

Why Still No Peace in the Middle East: An Interview with Sol Stern

The Nabka Myth

by [Patrick J. McCloskey](#) (May 2024)



Sol Stern



A family house in Nahal Oz Kibbutz after the Hamas terror attack on October 7, 2023. (Wikipedia)

Below is an excerpt of an interview with Sol Stern, who has worked as an acclaimed journalist for 55 years, starting with the award-winning *Ramparts* magazine, the most popular publication associated with the New Left in the 1960s and 70s. Stern has written for more than 30 national magazines, including 22 years for *City Journal*. He and his wife hold dual citizenship with Israel and spend half the year there. Stern has been writing about the Middle East for the last decade. His books include *Breaking Free: Public School Lessons and the Imperative of School Choice* (Encounter Books, 2003), *A Century of Palestinian Rejectionism and Jew Hatred* (Encounter BroadSides, 2011) and *Common Core: Yea & Nay with Peter W. Wood* (Encounter BroadSides, 2014).

I met Sol when he gave a talk about education writing when I was a student at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in 1996. Sol became an invaluable mentor who guided my education writing in the following years. Recently, I interviewed Sol since he is one of the most thorough and objective researchers and writers I know. His work provides an antidote to the waves of misinformation in the media and on social media, where inaccuracies are amplified digitally, about Hamas, Jews and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Please note that Sol would never promote or condone mistreatment of Palestinians and expressed deep empathy with the desperate situation Hamas has trapped them in.

PJM: Several years ago, you wrote an article titled, “Why No Peace in the Middle East: Palestinians’ Nakba Myth is the Biggest Obstacle to Resolution,” which I edited for a previous publication. It’s one of the best article’s I ever read explaining the impasse regarding Israel and the Palestinians. Last year, you updated the article in [Commentary](#). What is this Nakba?

Stern: “Nakba” translates as “disaster” or “catastrophe.” What happened in 1948 was a catastrophe for the Palestinians, and my sympathies go out to any people who suffer this. The disaster was that the Palestinians were defeated in the Israeli War of Independence—a war which they started and were joined by armies from seven Arab counties. Almost 700,000 Palestinians became refugees, most fleeing their homes to avoid the conflict. Two-thirds went to another part of Palestine and the rest to other countries, Lebanon, Syria and Egypt.

PJM: Was the treatment of Palestinians worse than how other refugees were treated at the time?

Stern: No, for example, at the end of World War II, the ethnic cleansing of Germans in Central Europe was complete. Even Germans who had been living there for centuries in Sudetenland were expelled, as well as partisans who fought against Hitler. The Allied powers signed off on this. Almost 12 million Germans were put on the road and sent back to Germany. Between half a million and 2.5 million of these refugees died en route. The conventional wisdom at the time was that wars produce refugees, and the best solution is resettlement. The expectation was that the Arab countries where Palestinian

refugees had moved safely would eventually absorb them as full citizens. Gaza was part of Egypt at the time, but the Egyptians didn't want to take in the Palestinians.

PJM: Why is Nakba a myth?

Stern: To begin, Nakba had little to do with Palestinians. In 1948, Constantine K. Zurayk, a renowned professor of Oriental history at the American University of Beirut, published a book titled, *Maana al-Nakba (The Meaning of the Disaster)* in which he coined the term. This was the first iteration of Nakba. However, Zurayk was not advocating a Palestinian state. Instead, he led a broad movement in the Arab world for many years to unite countries from Egypt to Iraq into one great power as sort of confederation of Arab states, which would be modern, moderate and secular. The new state of Israel was seen as an imposition by Imperial powers had ripped that land from the heart of this great Arab nation. During and in the wake of World War I, Great Britain supported establishing a Jewish state, while both Muslims and Christians in the region strongly opposed the plan. In fact, Zurayk was Greek Orthodox. Then in the wake of the 1948 Israeli War of Independence, the West Bank was taken over by the Kingdom of Jordan and Gaza was annexed by Egypt. These regions then contained about 90 percent of Palestinians who never protested against foreign occupation.

PJM: Yet every year, they mount protests at the Gaza border with Israel.

Stern: Yes, Nakba Day on May 15, the day Israel declared independence. But Nakba Day wasn't created until 1998, 50 years later, by Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization. He used the event to weaponize the Nakba narrative into a declaration of permanent war against the Jewish state. Arafat declared, "[w]e are asking ... for the refugees to return and to build an independent Palestinian land on our land."

PJM: Wasn't the two-state solution proposed several times for Palestinians?

Stern: During World War I, Great Britain liberated what was called South Syria from the Turkish Ottoman Empire, under which, for four centuries, the resident Arabs, who later identified as Palestinians, had few rights and no independence. Since the area was now liberated, the dream of a pan-Arab state gained momentum. But the Brits developed a plan for the State of Israel, which was always a two-state solution. There were few Jews there at the time because they had been barred from entering. The two-state solution was offered four times since 1948, but the Palestinian leaders always rejected it. In 2000, for example, Yassar Arafat turned down an offer for an independent Palestinian state, brokered by President Bill Clinton.

PJM: Why?

Stern: Because they demand all the land: "From the River to the Sea," as protestors chant. This means the complete elimination of Israel. The other main demand is the right of return for all the refugees and their descendants, now totaling about seven million—ten times the original number. Today there about two million Arabs and almost eight million Jews in Israel. This right of return would destroy Israel as a Jewish state. As a result of these impossible demands, Palestinian leaders have kept their own people living in squalid, overcrowded conditions for 75 years.

PJM: If the Palestinians were thrown off their land, why are there so many living in Israel?

Stern: The fighting caused many to flee for safety but not all, who now enjoy Israeli citizenship and are much better off than those who left. In some areas, the Jewish forces emptied towns, such as Lydda and Ramla, mostly for security reasons. In some regions, the relationship between Arabs and Jews was

very good. In Haifa, the Jewish mayor and the British High Commissioner begged the Arabs to stay just before hostilities began. But Amin al-Husseini—the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, who was the official Palestinian leader as head of the Arab Higher Committee and running the war from Cairo before the Arab armies joined in—ordered the Palestinians to leave because he didn't want them part of Israel, giving the Jewish state legitimacy.

PJM: Wasn't the Grand Mufti a Nazi collaborator?

Stern: Yes, and archival documents show that if the Nazis had won the war, al-Husseini planned to oversee a Middle Eastern version of the Final Solution in Palestine. And Hamas is a present-day inheritor of this blood lust, this death cult, along with other Islamic terrorist groups.

PJM: Thomas Sowell, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, said in an interview that an official of a New York Jewish organization once "asked me what can Jews do in order to minimize the hostility they face. I gave him a one-word answer: Fail. Because as long as you succeed, you're going to be hated."

Stern: True.

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Patrick J. McCloskey serves as the editor of *Dakota Digital Review*, published by the North Dakota University System and the cofounder of the Columbia Free Speech [Alliance](#) for Columbia University alumni, faculty and friends. Previously, he worked as the Director of Research and Publications at the University of Mary and editor of *360 Review Magazine*. He also served on the Advisory Board of the Reilly Center for Science,

Technology and Values at the University of Notre Dame. McCloskey earned a BA in Philosophy and Political Philosophy at Carleton University and an MS in Journalism at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. He has written for many publications, including the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *National Post* and *City Journal*. His books include *Open Secrets of Success: The Gary Tharaldson Story*; *Frank's Extra Mile: A Gentleman's Story*; and *The Street Stops Here: A Year at a Catholic High School in Harlem*, published by the University of California Press.

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