own institutions (Allen, 2016).

We have also seen that narratives focus on the historic process of colonisation in Palestine. They specifically criticise the role of the British and American power in supporting the Zionist movement over Palestinian rights and national aspirations. Often the support of the colonial powers becomes linked together in a deliberate plan to divide and control the Middle East. As Mahmoud Abbas stated (2023b):

> the raging battle in and over Jerusalem did not begin only on the day of its occupation in 1967, but several decades before that, and even before the Balfour Declaration, which the colonial powers, led by Britain and America, conspired to issue, with the aim of getting rid of the Jews in Europe on the one hand, and establishing, on the other hand, […] an outpost to secure the interests of these colonial countries (own translation).

This colonial narrative featured heavily in my interviews. Conspiracy narratives can then be understood as criticism of the historic support and continuing support of the United Kingdom and the US for Israel, and a crude way of holding those actors rhetorically to account. Yet, because conspiracy narratives see the exercise of power as done by strategically informed monolithic actors they do not distinguish between intention, historic responsibility, and complicity.

Overall, Palestinian conspiracy narratives provide political criticism. As Yablokov (2018: 8) writes conspiracy narratives "can become an important tool for the redistribution of power and an efficient political strategy to expose inequities within the political, economic and social order". Understanding this function of conspiracy narratives is contrary to much of the initial scholarship that sees Middle Easterners who embrace conspiracy narratives as “paralyzed by paranoia”, unable to enact social change, because conspiracy narratives would “encourage feelings of victimization, powerlessness, and pessimism.” (Waters, 1997: 113). Instead, Palestinian conspiracy narratives function at times as a crude but important anti-colonial critique of powerful actors whose actions are engaged in violence and oppression of Palestinians or complicit in it.

8.2.3 Building legitimacy, delegitimizing and securitising opponents

As we have seen, conspiracy narratives are widely communicated, by all parts of Palestinian society. This includes the PA as well as Hamas, who rely on them for political purposes. Politically, conspiracy narratives can be used to build and enforce legitimacy, rally people behind a cause, explain their political failures, delegitimise opponents and construct them as dangerous threats.

With conspiracy narratives, the Fatah-led PA and Hamas style themselves as defenders against dangerous threats that demand the population to rally and unify behind them. Promoting conspiracy narratives has allowed Palestinian political parties to craft a national narrative of Palestinians being at

the forefront in the fight against Western imperialism, aligning themselves with this fight. The PA, for example, endlessly points towards a conspiracy against the Palestinian people, its national ambitions, and the legitimate leadership of President Abbas. As outlined, in Palestinian discourse the word "conspiracy" is frequently used. Fatah and Hamas both use this discourse to signal their commitment to the Palestinian cause, even if it is largely performative.

Fatah and Hamas officials usually combine the sketching of a threatening plot with calls for unity and support for the right leadership to confront the conspiracy. For example, Muwafiq Matar (2022a) claims, as we have seen, uses the term "creative chaos" to describe the alleged American-engineered Arab spring that, so he claims, intentionally empowered divisive Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood. This also happened in Palestine, where Hamas "since their armed coup against the PLO, the national project, and Authority, and the Palestinian Basic Law" divided the Palestinian people. "[T]his reality […] is the product of a regional, international and Israeli conspiracy against Palestine and the Palestinian people […]", However, Fatah has the power to unify "their positions and visions" (own translation). In this way, conspiracy narratives function to lend actors legitimacy while denying the legitimacy of others.

At the same time, conspiracy narratives allow Palestinian parties to deflect blame and remove themselves from scrutiny. By displaying Israel and its Western masters as incredibly powerful, it easily explains why resistance efforts failed (or rather have failed so far). In the above-cited article, Muwafiq Matar essentially places all blame for Palestinian division on Hamas, described as an American-Israeli tool. In the face of such powers resistance becomes imperative but also difficult, and only when the people unite can Fatah be (potentially) successful.

Conspiracy narratives are also used to fend off criticism and delegitimise political opponents by linking them to an American-Zionist or simply Israeli plot against Palestinians. When the PA-elite links calls for democratic elections in the West Bank and East Jerusalem to a Hamas plot against the Palestinian national movement, it stifles criticism, even if concerns are genuine. For example, Muwafiq Matar (2024) detects claims that a campaign that hides behind "democratic slogans" of "reform and the necessity of holding elections" is

> poisonous because its tools are the same hidden tools of the 2007 coup against the Palestinian national project […] which was carried out by the armed branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine (Hamas). President Abu Mazen unmasked their leaders, revealing the involvement of their leaders in the conspiracy, along with the Hamas leadership. Abu Mazen […] ordered this information to be broadcasted […] to inform the Palestinian people […] of the conspiracy against their right, their cause, and their leadership (own translation).

Unsurprisingly, Hamas also adopts conspiracy narratives to blame the PA and Fatah for working with Israel, branding itself as the only true resistance movement towards Israel. An article on a Hamas-affiliated news website attacking the Fatah leadership illustrates this well. The article starts by acknowledging the heroic legacy of the Fatah movement in leading the Palestinian resistance, before stating that today its leaders are conspiring with Israel. The article, quoting Hamas functionaries states: "there are narrow circles [in Fatah] whose commitment to the occupation is higher than their commitment to our people, and this is […] very dangerous", but that "the Fatah movement [with its ordinary members] is subject to a Zionist conspiracy to liquidate it permanently with the help of its leaders who are appointed by Tel Aviv" (Pal Info, 2023, own translation).

The conspiratorial discourse advanced by the PA and Hamas is tightly connected to similar attempts at securitisation as described on the Israeli side, albeit less systematically connected to policy initiatives. The rhetoric of conspiracy adopted by the PA-affiliated elite emotionally constructs both Hamas and other critics of the PA, for example, human rights activists, as dangerous conspirators working towards the destruction of the Palestinian national movement. The above quote linking protesters to Hamas, describing their calls as poisonous, is a good example; countless others exist as well. In 2022, an official Fatah statement (cited in Al-Hayat al-Jadida, 2022) warned with highly emotionally charged language of a potentially imminent

> continuation of Hamas' attack on the national [Palestinian] identity and its cultural pillars with fire and bloodshed [...] which may not only end with the [permanent] separation of the Gaza Strip from the homeland, but also in the coup plotters' attempts to expand their conspiracy to control the West Bank, after they received approval from the head of the occupation system's government.

Such language securitises Hamas and its supporters in the West Bank as an evil threat "ready to ally even with the devil" (Rajab, 2022). As Hamas would serve Israel and the Muslim Brotherhood, it cannot be accommodated. Linking protesters and activists to such an agenda securitises any form of protest as either involuntarily aiding these enemies or as following hidden Hamas directives. Such language, even if rarely directly connected to legislation, certainly aids in justifying the PA's authoritarian measures towards these groups. The PA increasingly relies on harsh repressive measures, frequently targeting Hamas members, activists, and human rights defenders (Abu Tomaeh, 2023; Buxbaum, 2023; HRW, 2016). This also takes the form of Presidential Decrees that limit freedom of speech and the space for Palestinian civil society. Without delving too much into the Hamas conspiracy narratives in Gaza, this logic of securitisation also applies to Hamas, which frequently securitises any form of opposition as conspirators secretly working with Israel or the PA. Thus, Hamas has often been accused of arresting and executing citizens under false charges of espionage (HRW, 2009; 2012).

This is not to say that the PA and Hamas are not rightfully afraid of political challenges, also backed by Israel, that indeed might come in the form of a secretly prepared coup. This constitutes a potentially deadly threat for the party leadership and even its members. The PA, for example, frequently warns of Hamas coups being prepared against its rule. As described in Chapter 1, conspiracy narratives can create a climate of fear where the anticipation of not-yet-existing threats and existing threats fuse and cannot be distinguished. Potential contenders for power are anticipated before they even come to exist. This is typically linked to cracking down on everything that is somehow perceived as dissent.

Overall, conspiracy narratives function as an authoritarian tool for Palestinian political actors to manipulate public opinion, suppress dissent, and maintain their grip on power. The emotional securitisation of opponents via conspiracy narratives is a useful tool for this end. By exploiting fear, distrust, and uncertainty, Palestinian political parties seek to consolidate control and evade accountability for their actions and failures. In particular, the Fatah-led PA is in the strange position of having high interests in maintaining the status quo to stay in power and enjoy the material benefits that come from working with Israel, while at the same time being vulnerable to the Israeli exercise of power, while also being somewhat committed to challenging Israel and the status quo, at least in a performative way. This understandably produces even further opacity and powerlessness among Palestinians who in turn, as described, resort to conspiracy narratives to explain this oppressive paradox.

8.3. Comparison – Israeli and Palestinian conspiracy narratives

In this last section, I will bring various observations on conspiracy narratives together, focusing particularly on their function and connection to the exercise of power.

I have argued in Chapters 4 and 6 that Palestinian as well as Israeli conspiracy narratives are based on anxieties, insecurity and feelings of powerlessness that pervade both societies. Still, those feelings arise from the experiences both societies have had. This is not to say that those feelings are natural, in the sense that they simply occur due to situations that act upon groups. Rather, they cannot be separated from group interests, narratives and the way groups generally make sense out of their environments. Yet, if we want to understand Israeli and Palestinian conspiracy narratives it is important to understand and accept those feelings as genuinely felt by many if not most members of society.

The conspiracy narratives that I tracked in Chapters 5 and 7 are based on those feelings but do not appear randomly. For narratives to be successfully spread by the political elite they need to resonate emotionally, but also fit in the general group narratives. However, the narratives that become reproduced by both the elite and the group more generally are those that exercise specific political functions. Actors

adopt conspiracy narratives because they successfully perform a political function, thus conspiracy narratives prove useful. For example, conspiracy narratives allow Israel's right to channel anxieties around challenges to Israeli identity and transform them into fears of NGOs that somehow are implicated in this challenge. To be clear, I am not claiming that conspiracy narratives are necessarily adopted instrumentally: they might be, but they also might be genuinely believed. However, if conspiracy narratives do not resonate with existing narratives or interests and prove useful, they certainly would fade over time, and not come to constitute part of the worldview of the actors, or part of how actors make sense of their environment.

Conspiracy narratives are rhetorically counterhegemonic narratives, as they paint the ingroup as threatened by large forces. However, as I have shown above, they can be involved in either maintaining or challenging power. Thus, despite their rhetoric, they can be understood as either hegemonic or counterhegemonic narratives.

Conspiracy narratives emotionally construct large, dangerous and evil enemies. As previously noted, conspiracy narratives then not only draw on anxieties but produce fear. As I argued, they channel vague feelings into specific fears. Thus, they do not reduce adverse feelings, but increase them. The fear transported by conspiracy narratives and attached to the object is political. Because the fearsome image of the constructed enemy seems, on the one hand, natural, and on the other hand easily morphs into a technical discourse of security, it proves politically so powerful. For the Israeli side, fear is hegemonically involved in justifying the status-quo of Israeli dominance and colonialism over Palestinians, to legitimise right-wing projects and delegitimise (post-Zionist) opponents. For the Palestinian side, the threatening image underscores the need for vigilant resistance but is also politically used to unify the population, explain the failures of the political leadership and delegitimise political opponents. This does not mean the generated fears (or the initial anxieties) are equal. As Elias Zureik (2016, 157-158) points out, "It is one thing when the majority with the full backing of state and its institutions expresses its fears, and it is another thing when a powerless minority attributes its fears to the hegemonic nature of the Zionist state, which usually sides with the Jewish public."

When promoted by actors in positions of power, conspiracy narratives are thus especially problematic, the fear they create lends itself too easily to target groups with less power, and in the present case, function to enhance authoritarian oppressive policies. The fear that people express and usually genuinely perceive that derives from the conspiracy narratives must still be approached with empathy, otherwise, we cannot fully grasp actors' worldviews and motivations. Yet, as I have argued in Chapter 3, empathy should be extended without sympathy. We should not treat those fears as legitimate and as requiring

reassurance, precisely because they are so intertwined with maintaining an oppressive status quo. Only by going beyond these fears can a more just situation can be realised.

When promoted by actors in a marginalised position conspiracy narratives function as counterhegemonic tools that contrary to popular opinion can perform useful functions.

I have highlighted the sense-making function, especially in the Palestinian case. Here, conspiracy narratives function as – I would argue – a flawed tool for making sense out of daily insecurity and national powerlessness. Conspiracy narratives describe actions and events as the result of deliberate strategies by actors that intentionally conceal their actions. Thus, Palestinian conspiracy narratives capture important aspects of the Zionist settler-colonial project. Indeed, a key aspect of Zionism has been the conscious replacement of Palestinians, often relying on (self-)denial. At times, colonial and Zionist leaders indeed formulated secret agreements and plans, such as the Balfour Declaration or Plan Dalet. Yet, usually, political events are driven by contingent developments (Perthes and Lippert, 2011) to which actors respond.

Conspiracy narratives can also constitute "productive political work", by breaking historic developments and layers of responsibility, and complicity down to intention. Thus, they highlight the agency and interests of actors that are often obscured or denied. By doing so, conspiracy narratives offer a way to hold actors rhetorically accountable. For example, narratives hold left-wing Zionists accountable for their complicity in the occupation, despite their overt commitment to territorial withdrawal. Analytically, the problem is that conspiracy narratives always stipulate the same hidden interest as ultimately behind any behaviour or action. Thus, anything that Israel does is interpreted as somehow advancing a settler-colonial agenda: withdrawal, and no withdrawal both become part of the strategy to advance this goal. However, as Wolfe (2006) and others argue, settler-colonialism is a structure that produces a certain logic that governs and constitutes actors, but not an all-determining grand strategy.

Israeli sources often claim that Palestinian conspiracy "theories" spread antisemitism and encourage violence. Reviewing the Palestinian discourse, I have shown a decidedly different picture. This does not mean that conspiracy narratives are never involved in justifying violence. The imperative for resistance that conspiracy narratives contain can justify armed resistance, which should not generally be equated with antisemitism. Yet, specific antisemitic conspiracy narratives do circulate in Palestinian society as well, which can incite antisemitic violence.

To clarify again, I have not linked conspiracy narratives, particularly to armed resistance. Conspiracy narratives in both Palestine and Israel are too widespread and part of ordinary everyday political discourse to count only as the dangerous beliefs of political extremists. Rather conspiracy narratives are a versatile political tool that can both serve everyday hegemonic structures of oppression, as well as everyday counterhegemonic claims that demand political change.

8.4 Conclusion

When writing this chapter, I came across the poem "The Law of Fear" by Mahmoud Darwish. It beautifully captures how fear is used by those in power to legitimise their actions. I will quote nearly the full poem, cited with some small editorial alterations:

> The killer looks at the ghost of the murdered, not in his eyes, without remorse. He tells the bystanders, "Do not blame me: I am afraid, I killed because I was scared, and I will kill because I am scared". A few, trained in the jurisprudence of justice interpreted the sentence as the right to kill in self-defence. Others, admirers of the idea that progress is superior to morality said: 'Justice is the overflow of the generosity of power. The victim should apologise to the killer for the trauma he caused him. Let us comfort the frightened man.' But when a foreigner wondered, 'But what is the reason for killing a baby?' The mob replied, 'Because one day this baby will grow up and then we will fear him.' 'But why kill the mother?' The mob said, 'Because she will raise a memory.' […] The mob shouted in unison, 'Fear and not justice is the foundation for authority.' The spectre of the dead man appeared to them from a cloudless sky. They opened fire, but did not see a single drop of blood, and they were afraid.' (Darwish, 2013, own translation).

In the above chapter, I described that conspiracy narratives, due to the fear they convey, do the same. Conspiracy narratives can become tools for sustaining the status quo when advanced by actors in a position of power. In other words, they exercise a hegemonic function. I described this by outlining three functions of right-wing Israeli conspiracy narratives. First, Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives assist in shielding right-wing groups emotionally from acknowledging evidence showing the brutal practices of Zionism and Israel and thus aid in denying responsibility. Second, conspiracy narratives channel vague anxieties into concrete fears that construct fearsome objects that pose a deep threat to Israel and the safety of its citizens. Third, conspiracy narratives, especially via the invoked fear and the fearsome image that they create, are ideal to justify and promote specific policies that target those enemies.

In short, Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives function to sustain Israeli hegemony towards Palestinians and right-wing hegemony over liberal and post-Zionist Israelis.

Palestinian conspiracy narratives challenge the power exercised against them and thus are largely counterhegemonic. I have shown this, especially via two functions. First, Palestinian conspiracy narratives allow Palestinians to make sense of their feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness by

stipulating a simple cause for their oppression by Israel, the PA, as well as foreign responsibility and complicity. Furthermore, they endow the Palestinian struggle with significance. Second, conspiracy narratives function as a crude but at times useful tool to hold actors accountable by (over-)emphasising the agency of actors that either intentionally harm Palestinians, share the responsibility or are complicit in such events. I outlined also a third function of Palestinian conspiracy narratives. Here, political actors, such as the PA draw on these narratives to sustain their position in power by building legitimacy and by delegitimizing political opponents.

Overall, I have highlighted six functions of Israeli and Palestinian conspiracy narratives. I have focused on three functions that I see as most important in each society when it comes to the exercise and maintenance of power. It should be noted that in each society they will also play other roles. For example, sense-making is certainly important also for the Israeli right, but less important when considering the other outlined functions that actively sustain current injustices. While Palestinian narratives strongly challenge Israeli rule, this is not to say they have no other functions, such as being involved in justifying legitimate and illegitimate armed resistance. However, many other Palestinian narratives around heroism and martyrdom, as well as some Islamist currents are more strongly linked to this aspect.

To conclude this chapter, I have shown that conspiracy narratives can function to sustain the status quo by being a useful authoritarian tool for Israeli and Palestinian political actors. Yet, conspiracy narratives also have qualities that make them counterhegemonic by allowing marginalised actors to explain their oppression and hold oppressive forces to account.

Conclusion

This thesis examined conspiracy narratives and their emotional function in Israeli and Palestinian politics. While working on this thesis, the events of and since 7 October 2023 constitute a seismic shift in the political landscape. From a research perspective, such drastic political change can undermine the validity of research and challenge its findings and conclusions. Yet, the war in Gaza seems to reaffirm my observations and findings. Most importantly, the events highlight the importance of investigating conspiracy narratives, the emotions they draw on and create and their political function in the Israeli-Palestinian context.

After 7 October, experiences and feelings of insecurity have sky-rocketed in both societies. While I do not mean to compare the scale of suffering and insecurity that is by any objective measure significantly more intense on the Palestinian side, both societies have nevertheless been deeply affected. Emotions in the public realm, however, do not simply occur but are formed and channelled by group discourse, including conspiracy narratives into what I termed eclectic emotions and emotional beliefs. In line with the thesis' suggestions, conspiracy narratives increased alongside those intense feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness. While such an assessment must remain tentative without systematic data, the ease with which it is currently possible to find conspiracy narratives is telling. As argued in this thesis, conspiracy narratives allow groups to explain their adverse feelings and experiences. Since 7 October, conspiracy narratives have been employed to explain the war and its events, including the intense emotional experiences groups have.

In the aftermath of the attacks of 7 October, the Israeli right-wing discourse seems to be replete with conspiratorial allegations that have strong emotional undertones by invoking dangerous threats might throw the country further into chaos. The following examples demonstrate their enduring if not heightened presence. Zvi Hauser (2024) claims that Palestinian factions conduct "a unified active operation", combining Hamas' armed attacks with the PA's legal action, designed to undermine Israel's right to self-defence. Internally, Shaw (2024) alleges that some influential left-wing figures continue orchestrating a campaign "to remove Netanyahu" for ulterior motives. "Prior to 7/10 they included […] malevolent, former leftist politicians and retired IDF and air force commanders", "[n]ow these people […] have returned […] with different signs and are using the hostages […] as their cover". At times, right-wing commentators including politicians go as far as alleging secret communication between Israeli opposition figures and Hamas before 7 October (Magid, 2023; Fink, 2024). According to Haaretz's Alison Kaplan Sommer (2024), about 30% of Israelis would find such claims credible.

International actors are described as being part of a wider plot. Speaking about the UN's role in the current war, Gilad Erdan the Israeli ambassador to the UN and a former Likud Minister, claimed that the "UN poses a threat" because the "political interests driving UN […] harbor hidden agendas" against Israel (cited in Kempinski, 2024). Other commentators opine that legal steps taken by international organs, such as the ICJ are "a judicial Oct. 7th" (Kontorovich, 2024) or an "act of lawfare" (Apfel, 2024). Those attacks against Israel are not seen as based on Israeli actions in Gaza. After all, "Israel has conducted itself in Gaza like Mother Teresa" (Shragai, 2024) but are designed to destroy Israel. It is an agenda that some commentators tie to helping Hamas or to funding from anti-Israeli states (ibid; Hummel, 2024; Eydar, 2024). Thus, for many on the Israeli right, the war exposes various plots that systematically threaten Israel on various levels. As such, they construct a very threatening environment, in which "the superficial story is never the whole story, and is often a diversion from the real crime […]" (Altabef, 2023).

Post-7 October conspiracy narratives can be found in Palestinian discourse as well. Conspiracy narratives construct the Israeli state as deeply malicious, as allowing the Hamas' attack to take place, or coordinating the attack in the first place (Hasson, 2023). Fatah-affiliated Omar Al-Ghoul (2024a, own translation) states that "the Israeli political and security elites were aware of what would happen on October 7", indicating that there might have been an agreement between Hamas and Israel beforehand. In a follow-up article, Al-Ghoul (2024b, own translation) doubled down on his fearful claims writing that 7 October was planned by the capitalist West, and its "Zionist tool" to destroy the Palestinian national project". Similarly, former PLO official Hassan Asfour (2023) alleges that Israel and the US let Hamas' attack happen to fabricate the justification for "a comprehensive war" […] to impose "American hegemony" over the entire Middle East and save Netanyahu's coalition from collapse.

In some contributions, the war is described as part of a planned Israeli effort to ethnically cleanse Gaza (Barhoum, 2024). As Professor Khaled Beydoun (2024) argues "Ethnic cleansing. This was always the plan". This discourse drawing on deep suspicion of US and Israeli actions, undergirded by Palestinian anxieties of dispossession channels these feelings into conspiratorial allegations. An example is the discourse, regarding the newly constructed US temporary port in Gaza, which according to the US should increase the flow of humanitarian aid. Yet, contributors from across the political spectrum fear that the port's main purpose is to facilitate ethnic cleansing. As Palestinian journalist Diana Butto (2024) discusses, American and Israeli intentions towards Palestinians are not good. She then discusses how many Palestinians believe the pier is in fact built to facilitate the deportation of Palestinians: "The Israelis and the Americans want to make it look as though […] they are not starving Palestinians. But

we know better. […] We as Palestinians have learned that things that are labelled temporary become permanent. […] The bigger question is what's it [the port] being used for?" Butto is not the only one questioning the motives of the US and Israel. For example, Palestinian Professor, Sania El-Husseini casts doubt on the port, linking it to the exploration by Israel of gas fields in front of Gaza's shore (2024, own translation).

These few examples reflect, as the thesis has shown, that conspiracy narratives are an important aspect of the discourse in both societies. In other words, conspiracy narratives are not a rare occurrence of some deluded individuals, neither before, nor since 7 October. Considering the current trajectory of both external and internal conflicts in both societies and the amount of anxieties, insecurities and feelings of powerlessness this inevitably produces, it should not be surprising that conspiracy narratives continue to feature prominently. Thus, the question is do conspiracy narratives politically matter? Do they take on a political function? And if yes, how do they matter? This is the key question that this thesis addressed.

The gaps of current research and the thesis' aims

Despite the enduring presence of conspiracy narratives in Israeli and Palestinian politics, the current research landscape does not sufficiently address conspiracy narratives and their political function.

As shown in Chapter 1, research on conspiracy narratives in Israel and Palestine is almost absent. If Israel appears in scholarly work on conspiracy narratives, it appears as the target of the studied narratives. Palestinian conspiracy narratives are also understudied. Academic work rarely addresses Palestinian conspiracy narratives directly. Usually, scholars subsume Palestinian conspiracy narratives under Middle Eastern conspiracy narratives more generally. Yet, even the general literature on conspiracy narratives in the Middle East is relatively scarce. As shown in Chapter 1, research can be divided into an "old" and a "modern school". Older approaches usually rely on orientalist understandings of Arab or Muslim culture. Such approaches often treat conspiracy narratives as the key driver for the region's underdevelopment, various conflicts and hatred for Israel and the West, while at the same time being paralysing, locking the people of the region into a paranoid fantasy worldview (Pipes, 1998; Zonis and Joseph, 1994).

The modern school provides valuable research on conspiracy narratives. Scholars adopt a more nuanced perspective, providing useful insights into the sources of conspiracy narratives in the region. These include the experience of colonialism, state repression, as well as weak states with little legitimacy. Yet, the question of how conspiracy narratives matter remains vague. Authors hint at states' attempts at

legitimacy building and mobilisation (Butter, 2014; Gray, 2010). However, it remains unclear to what extent conspiracy narratives succeed in doing so, and how such effects come about. This follows the trend in conspiracy research that is mainly concerned with the reasons why people believe in conspiracy narratives. To be clear, these are important aspects. Nevertheless, it is curious that the political role conspiracy narratives play is rarely studied explicitly, especially as scholars make bold claims about their effects, as conspiracy narratives would "have been deeply entwined in revolutions, social movements, [...] witch-hunts, and worse" (Uscinski and Parent, 2014: 4).

Ultimately the literature review revealed three core gaps. First, the literature is silent on Israeli conspiracy narratives. Second, it insufficiently addresses Palestinian conspiracy narratives. Third, the political role and effect of conspiracy narratives in both societies and the Middle East are undertheorized and -specified.

With this thesis, I made an initial contribution to filling those gaps by relying on the following research question: **What function do conspiracy narratives play in Israeli and Palestinian society?** I restricted the analysis to conspiracy narratives of Israeli right-wing groups, as they represent the politically hegemonic group of Israeli society, and to the Palestinian society in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, to specifically address conspiracy narratives under formal Israeli occupation. Based on this question, the thesis explored when, how, and for what purposes political actors on Israel's right and in the Palestinian society of East Jerusalem and the West Bank draw on conspiracy narratives, and the implication this has on broader group dynamics, and the construction of reality.

Research design

I based this thesis on an interpretivist framework tied to an understanding that social reality should be accessed from the perspective of its participants (Glesne, 2016: 19). This is linked to two fundamental assumptions. Ontologically, the world is socially constructed and epistemologically, knowledge and language are intrinsically connected and impossible to separate.

Ontologically, social reality is diverse and highly contingent. Hence, in this thesis, my aim was not to uncover universal laws about conspiracy narratives, but rather how individuals and groups in Israel and Palestine assign meaning to the world in which they live. In other words, I was interested in the inter-subjective reality Israeli right-wing groups and Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank perceive and construct.

Epistemologically, I could not access that reality without relying on the interpretations of Israelis and Palestinians themselves. Thus, any material I draw on was "already interpreted" by the participants

(Guzzini, 2000: 149). In that sense, my research was not geared towards a "neutral" description and explanation of the world but was together with the research's participants embarking on a journey of "worldmaking" to borrow Nelson Goodman's term. In other words, the research (and myself with my specific positionality) did not simply capture what is out there but participated in the creation of the worlds it attempted to capture.

However, this does not mean that this research has no validity. As explained in more detail in Chapter 3, I aimed to show that the conclusions I drew were "sufficiently contextualized" to show that they derive from the context and the specific interpretations of the participants (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 47). Such assumptions strongly suggested adopting a qualitative method that allows the gathering of rich data, studying conspiracy narratives from the perspective of those that narrate them. I cautioned, however, that only attempting to understand conspiracy narratives from the perspective of their narrators might lead to an uncritical evaluation that ignores potential harmful effects. Thus, I highlighted how conspiracy discourse must be problematised via an examination of how conspiracy discourse relates to the exercise of power and how that power is exercised.

Based on those fundamental assumptions, the thesis relied on semi-structured qualitative elite interviews. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews in asking follow-up questions was particularly useful in determining if a narrative was truly describing a conspiracy. Because public discourse is decisively shaped by elites, I focused on interviewing political elites.

Overall, I conducted a total of 46 interviews. For the Israeli context, I conducted a total of 22 interviews. I conducted 14 interviews with right-wing individuals and 8 with left-wing participants to gain more contextual information, especially from those often targeted by right-wing conspiracy narratives. Based on an analysis of Palestinian society, I interviewed three groups of Palestinians: Fatah loyalists, Hamas supporters, and members of Palestinian society. I conducted a total of 24 interviews with Palestinian participants in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

To supplement interview data and provide contextualisation, I immersed myself in Israeli right-wing, and Palestinian discourse through extensive access to online sources. This included newspaper articles, social media posts, and videos, incorporating a diverse mix of textual, visual, and audio data. I analysed this data following Virgina Braun's and Victoria Clarke's (2006; 2002) approach to thematic analysis. I derived the main themes from the interview data and further refined them by drawing on the contextual knowledge from the immersion process.

Contribution and findings

This thesis made a conceptual, as well as empirical contribution to the literature.

Theoretical and conceptual contribution

As a first step, I developed a novel theoretical framework that draws together diverse theoretical and empirical insights on conspiracy narratives and emotions. I developed the concept of conspiracy narratives, arguing against the use of the more commonly used term conspiracy theories. I defined conspiracy narratives, following Claire Birchall (2006: 34), as any narrative that explains an "event or series of events to be the result of" a powerful group of people working in secret towards an evil goal. This definition includes the combination of three necessary narrative elements that describe a conspiracy by referring to a) the secret plans or actions, b) hedged by a powerful group of conspirators, c) based on malicious intents. The chapter highlights the main themes of conspiracy narratives, what feelings they draw on, and what threats they emotionally construct. These elements make conspiratorial discourse distinctive from related phenomena, such as discourse that emphasises how actors cynically pursue selfish ends but does not assume actors are malevolent, as proposed by game or realist IR theory.

I argued that the concept of conspiracy narrative is more useful than the more commonly employed concept of conspiracy theories. While the concept follows much of the literature it diverges in two important points. First, the concept captures vague conspiratorial suspicions as well as full-blown conspiracy theories. Because the former is more common than the latter, it would be a mistake to exclude them. In fact, much of the research that uses the term conspiracy theory goes beyond the self-imposed definition of conspiracy theories as being coherent constructs outlining global conspiracies and includes in the analysis vaguer allegations as well. Second, with the term conspiracy narrative, I attempted to sever the common association of conspiracy theories and falsehoods. On the one hand, I argue that it is pragmatically unwise to tie the definition of conspiracy narratives to their truth value. On the other hand, the term sheds some of the pejorative baggage that inevitably comes with the term conspiracy theory and easily associates research with the study of deluded people, distracting from how common and politically useful conspiracy talk is.

Most importantly, I argued that conspiracy narratives need to be understood through their link to emotions. Research on conspiracy narratives has well established that conspiracy narratives are grounded in feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness. Such feelings are often related to conditions like violent conflict, societal crises and marginalisation, conditions which are highly relevant in the Israeli-Palestinian context. By drawing on some more recent scholarship (Liekefett et al., 2023; van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017), I suggested that conspiracy narratives not only draw on feelings of

anxiety but channel those feelings to emotionally construct a fearsome group of conspirators. In a nutshell, conspiracy narratives are grounded in feelings of anxiety but produce specific fears.

By drawing on psychological constructivist literature on emotions, I detailed this further in Chapter 2. As argued by psychological constructivists, emotions do not simply happen to us. Rather, they should be described as a sense-making process via which we try to understand signals from our body and brain and relate them to the world. In other words, we desire to understand what we feel and why we feel a certain way. This insight can be connected to the difference between anxiety and fear. While anxiety and fear are similar feelings, I described anxiety as a vaguer, more generalised feeling that lacks an object we can describe as the cause of the anxiety. On the contrary, fear is related to a specific object that seems to constitute an imminent, rather than vague threat. Yet, groups prefer clear fear over anxiety. Anxiety, because of the absence of the object that seemingly causes the feeling is harder to address and manage and demands to make sense of this vagueness.

Connecting these insights, I argued that conspiracy narratives offer a way to make sense out of such vague anxieties. They do so by offering a specific object that is described as causing those feelings. Thus, conspiracy narratives essentially channel vague anxieties into fears of a specific group and their malicious intentions and conspiratorial actions. Yet, I understand fear not solely as a fleeting emotion. Rather fear, like other emotions, seems to be an insight about the attributes an object carries. In other words, we form as Jonathan Mercer (2010) has described emotional beliefs about the nature of objects. Conspiracy narratives create an emotional belief that a certain outgroup is a dangerous group of conspirators.

Furthermore, I argued that through discourse, such conspiratorial fears can become institutionalised, and become an eclectic emotion of a group, an emotion that is actively adopted, rather than simply passively triggered. I specifically described two mechanisms. When conspiracy narratives and the attached fear circulate inside a group, they can create feeling rules (Hochschild, 2012), stipulating that the outgroup of alleged conspirators must be treated as a dangerous threat. This is linked to a second mechanism. I argued that conspiracy narratives are involved in processes of securitisation (Buzan et al., 1998). Because conspiracy narratives construct an outgroup as a dangerous threat, they demand emotionally that the threat be urgently addressed and thus, justify the allocation of attention, resources and the adoption of specific policies that combat the constructed threat.

It matters little if the conspiracy narrator believes the conspiracy to truly exist or if they are communicating it solely for instrumental reasons. By narrating it, the narrator inserts the narrative and the attached fear into the public discourse where this fear exercise effects disregarding if the narrator

genuinely feels this fear. Because conspiracy narratives lend themselves to emotionally securitise objects, they can be drawn on for political purposes, such as justifying certain ideologies and policies, and are thus connected – instrumentally or not - to the pursuit of (material) interests groups have. As such, conspiracy narratives can either be involved in sustaining or challenging political hegemony.

Overall, the original framework proposed in this thesis suggests conspiracy narratives have an intimate connection to anxiety and fear, allowing them to be drawn on for political reasons legitimising or challenging the exercise of power by explaining and constructing out of feelings of anxiety, insecurity and powerless the threatening image of a group of conspirators.

Empirical contribution

The empirical contribution of this thesis is threefold.

Delineating sources of eclectic group emotions

First, I developed a detailed account of feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness among Israeli right-wing groups and Palestinians living in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. In both cases, these feelings are pervasive and deeply ingrained in group narratives and beliefs, providing ample ground for conspiracy narratives to flourish.

I highlighted three sources of anxiety and their historical genesis among right-wing Israeli voters. Right-wing groups in Israel experience anxiety due to the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, perceived socio-economic marginalisation, and what I termed right-wing Zionist fragility, denoting the anxiety arising from challenges to the right-wing, religious ethno-nationalist interpretation of the need for a Jewish-dominated state. These anxieties are compounded by a specific interpretation of Jewish history, including the Holocaust, that constructs the destruction of the Jewish people as a constant, realistic possibility. In that sense, despite commanding a strong military, right-wing Israelis feel deeply insecure.

The thesis also highlighted how Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank experience deep anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness. These feelings derive from everyday insecurity due to Israeli colonialism and violence that impacts every Palestinian in a deeply personal way, creeping into the fabric of everyday life. Palestinians also live through collective insecurity due to violence against Palestinians as a whole, insecurity that is experienced today but also historically transmitted and shaped via the Palestinian narratives of the Nakba and the ongoing suffering of a people without a homeland. This is further compounded by considerable anxiety due to constant challenges to Palestinian identity by Israeli actions.

Six Themes of Israeli and Palestinian Conspiracy Narratives

Second, I gathered extensive data on conspiracy narratives and their emotional content in the discourse of Israel's right as well as Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

On the Israeli side, I have shown that the conspiracy narratives prevalent among Israeli right-wing groups are embedded in a meta-narrative, alleging that a coalition of left-wing and Palestinian forces adopted the dangerous ideology of postmodernism to assault right-wing identity and values, such as the importance of the nation and religion. I identified two main themes of Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives. Both themes use emotionally charged language, fearfully outlining a potential, almost imminent apocalyptic rupture of Israel's potential downfall to construct two groups of enemies that cannot be accommodated.

The first theme revolves around the machinations of the Palestinians. Conspiracy narratives construct Palestinians as menacing, cunning, and wicked figures, intently focused on destroying Israel, including by faking their identity and history. Conspiracy narratives claim that Palestinians, despite overtly being divided, secretly work together to destroy Israel, including by producing propaganda, covertly occupying Israeli land, and masquerading as moderates and human rights activists. The second theme revolves around the machinations of powerful Israeli left-wing groups that are fearfully described as secretly striving to de-Judaize Israel. Most notably, right-wing groups accuse a deep state composed of liberal Ashkenazi elites, especially the judicial institutions, of secretly ruling the country, often supported by left-wing NGOs, European countries, and international organisations.

On the Palestinian side, conspiracy narratives in East Jerusalem and the West Bank are embedded in a meta-narrative around power politics, claiming international politics is solely about nations' ruthless pursuit of power and economic gains. Embedded in that meta-narrative, the analysis revealed three main themes that highlight Palestinian suffering but endurance in the face of an ongoing conspiracy. First, narratives allege an ongoing, historically rooted conspiracy in which almost omnipotent colonial powers, such as the US or UK, strategically created Israel to weaken and divide the Middle East and ethnically cleanse Palestine. The second theme revolves around the machinations of Israel, which is equally displayed as vastly powerful and deeply malicious. Israeli institutions are seen as strategically working together to achieve one goal: maximum land with the least number of Palestinians, even striving for a Greater Israel. Israel would spread terror, attempting to break the will of the Palestinians while concealing its actions from the world. A third theme addresses Palestinian actors. Narratives, often following partisan lines, allege that Palestinian elites secretly cooperate with Israel, pretending to work

for Palestinian liberation while, in fact, doing everything to keep Israel safe and the occupation entrenched.

The outlined Israeli and Palestinian narratives are prevalent in the data and by no means fringe narratives. Yet, as I have cautioned, this prevalence does not mean that all right-wing Israelis nor all Palestinians from East Jerusalem and the West Bank believe in those allegations. While I believe that participants were genuinely concerned over the developments they outlined, what matters is how they express and narrate those conspiracy narratives. The narratives always carry emotions, sometimes overtly and strongly, sometimes more subtly, contributing to the emotional construction of the mentioned outgroups as dangerous conspirators.

The function of Israeli and Palestinian conspiracy narratives

Third, I connected theory and empirics by describing six political functions of conspiracy narratives in Israel and Palestine. Due to their emotional content, conspiracy narratives can become tools for either sustaining or challenging the status quo.

The Israeli right largely draws on conspiracy narratives as a hegemonic tool to sustain right-wing rule and justify and promote right-wing ideologies and policies. I proposed three specific functions. First, Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives assist in shielding right-wing groups emotionally from acknowledging evidence showing the violent practices of Israel and thus aid in denying responsibility. Second, conspiracy narratives allow right-wing elites to channel the vague feelings of anxiety, insecurity or powerlessness among right-wing voters into concrete fears that can and must be addressed. Third, conspiracy narratives, especially via the invoked fear and the fearsome image of a group of conspirators that they create, are employed to justify and promote specific policies that target those constructed conspirators. In short, Israeli right-wing conspiracy narratives function to sustain Israeli hegemony towards Palestinians and right-wing hegemony over liberal and post-Zionist Israelis.

Palestinian conspiracy narratives have largely counterhegemonic functions, challenging the power exercised over them, especially via two functions. First, Palestinian conspiracy narratives allow Palestinians to make sense of their feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and powerlessness by positioning a conspiracy as the simple and graspable cause for their oppression, while endowing this suffering with a larger-than-life meaning. Second, conspiracy narratives function as a crude but at times useful tool to hold actors accountable. By (over-)emphasising the agency of actors that are responsible or complicit in violence against Palestinians they brush aside pretext, hypocrisy, and apologetics. Yet, some Palestinian conspiracy narratives are also being used as hegemonic tools when Palestinian political actors draw on

these narratives to build legitimacy and delegitimise political opponents as secretly conspiring against the Palestinian cause.

Avenues for future research

This thesis laid the ground for further research on conspiracy narratives in general and those in Israel and Palestine specifically. While building on the insights from this thesis, further research could illuminate aspects outside the confines of this study.

Conspiracy narratives in other contexts

First, to advance our knowledge of conspiracy narratives, future studies should cover a larger array of different groups in Israel, Palestine and other Middle Eastern countries. For example, it is more than likely that conspiracy narratives equally exist among left-wing groups. Such a study on Israeli left-wing conspiracy narratives could meaningfully contribute to our understanding of Israeli conspiracy theories, but also shed light on the difference between left- and right-wing conspiracy narratives more generally. Furthermore, such a study could show in more detail which narratives might indeed not be simply right-wing or left-wing narratives but shared across the political spectrum in Israel.

In a similar way, further studies on Palestinian conspiracy narratives in other contexts than the West Bank and East Jerusalem would be beneficial to complement the presented perspective. Such contexts include the Palestinians in Israel, the Arab countries, as well as the diverse diaspora communities. Because each of those communities faces specific challenges and thus has diverging emotional experiences but are at the same time somewhat connected to the Palestinian discourse, a comparison of conspiracy narratives could tell us more about specific circumstances that give rise to conspiracy narratives. We could also learn more about how conspiracy narratives are connected to a set of overlapping and competing identities.

The role of fear and other emotions

Second, the theoretical framework around fear proposes an original understanding of conspiracy narratives which was applied to the specific context of Israel and Palestine. Drawing on this framework in other contexts, would allow to test and develop the here theorised connection between anxiety, fear and conspiracy narratives further. Generally, the emotions produced by conspiracy narratives deserve more attention. As I argued, fear is a particularly important emotion that produces and shapes other emotions. Yet, drawing out not only the fundamental effects of fear, but also the secondary effects of anger and hatred could offer additional insights into the importance of emotions when thinking about the political function of conspiracy narratives. Furthermore, positive emotions might deserve attention

as well. In this study, participants discursively shared with me positive emotions, such as the emotional underpinnings of trust or loyalty to the ingroup as well. Theoretically drawing on such emotions, could offer additional insights into conspiracy narratives and their political function for groups.

Transnational ideologies

Third, research should examine how conspiracy narratives draw inspiration from global discourse. In the Israeli case, right-wing conspiracy narratives draw on transnational conspiracy discourse. For example, the introduction of the deep state allegations mirrors American right-wing discourse, and the alleged Islamisation of Europe draws on conspiratorial Islamophobic voices from abroad. Thus, conspiracy narratives are part of transnational ideologies and networks. In fact, many Israeli figures cited in this thesis speak not only to the Israeli audience but are vocal, especially in the American right-wing scene but also in the UK, France, Italy, Germany and others. As described, Palestinian discourse is often hard to separate from Arab and at times global discourse. PLO liberation discourse links to the revolutionary discourse of the 1960s. It could be assumed that there is also a crossover of conspiracy discourse among such networks. As pointed out by antisemitism scholars, antisemitic conspiracy narratives are found in elements of transnational left-wing as well as right-wing forces (Burston, 2022; McShane, 2008; Rensmann, 2019; Subotic, 2022). Equally, Hamas discourse does not operate in a vacuum, but draws extensively on a tradition of transnational Islamist thought, including conspiratorial language (Dunning, 2015; Wistrich, 2014).

Conclusion

Overall, this thesis highlighted the importance of conspiracy narratives in the Israeli-Palestinian context. With potentially increasing feelings of insecurity in both societies, it is only plausible that such narratives will play an increasingly important role in group and public discourse of both societies. If some sort of reconciliation is ever to be reached between Palestinians and Israelis, understanding this phenomenon and how it has been contextualised will be integral to that process.

Annex

Annex I – Interview overview

Number	Gender	Description
Interviews: Israel		
1	male	Right-wing activist
2	male	Right-wing activist
3	male	Right-wing activist
4	male	Right-wing think tank member
5	female	Right-wing journalist
6	male	Right-wing think tank member
7	male	Left-wing journalist
8	male	Right-wing academic
9	male	Right-wing journalist
10	female	Left-wing activist
11	female	Left-wing activist
12	female	Left-wing activist
13	male	Left-wing activist
14	male	Right-wing activist
15	male	Left-wing politician
16	female	Right-wing activist
17	male	Right-wing think tank member
18	female	Left-wing academic
19	male	Right-wing academic
20	male	Left-wing academic
21	male	Right-wing think tank member
22	male	Right-wing activist
Interviews: Palestine		
23	male	Community leader
24	female	Fatah affiliated
25	male	Academic
26	female	Activist
27	female	Activist
28	male	Fatah affiliated
29	male	Community leader

30	male	Activist
31	female	Community leader
32	female	Academic
33	female	Fatah affiliated
34	male	Fatah affiliated
35	male	Fatah affiliated
36	male	Community leader
37	male	Hamas affiliated
38	male	Hamas affiliated
39	male	Hamas affiliated
40	male	Community leader
41	female	Activist
42	female	Activist
43	male	Hamas affiliated
44	male	Academic
45	female	Activist
46	male	Fatah affiliated

Annex II – List of Israeli and Palestinian organisations

Israel	
Ad Kan	**Ad Kan** is a right-wing organisation that self-declares investigates and exposes anti-Israel activity, corruption, and illegal conduct within Israeli society, mostly targeting left-wing organisations via undercover investigations.
Arutz Sheva – Israel National News	**Arutz Sheva – Israel National News** is an Israeli news website and radio station known for its religious-nationalist coverage of Israeli and Jewish affairs.
B'Tselem	**B'Tselem** is a human rights organisation focused on documenting human rights violations in the OPT and advocating for an end to the Israeli occupation.
Breaking the Silence	**Breaking the Silence** is an organisation of former Israeli soldiers who collect and publish testimonies from soldiers about their service in the OPT, highlighting alleged human rights abuses.
Camera – Honest Reporting	**Camera – Honest Reporting** is an organisation dedicated to monitoring media coverage of Israel and the Middle East, combating alleged instances of bias, misinformation, and antisemitism in mainstream news reporting.
Im Tirtzu	**Im Tirtzu** is a right-wing non-governmental organisation. Im Tirtzu sees itself as defending Zionism and Israel from those intent on harming them, working against what it calls anti-Zionist elements in Israeli society.
Israel Hayom	**Israel Hayom** is the most widely circulated newspaper in Israel known for its right-wing and pro-Netanyahu editorial stance.
Israeli Academia Monitor	**Israeli Academia Monitor** reports on the activities of Israeli post-Zionist academics to address what it calls demonstrably false arguments that defame Israel.
Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs	**Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs is a right-wing think tank that** conducts research and analysis on Middle Eastern affairs, with a focus on Israeli security, diplomacy, and international law.

Jerusalem Post	**Jerusalem Post** is moderate right-wing English-language newspaper based in Jerusalem.
Jewish News Syndicate (JNS)	**Jewish News Syndicate** is a right-wing Jerusalem-based news agency providing English-language coverage of Jewish and Israel-related news.
Kohelet Policy Forum	**Kohelet Policy Forum** is a right-wing think tank. It promotes libertarian and nationalist policies. It became known to a wider audience as being the intellectual driver behind the judicial reform proposed in 2023.
NGO Monitor	**NGO Monitor** is a right-wing organisation that scrutinizes NGOs operating in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to combat what it sees as delegitimization campaigns against Israel.
Palestinian Media Watch	**Palestinian Media Watch** is a right-wing organisation that monitors and analyses Palestinian media, schoolbooks, and statements by Palestinian leaders of what it deems instances of incitement, and glorification of terror against Israelis.
Regavim	**Regavim** is a right-wing, pro-settlement organisation that focuses on land-use issues in Israel and Palestine. According to its website, it aims to protect Israeli national lands and combat the illegal takeover of lands by Palestinians.
Ribonut (Sovereignty Movement)	**Ribonut** is a right-wing lobbying group that advocates for the application of Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank.
The Israel Guys	**The Israel Guys** is a YouTube channel associated with the evangelical organisation HaYovel that provides analysis and insights about political events in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza to strengthen support for Israel.
The New Israel Fund	**The New Israel Fund** is a left-leaning organisation that supports civil rights, social justice, and democracy in Israel, mostly through funding.
The Tikvah Fund	**The Tikvah Fund** is a right-wing foundation that supports Zionist, right-wing thought, culture, and institutions, acting as a funder for a host of right-wing organisations.
UN Watch	**UN Watch** is a right-wing organisation that monitors UN proceedings, especially those of the Human Rights Council, aiming to expose alleged instances of bias, double standards, and antisemitism.

Palestine	
Addameer	**Addameer** is a Palestinian non-governmental organisation that supports Palestinian political prisoners by providing legal aid, advocating for prisoners' rights, and documenting cases of arrest and detention.
Al-Haq	**Al-Haq** is a Palestinian human rights organisation that documents human rights violations in the occupied Palestinian territories, advocates for international law, and seeks accountability for abuses.
Al-Hayat Al-Jadida	**Al-Hayat Al-Jadida** is a Palestinian daily newspaper and the official publication of the Palestinian Authority. It covers a wide range of topics including politics, culture, and society, often reflecting the official stance of the PA leadership.
Palestine Today	**Palestine Today (PalToday)** is a Palestinian news website affiliated with Hamas.
The Palestinian Information Center	**The Palestinian Information Center** is an online news portal that provides news about Palestine. It is known for its affiliation with Hamas.

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