

## How the Irish Can Save the Middle East

By Conn Hallinan | August 8, 2006

History is the story we tell ourselves in the present about the past. But how we punctuate the story—where we put the periods, the commas, and the ellipses—depends not on everything that happened, but on who is telling the story, where we stand in the narrative, and what outcome we want.

As Rebecca Goldstein notes in her study of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, there are “powerful tendencies in each of us toward developing a view of the truth that favors the circumstances into which we happen to have been born.”

Israel and Hezbollah both have stories to tell based on their particular circumstances.

### A Tale of Two Tales

*Tel Aviv—Hezbollah terrorists ambushed an Israeli patrol on July 12 near the Lebanese border. Three soldiers were killed and two others kidnapped. Israel launched a counterattack in an effort to retrieve them.*

This is the story Israel and the United States tell, and there is nothing factually wrong about it, although Associated Press and *Agence France-Press* initially reported that it was not clear whether the Israeli soldiers were in Israel or Lebanon.

Hezbollah also has a story though the punctuation is different.

*Beirut—Resistance fighters captured two members of the Israeli Defense Force on July 12 in order to exchange them for three Hezbollah soldiers Israel has held since 2000. The operation was also part of efforts to expel Israel from the Lebanese territory of Shebaa Farms.*

Each of these stories generates a set of predictable responses. Hezbollah’s rockets threaten Israeli sovereignty; Rockets were fired after Israel bombed and shelled Lebanon; Hezbollah is ignoring United Nations (UN) Resolution 1559 to disarm, while Israel has ignored at least five UN resolutions to withdraw from the West Bank and the Golan Heights; What about the Holocaust? What about the Crusades? Yahweh gave us this ground; Allah gave us this land.

People punctuate stories so as to establish causality and to assure themselves that they stand with the angels. But such stories can kill. When reinforcing narratives of victimization, they may perpetuate endless cycles of righteousness and revenge.

Is humanity then locked into a world of subjective point and counterpoint, doomed like Sisyphus to never-ending efforts and fruitless undertakings? By no means. But when it comes to solutions, it may be necessary to edit our stories even if they are true.

There is at least one historical example that suggests a way to short circuit the narrative loop.

### The Lore of the Irish

For just under 837 years, the English and the Irish have warred against one another. Terrible things have been done in those long centuries, and the



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Irish tell endless stories about them. They know when it began: On Aug. 23, 1170, Richard de Clare, Earl of Pembroke—"Strongbow" to the Irish—waded ashore with 200 Norman knights and 1,000 men-at-arms near Waterford on Ireland's southeast coast. He took the town in five days, then marched north and smashed an Irish army near Dublin.

Thus began the longest war in European history. For more than 40 generations the Irish seethed at the occupation, rising up time and again to fling themselves in bloody rage at armies they could not hope to defeat.

The Irish call it "the long sorrow," and they can recite it with the precision of a rosary: "Red" Hugh O'Neill's war against Elizabeth I; The First Land War; the Great Rising of '98; the Tithe War; Catholic Emancipation; the Fenian revolt; the Second Land War; the Easter Rebellion.

The stories, poems, and songs that the Irish wrote about these events taught each generation about courage and resistance, but also about hatred, tribalism, and a certain kind of suicidal madness the poet William Butler Yeats called "an excess of love."

To the English, the men and women who rose on Easter Sunday, 1916, and fought them from Jacob's Biscuit Factory and the General Post Office, were traitors and terrorists. The British smashed up Dublin to root out the rebels, and then executed them against the walls of Kilmainham prison.

To Yeats, the rebellion was the birth of "a terrible beauty," one that transformed Ireland forever, and elevated the executed leaders to the status of martyrs and saints. What began as a quixotic challenge to England in the middle of World War I was transformed into a cultural myth.

What are the stories Hezbollah will tell about Bint Jbail, which the most powerful army in the Middle East was unable to secure after almost a week of savage fighting? As the English did to Dublin in 1916, the Israelis flattened the place with artillery and bombs, but that will not extinguish the narrative that Hezbollah held out against the mighty Golani Brigade.

What are the stories the Israelis will tell about life in the shelters? Will they conjure up the spirit of Masada, the Jewish people's equivalent of the Easter Rebellion, albeit one that ended a good deal more tragically? Will they tell themselves that once again tiny Israel is beset by enemies on all sides?

Both of these narratives will end up with a lot of people dead and homeless, economies derailed, and infrastructures shattered. They may even lead to the unthinkable: a regional war. They will pump up a tribalism that says, "We are special, we are better, we are owed this, and the wrongs we do to others are canceled out by the wrongs others have done to us."



The General Post Office after the Easter rising in Dublin, 1916.  
Photo: <http://www.easter1916.net/>

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## The Good Friday Agreement

History does not mark all roads, and all analogies are fraught with danger. Like the Oracle of Delphi, Clio the muse of history predicts what we want her to predict. But the recent history of Ireland is worth some study.

Starting in 1992, the principal antagonists in Northern Ireland began to talk with one another, in large part because majorities in both communities were fed up with the sectarian violence. It was not easy, but the talks led to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which has kept the peace for the most part between warring Catholics and Protestants. It was a process the United States helped along, unlike the role the United States is playing in the current Middle East crisis.

To reach an agreement, the parties had to get past a series of myths.

The first myth is that force will get people to do what you want them to do. It never did, it never will. If Qassams and Katyushas have not caused the Israelis to throw in the towel, why would Israel think that bombs and artillery would force Hezbollah or Hamas to give up? To suggest that Arabs will react any differently to violence than the Jews or the Irish is simply racist.

Rather than terrorizing the Lebanese and the Palestinians, the current war has united both communities. The collective punishment that Israel is inflicting on Gaza and Lebanon simply produces collective rage at both Israel and the United States. A poll by the Beirut Center for Research found that 89% of Lebanese do not consider the United States an “honest broker,” and 87% support Hezbollah’s “retaliatory rocket attacks.”

Even al-Qaida, which normally refers to Shiites as “dogs” and “a thorn in the throat of Islam,” has called for aiding the resistance in Lebanon. Indeed, Israel has managed to drive Shiite Hezbollah into an alliance with Sunni Hamas.

The second myth is that you can design someone else’s country. You cannot tell the Lebanese what their internal politics should be, nor can you tell the Palestinians that they can have a nation but only if it is riddled with Jewish settlements and surrounded by a wall. Such a Palestinian state is not a country but an open-air prison, much like Gaza is today.

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All the settlements will have to go, the borders returned to the 1967 Green Line, and Jerusalem will have to be shared. The occupation is illegal, immoral, and clearly not in Israel’s interest, despite being of its making. Instead of listening to David Ben-Gurion, who urged Israel to withdraw from the lands conquered in 1967, Tel Aviv established the settlements and kept East Jerusalem.

In return, the Palestinians will have to abandon the right of return and accept a deal that compensates

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them for the lands they lost in 1948. Regardless of the injustice behind the original expulsions, asking Israel to dismantle itself unilaterally is a non-starter. Israel is a country, if for no other reason than the Holocaust made it so.

But Israel cannot continue to hide behind the argument that it won't negotiate with "terrorists." If England could talk to Sinn Fein and the Irish Republican Army, Israel can talk to Hezbollah and Hamas. Israel recently held a two-day seminar on the 60th anniversary of the bombing of the King David Hotel by the Jewish resistance. The blast killed 92 people. One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter.

Some in the Middle East will resist such a settlement, just as some hardliners in the Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland reject the Good Friday Agreement. But in Northern Ireland those forces have been increasingly marginalized. For all its fragility, the pact is generally holding.

Despite eight centuries of occupation, and 24 years of civil war, Irish on both sides are downplaying their respective nationalist narratives and finding common ground.

The world does not need more tribal allegiances and stories that tell us it is all right to blow up pizza parlors or flatten towns in Southern Lebanon. It needs solutions anchored in the real world and a moral order that sees no difference between a dead Jewish child and a dead Arab child. The living weep for them equally, and no pain is greater or less because of the weight of history.

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