

# **The Quest for Victory: Collective Memory and National Identification among the Arab-Palestinian Citizens of Israel**

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## **Abstract**

The interdependence of collective memory and national identification has become a widespread scholarly axiom. While the related literature recognizes the role of memories of victimization and heroic victories, this article illustrates the importance of a ‘semiotic balance’ between these two for the maintenance of national identification. The study is based on an individual-centered quantitative method, which has never been used to investigate the national identity-memory nexus before. Using a survey with a representative sample (N=530) of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, the association between individuals’ memories and national identification is examined. It was found that remembering a combination of victory and victimization is a better predictor of national identification than either theme separately. These findings indicate the crucial importance of a balanced mythical structure that includes both themes of victimization and triumph.

Keywords: Collective Memory; Heroism; Israel; National identity; Palestinians; Victimization

## **Introduction**

On May 2006, 'Azmi Bishara, then an Arab-Palestinian member of the Israeli parliament (the Knesset), delivered a speech at a party event commemorating the 58th year since the *Nakbah*, the destruction of Palestine in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. In his speech, Bishara linked the *Nakbah* with another event: 'We have to convene every 15th of May to commemorate the *Nakbah*, and on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July to celebrate the answer to the *Nakbah*' (Kul-al-Arab 2006). Bishara was referring to the 1952 Free Officers' revolution in Egypt, which toppled the pro-Western monarchy and established an Arab nationalist and anti-colonialist regime that set the tone in Arab politics for the next 15 years. Naming this event an 'answer to the *Nakbah*' requires some intellectual effort. The 1948 war resulted in the forced uprooting of at least 700,000 Palestinians and the eradication of hundreds of villages. While the revolutionary Egyptian regime was very sympathetic to the Palestinians in its rhetoric, it was not able to bring home even a single refugee. However, the July 23 revolution is popularly considered a **victory** for Arab nationalism, which contributed to a discursive change in the Arab world and, in the eyes of Bishara, partly restored a symbolic balance of victories and defeats, humiliation and pride.

Bishara's choice is a statement against the widely accepted convention that victimization is a central aspect of the Palestinian collective ethos (Oren, Bar-Tal & David 2004). The underlying assumption behind the juxtaposition of these two events is the futility of constructing a stable and compelling national narrative in which the nation is primarily depicted as a subjugated entity. No matter how central a collective victimizing experience might be in the national narrative, a certain level of historical agency, or even victories, need to be added to the equation. This article puts this idea to an empirical test.

## **Collective memory, national identity, and 'semiotic instrumentalism'**

Since the mid-1980's an enormous volume of scholarship in various disciplines has been published on the national identity-collective memory nexus. The theoretical discussions and controversies in this field have concentrated mostly on the following four dimensions: 1) Malleability vs. persistence of national memories and the conditions that

might explain the level and nature of their persistence (Olick and Robbins 1998; Spillman 1998) 2) Instrumentalism vs. culturalism, or, in other words, an approach that sees “memory entrepreneurship as a manipulation of the past for particular purposes” as opposed to “selective memory as an inevitable consequence of the fact that we interpret the world” (Olick and Robbins 1998) 3) The tension between considering individuals as bearers of memories vs. focusing on collective commemorative representations (Olick 1999; Schwartz and Schuman 2005) 4) Classification of the spatial and temporal organization of public commemorations in divided societies (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991).

One aspect that has remained relatively under-theorized is the way the symbolic themes that associate memory and national identity relate one to another. The most prominent themes associated with the symbolic construction (or undermining) of national identities are heroism and sacrifice (Anderson 1991; Mosse 1990; Winter 1995), victimhood (Rosland 2009; Takei 1998), and guilt or shame (Barkan 2000; Buruma 1994; Olick and Levy 1997). Although almost every study of memory and national identity does refer to at least one of these prominent themes, a discussion of how they relate one to another in the process of mobilizing national identification is uncommon.

Schwartz, Zerubavel, and Barnett (1986) provided an important exception by introducing the concept ‘semiotic instrumentalism’ to describe the potential contribution of certain memories for maintaining a certain symbolic structure. Using the same logic (although without using the same term), Yael Zerubavel’s work on Zionist collective memory (Zerubavel 1995) became the most detailed example of this approach. According to Zerubavel, selective choices from Jewish history incorporated into the Zionist commemorative narrative were shaped to a large extent by the drive to create a counter-image to that of diasporic Jews as passive and weak. Therefore, themes of active heroism were especially valuable for balancing the themes of victimization prevailing in pre-Zionist Jewish tradition. As I show later in this article, ‘semiotic instrumentalism’ is a

useful conceptual category analysis, beyond the particular case of Zionist commemoration.

### **Heroism, Victimization, Victories and Defeats**

Zerubavel identified an inherent tension in national myths of martyrdom between the two poles of heroism and victimization (Zerubavel 1991). While the first is identified with activism and self-empowerment, the second represents passivity and downplays the nation's power. Heroism is related to the sacrifice one makes to achieve national goals or ensure national survival. Emphasis on victimization in national conflicts, on the other hand, is based on beliefs about the justness of national goals, while emphasizing the evil of the opponents' goals and delegitimizing their characteristics (Frank 1967).

Furthermore, since WWII, the international sphere has become a stage of competition over the status of 'victim' (Chaumont 2002) and victimhood has become an important universal form of moral capital.

The distinction between myths of heroism and victimization is between two ideal types. In reality, the two complement each other, and every national myth merges elements from both. However, some events are remembered as almost ideal types. Genocides, such as the Jewish and Armenian holocausts, for example, are very close to the ideal type of victimization myths, even though a closer examination certainly would reveal a more intricate production of meanings.

This distinction, however, needs further refinement since heroic myths can be related to both victories and defeats. While heroic victories hold a central place in many national narratives and are frequently commemorated by major national holidays, some national 'heroic defeats' are also celebrated as evidence of the nation's ability to sacrifice – even without achieving a tangible goal. This is the case of the Battle of the Alamo myth in Texan identity (Flores 2002), the Battle of Gallipoli in Australian identity (Haltorf 1993), or the Battle of Tel Hai in early Zionism (Zerubavel 1991). The interesting question is whether these events could have been used successfully as national myths had they not

been part of a set of myths that included victories as well. In the case of Zionist commemoration, for example, it was especially important to present certain events as victories, regardless of their actual outcome. Maybe the best example of this is the commemoration of the Bar- Kokhba revolt against the Roman Empire (135-137 CE):

National pride was a central Zionist theme, and the revolt was important because it symbolized the ancient Hebrews' proud and courageous stand that led them to defend their nation's freedom at all cost rather than yield to the oppressors. The Zionist commemorative narrative thus shifted the focus from the outcome of the revolt to the act of rebelling; it emphasizes the initial success that brought about the liberation of Judea rather than the defeat that led to exile (Zerubavel 1995: 96).

Zerubavel's argument about the importance of victorious myths raises two questions. First, can this insight be generalized beyond the case of Zionist commemoration? Second, since Zerubavel developed this insight by analyzing official texts (as well as a small number of interviews with a non-representative sample), would the quest for victory, as a theme that supposedly restores semiotic balance, be found as well in the receptive end? Contextually, this article examines the above-mentioned questions among the Palestinian citizens of Israel. Methodologically, I use survey data, which provide the subjective remembering of individuals representing this population.

### **The Context: Palestinian Identity and Memory in Israel**

Deeply divided societies such as Israel provide fertile ground for the sociological study of national identification. Specifically, because of their exposure to different historical narratives and contradictory expectations from different communities, ethno-national minorities in those societies provide convenient case studies for examining the relation

between social memory and national identity. 'Trapped minorities' (Rabinowitz 2001) like the 1.2 million Palestinian citizens of Israel are especially interesting in this context since their political memory and identity have been shaped by cross pressures from both the nation-state and the rest of their ethno-national community.

A distinct Palestinian identity can be traced back at least to the middle of the 19th century (Khalidi 1997; Kimmerling and Migdal 1993) or possibly even to the 17th century (Gerber 1998). The nationalization of this identity, however, did not begin until after WWI, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the British commitment to support the creation of a 'national home for the Jewish people' in Palestine (Khalidi 1997).

The 1948 war, which erupted on the heels of the United Nations' decision to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, drastically changed the focus of the national narrative as well as the balance between the different political orientations in Palestine. As scholars have recognized, 'the contemporary history of the Palestinians turns on a key date: 1948. That year, a country and its people disappeared from maps and dictionaries' (Sanbar 2001:87). 'For Palestinians', writes Ahmad Sa'di, 'al-Nakbah represents, among many other things, the loss of the homeland, the disintegration of society, the frustration of national aspirations, and the beginning of a hasty process of destruction of their culture' (Sa'di 2002).

The 156,000 Palestinians who remained under Israeli rule after the dust settled from the war were granted Israeli citizenship. Having lost most of their urban elite and being subjected to military rule until 1966, Palestinians in Israel were extremely limited in their ability to develop independent institutions. If there was any hope for turning back the wheels of history, it was based on the promising pan-Arab momentum in the 1950's and 1960's. These hopes, however, were shattered with the Arab defeat in 1967. Following the war, the Palestinian national movement, led by the Palestinian Liberation Organization, re-emerged as a focus of collective identity and pride.

However, the 1967 war also clarified that Israel was not going to disappear, and as a consequence, Palestinian citizens of Israel gradually turned to the Israeli political sphere

to cope with their predicament (Bishara 1999). As a result, surveys conducted between 1976 and 1995 among the Palestinians in Israel found that the ratio of those who defined themselves as both Palestinians and Israelis in this period tripled (Smootha 1999). The two Palestinian uprisings against Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (the first *Intifada* from 1987-1991 and the second *Intifada* from 2000- 2004) gained much sympathy and solidarity among Palestinians inside Israel, but with the exception of a few days in the fall of 2000, they did not actively join the uprisings. At the same time, these revolts were incorporated as heroic milestones in the collective Palestinian narrative, including among Palestinians in Israel.

Therefore, the experiences of Palestinians as citizens of a Jewish state are significantly informed by the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As both Israeli citizens and Palestinians they face persistent predicaments regarding their socio-political identity for several interrelated reasons. First, Israel as a Jewish state was established in 1948 on the ruins of the local Palestinian society. Second, the Palestinians in Israel face contradictory sets of expectations by Israeli Jews and by Palestinians outside Israel. While their Arab-Palestinian identity places them in the position of ‘an enemy within’ for the Jewish majority, they are simultaneously considered suspicious – ‘Israelified Arabs’ – by Palestinians outside Israel. Third, they suffer from diverse forms of prolonged discriminatory policies in a wide variety of spheres.

Over the last two decades, Arab society inside Israel has gained more confidence with the emergence of new circles of educated elites, leading to the foundation of an independent Arabic press in the 1980’s, a formalized leadership in the form of the Follow-Up Committee and its sub-committees, and massive commemorative rituals interwoven with political protest such as Land Day<sup>1</sup> and Nakbah Day.

### **Studying collective memory with survey data**

Qualitative analysis of texts and commemorative events is highly valuable for identifying and interpreting themes of heroism, victimhood, defeats, and triumphs. However,

isolating the peculiar contribution of each of these for mobilizing national identification requires the use of individual-centered quantitative methods. The relation between collective memory and national identification has not yet been studied in a systematic search for correlation between the two elements among individuals. Relatively few scholars produce quantitative studies of collective memory based on interviews. These studies usually implement multivariate analysis of surveys and tend to use individual memories as dependent variables for investigating the contribution of various social attributes, such as cohort, race, gender, education, or religiosity to the frequency and salience of social memories among individuals (Griffin 2004; Schuman and Scott 1989; Schuman, Vinitzky-Seroussi & Vinokur 2003; Schwartz and Schuman 2005). Much less common is the attempt to measure the importance of memory in constructing political identity and world-view.

### **Formal Expectations**

This investigation is based on multivariate analysis of a survey conducted among a representative sample of Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel. Given the relation between national identity and collective memory described in the existing literature, it is expected that national identification can be predicted by what individuals remember as important in the country's history. Furthermore, the research is designed to measure the differential contribution of themes of victimization, heroism, and victories to national identification.

Political aspirations in the name of a certain identity are a necessary aspect of the various definitions of a nation (Anderson 1991; Smith 1998). According to this criterion, among the 'identity repertoires' of the Arab-Palestinians in Israel (Amara and Schnell 2004), Palestinian identity is the only one that can be defined as 'national'. Israeli identity is related to their formal relationship with the state (Rouhana 1988). This relationship has some political and cultural implications beyond formality (Bishara 1999), but since the hegemonic Israeli national ethos excludes them from the national community, this civic identity cannot develop into a national one. Similarly, Arab identity in Israel is no longer related to political-national aspirations. It is based on cultural heritage and a vague solidarity with other Arabs in the region and among the Arabs inside Israel (Amara and



Schnell 2004). Unlike Palestinian identity, the Arab identity of the Arabs in Israel is not contested. Although they are discriminated by the state as Arabs, their identity as Arabs is not denied, precisely because it is not seen as challenging the political legitimacy of the State of Israel. Palestinian identity, on the other hand, is a contested identity as it is clearly related to political national aspirations, although not necessarily in the form of a concrete demand for political separation of the Palestinian minority in Israel. Politically, this identity inside Israel is usually expressed through concrete demands for one or more of the following: a Palestinian sovereign state based on the 1967 borders, cultural autonomy for the Palestinians in Israel, recognition of their rights as a national minority, allowing the return of Palestinian refugees, or an increasingly articulated demand for establishing a bi-national state in Israel/Palestine.

It is therefore expected that individuals who ascribe high importance to historical events that are part of the public Palestinian national narrative will also tend to self identify as Palestinians more than other individuals. In addition, the research is expected to measure the peculiar contribution of victimization and victories for predicting of national identification.

### **Sample and Data Collection**

The analysis is based on phone interviews with 530 Arab citizens of Israel who constitute a representative sample of this population. The survey was carried out in July and August 2008 by the B. I. Lucille Cohen Institute for Public Opinion Research at Tel Aviv University. The sample was based on proportional sampling of statistical areas, within layers defined by religion, geographical region, and socio-economic status. In the second stage, numbers of households were sampled from each statistical area. In each household selected for the sample, one adult aged 18 or above was interviewed. The questions were

conducted in Arabic by interviewers who are themselves Arab citizens of Israel and native Arabic speakers. The phone conversations typically lasted no more than 10 minutes. The questionnaire was part of a larger research project about memory and identity among Jews and Arabs in Israel and this article uses only the Arab sub-sample and answers to specific questions from that sub-sample .

It is noteworthy that the reliability of phone interviews among the Arab minority in Israel has been frequently criticized. It has been argued that Arab respondents are suspicious and tend to feel threatened when being asked questions with a potentially political connotation (especially by phone), and that their answers might reflect a tendency to satisfy the authorities (Smootha 1998).

As Smootha (1998) writes, in surveys he has taken since the mid-seventies, the high rate of support for the PLO (considered as a terrorist organization by Israeli law until 1993) and a long list of anti-establishment attitudes indicate that, collectively, the Arabs in Israel are not a frightened public. Nevertheless, the threat might be felt differentially by different segments of the population, and therefore, these concerns should be taken seriously.

It is possible that the sense of threat influenced the response rate and somewhat damaged the quality of the sample as representative. It should be noted, however, that the response rate in the Arab sample was higher than in the Jewish sample (only 29%), and therefore we should not overestimate the effect of political threat on response rate. In addition, in both samples, the response rate is compatible with the known response rate of phone interviews in Israel.

More serious, however, is the likelihood that some answers relating to especially sensitive issues (like the Nakbah), were influenced by the context of the interviews. For this reason, I would not suggest treating the descriptive findings, such as frequencies of respondents who mentioned the Nakbah, as representing 'reality'. The focus of this study, however, is not descriptive but correlative. Even if some respondents tended to downplay

their memory of certain events or their national identification, there is still significant empirical value in any correlation found between the two.<sup>2</sup>

### **Variables, Measures, and Data Analysis**

The dependent variable in this study is national identification. The interviewees were asked an open-ended question: ‘*How do you define your identity?*’? The question sounds as vague in Arabic as it sounds in English, and the aim was to avoid directing the respondent to any pre-determined self-definition. It was important to distinguish between those who spontaneously define themselves in national terms from other respondents and therefore I avoided a multiple-choice question or a clearer question such as : “how would you define your national identity?” The only clarification the interviewers were allowed to provide for those who asked for it is ‘*how do you define yourself?*’? It is not assumed that only those who defined themselves as Palestinians in their answers feel as such; rather, the assumption is that among those respondents, national identification plays a relatively important role in their worldview, and therefore we can consider them as belonging to the core of the imagined national community. In other words, given the meaning of Palestinian identity in Israel as a ‘political’ identity, those who choose to define themselves as Palestinians can be seen as individuals who politicize their identity and emphasize their national belonging. It should be emphasized that using spontaneous self-labeling to probe national identification might be useful only when dealing with national minorities. As for members of the majority, their national identity is too frequently taken for granted, and therefore relatively few people would be inclined to use national terminology to define themselves.

Based on the answers given, three dummy variables were created for identification – Palestinian, Israeli, and Arab. To create the variable ‘Palestinian’, answers that included the term Palestinian alone or in any possible combination (Palestinian-Israeli, Palestinian-Muslim, Arab-Israeli-Palestinian, etc.) were coded as 1, while all other cases were coded as 0. For the variable ‘Israeli’, answers including the term Israeli or Israeli citizen were coded as 1 while all other cases as 0. For the variable ‘Arab’, answers including the term

Arab were coded as 1 while all other answers coded as 0. Obviously, every respondent could have scored 1 in more than one variable, had they defined themselves as belonging to more than one group (e.g. both Israeli and Arab). A fourth dummy variable was created by the combination of Israeli and Palestinian identities (answers that included both terms were coded as 1).

In order to collect individual memories I adopted Schuman and Scott's spontaneous memory method (Schuman and Scott 1989). In two open-ended questions, the interviewees were asked: 'in your opinion, what is the most important event in the history of the *balad* in last 100 years'? The term *balad* in Arabic can mean a country or a certain geographical region – not necessarily a political unit. I considered it to be the least politically loaded term among other options available, including 'Israel', 'Palestine', 'the state' (*dawla*), or 'the homeland' (*watan*). The disputed land has been ruled by various political forces throughout the last century (Ottomans, British, Israeli, Jordanian, Egyptian, and Palestinian) and I tried to avoid directing the respondents to any of them. Some respondents asked for clarification – if the intention is to Palestine or Israel. The interviewers were instructed to say in this case 'both of them, Palestine and Israel'. If an answer was given, the interviewer asked: 'Is there another event which you consider as especially important'? If another answer was given, the second question was repeated. In this way, up to three events were collected for every interviewee.

The events were coded to create dummy variables representing themes of heroism, defeats/victimization and victories. Collective memory is obviously a contested terrain and various groups and individuals might remember every event differently. My coding is based on the dominant meanings attached to these events in the public culture of the Arabs in Israel, despite the existence of challenging interpretations.

Given the centrality of the Nakbah in the Palestinian ethos, mentioning the war of 1948 has been used as an indicator of victimization memory. Given the political sensitivity of the Nakbah memory and the caution Arabs in Israel practice in its commemoration (Sorek 2008), I included in this category any reference to 1948, whether the respondent used a Palestinian national vocabulary (e.g. 'Nakbah', 'expulsion of 1948'), neutral

vocabulary (e.g. '1948') or adopted a Zionist vocabulary (e.g. 'War of Independence', 'establishment of the state'). In the heroic category I included those events in which the Palestinians are publicly remembered as active agents, even if they included suffering and casualties: the 1936-1939 Great Revolt, Land Day, the First Intifada, and the Second Intifada. Mentioning at least one of those events created the value 1 in the Palestinian Heroism variable.

It is difficult to identify events that represent clear-cut Palestinian victories. Respondents did mention, however, events popularly remembered as Arab victories -- the 2006 Israeli-Hizballah war, the October 1973 war, and the 1952 Free Officers' revolution in Egypt -- even though the latter took place in another country. These events were aggregated into one category, which was the basis of another dummy variable (Arab victories), although 94 per cent of the respondents who scored 1 in this variable mentioned the 2006 war (the possible reasons for that are discussed later).

It is impractical to use factor analysis or reliability tests to validate these categories. With a few exceptions, the frequency of most events is too low and therefore only their aggregation by pre-defined criteria enables their use in any complex calculation. More than 40 events were mentioned, three quarters of which were mentioned by less than three percent of the sample. As a result, the co-appearance of different events is inevitably low. Respondents were limited to three events and therefore the analysis is based on the assumption that those who mentioned certain events are not the only respondents who remember them. Rather, they were the individuals who ascribed more importance to these events, and therefore they usually represent the 'tip of the iceberg' of wider circles of social memory.

To measure the explanatory power of memories for national identification I used a series of logistic regressions in which the self-labeling variables were used as dependent variables (multinomial regression is inapplicable here since the categories of self labeling are not mutually exclusive). The logistic regressions included six controlled variables that have the potential to predict national identification 1) Religion: Religious denomination has been proven as an important predictor of national identification and pride (Evans and

Kelley 2002; Phillips 2002) and the Arabs in Israel are religiously diversified (82 per cent Muslim, 9 per cent Christian, and 9 per cent Druze). 2) Ethnicity: The Bedouin community is potentially less identified with Palestinian nationalism, both due to historical peripherality and because they were co-opted by the state. 3) Education: In previous studies academic education was found to predict Palestinian national identification (Sorek 2007). 4) Gender: Gender has been found to be a minor predictor of some dimensions of national pride in the U.S. (Evans and Kelley 2002). 5) Generation: Older people in the West were found to have greater national pride (Evans and Kelley 2002). In addition, generation is an important predictor of political memories (Schuman and Scott 1989). The sample was divided into three generations: young (age 18-29), middle (30-59), and old (60+). The middle group served as a reference category. 6) Religiosity: Religiosity is an important predictor of national pride in many countries (Sorek and Ceobanu 2009). In the questionnaire it was measured by self-ranking of religious practice on a 1-4 Likert scale. In the model the variable was included as a dummy variable (“Highly” and “Very highly”=1).

## **Findings**

Table I presents the frequency of the various events mentioned by the respondents. Table II presents the odds ratios from five logistic regressions. It shows the peculiar contribution of remembering different types of events for predicting various self identifications: Palestinian (used by 42.2 percent of respondents), Israeli (39.9), and Arab (64.1).

It turns out that after being Muslim, the two strongest predictors of Palestinian identification are heroic Palestinian revolts and the interaction of Arab victories with the *Nakbah* (1948 war). The meaning of “interaction effect” here is that, everything else being equal, individuals who mentioned both the *Nakbah* and Arab victories were approximately four times more likely than other respondents to self identify as Palestinians. This is beyond the particular separate contribution of the *Nakbah* and Arab victories for predicting Palestinian identification. While Arab victories alone were not

associated with Palestinian identity (or very slightly associated, if we exclude from Palestinian identification those who define themselves also as Israelis), mentioning them in conjunction with the *Nakbah* turned out to be a strong positive predictor of Palestinian identification. Interestingly, these victories (and their interactions) were not associated with Arab identity, although those who fought against Israel were non-Palestinian Arabs. This finding emphasizes the popular ‘zero-sum game’ image of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict: Israeli defeats boosted Palestinian pride even though Palestinians were barely involved in the fighting. It shows that Arab ethnic solidarity has a role in the politicization of Arabs in Israel, but this politicization is articulated in Palestinian terms.

**Table I: List of events mentioned, their frequency, and classification\***

2006 July War (33.6) <sup>a</sup>	WW I (1.4)
1948 (27.6)	1973 war (1.3) <sup>a</sup>
Al-Aqsa Intifada (11.8) <sup>b</sup>	Sharon's illness (1.2)
1967 war (6.9)	End of the Ottoman Empire (1.1)
POW exchange 2008 (6.9) <sup>c</sup>	Increase in oil price (0.8)
The Iraq war (6.3)	Great Revolt of 1936 (0.5) <sup>b</sup>
October 2000 events (5)	Nasser's death (0.5)
Israel-Egypt peace treaty (4.2)	1956 war (0.4)
Israel-Jordan peace treaty (3.9)	Balfour declaration (0.4)
Rabin's assassination (3.7)	Iranian revolution (0.4)
Saddam's execution (3.3)	Israel's withdrawal from Gaza (0.4)
WWII (3.2)	Lebanon war 1982 (0.4)
September 11th (2.9)	Release of Samir Quntar (0.4)
Collapse of the Dollar (2.5)	Sabra and Shatila Massacre (0.4)
First Intifada (2.4) <sup>b</sup>	Salah al-Din's conquests (0.4)
Oslo Accords (1.9)	1952 revolt in Egypt (0.4) <sup>a</sup>
Arafat's Death (1.8)	Land Day (0.3) <sup>b</sup>
Kafr Qasim massacre (1.5)	

\*The table includes events which were mentioned by at least two respondents.

<sup>a</sup> Included in Arab victories

<sup>b</sup> Included in Palestinian Heroism

<sup>c</sup> The POW exchange between Israel and Hizballah happened while the survey was conducted.

Another particularly interesting finding is that respondents who mentioned Arab victories were significantly more likely to define themselves as both Palestinians and Israelis. One possible reason is that for those Arab citizens who are both proud Palestinians and seek ways to integrate into Israeli society as equal citizens, Israeli defeats at the hands of Arabs pave the way for imagining a more egalitarian interaction with Jews. It is somewhat similar to the triumphs of Arab soccer teams over Jewish teams which both

contribute to boosting the collective self-esteem of the Arab-Palestinian minority and at the same time allow them to seek integration from a position of power (Sorek 2007).

**Table II: Odds ratios from logistic regressions for various identifications**

Variable	Palestinian	Israeli	Palestinian and Israeli	Palestinian (without Israeli)	Arab
Muslim	4.96***	0.46**	2.63*	4.14***	1.37
Bedouin	0.394**	2.11**	0.27*	0.56	1.32
Some college	1.83**	0.81	1.60	1.47	1.57
Old (60+)	1.35	0.75	1.17	1.24	0.56
Young (18-29)	0.96	0.60*	0.41**	1.45	0.92
Female	0.93	0.51***	0.53*	1.30	0.74
Religiosity	1.02	1.07	1.23	0.89	0.98
Palestinian Heroism	2.12*	0.78	1.31	2.07*	0.87
1948 war	1.15	1.16	1.39	1.04	1.24
Arab victories	0.90	1.33	2.34**	0.56*	0.37
1948 war * Palestinian Heroism	1.98	0.57	0.35	2.10	0.55
1948 war * Arab victories	4.09**	0.62	1.36	2.90*	0.85
Nagelkerke R2	0.18	0.10	0.14	0.13	0.04
N=	512	512	512	512	512

\*p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

The most surprising and thought-provoking case is the high frequency of the Israel-Hizballah confrontation in the summer of 2006, known in the Arab world as the July War and in the West and in Israel as the second Lebanon War. It was mentioned even more frequently than the 1948 war as among the three most important events in the history of the country (although not as the single most important event). However, we should be careful while interpreting the order of these two events since it is likely that mentioning of 1948 was affected by the political sensitivity of this event. It is not unlikely that face-to-face interviews would have led to a higher frequency of reference to the *Nakbah*. At the same time, the absolute frequency of the 2006 war is still impressive, regardless of whether or not it surpasses the *Nakbah*.

There might be several reasons for this finding, some of them circumstantial and the others more substantive. First, it is known that relatively recent events tend to be more accessible in human memory than older events. In a parallel Jewish sample, however, only 4.8 percent of the respondents mentioned this war, seven times less than in the Arab



sample. What can explain, then, the gap between the Jewish and Arab respondents regarding this war? There might be two possible reasons. First, it was the first war since 1948 in which the Palestinians in Israel were vulnerable and suffered casualties. In fact, 19 out of 44 civilians killed on the Israeli side were Arabs. The vulnerability explanation seems to have much validity since mentioning this war was highly associated with geographic location. All of the Israeli civilian victims in the war were killed less than 40 km from the Israeli-Lebanese border. Indeed, among the 'northern' respondents who live in this area, 38 percent mentioned the war, while among the other respondents only 24 per cent mentioned it (significance of  $\chi^2$  test  $< 0.01$ ).

Maybe more important, however, was the almost unequivocal presentation of the war in the Arab media as an unprecedented defeat for Israel, an interpretation which might have boosted the collective pride of Arabs in Israel. Especially important were the discursive strategies of Hizballah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, who projected the self-confidence of a self-reliant winner. Photos of Nasrallah, as wall posters or on key chains, became popular among many Palestinian nationalists in Israel. 'Azmi Bishara, whose attraction to triumphal discourse was illustrated earlier, wrote about it during the first days of the war: 'The [Hizballah] resistance is not playing the role of the victim and does not ask for international sympathy with the victim – but a combative solidarity from those who are free. These are new rules for the game that the Arabs forgot' (Bishara 2006).

To be sure, the July war was not the first confrontation publicly celebrated as an Arab victory over Israel. A battle in the Jordan valley in March 1968 between the Israeli army and the Jordanian artillery, supported by some Fatah (PLO) fighters, became a pivotal event in the emergence of a new Palestinian political identity. For years afterward, the event was celebrated by the Fatah movement as the Battle of Karamah (the name of the village where battle took place, which means 'honor' in Arabic), an incredible triumph and a turning point in Palestinian history (Terrill 2001). In addition, the October 1973 war, in which Egyptian and Syrian armies achieved impressive tactical aims by their surprise offensive of 6 October, has been intensively commemorated in Arab artistic, cinematic, musical and literary works (Meital 2003). Furthermore, in Egypt and Syria, the

state has imposed the war's memory extensively in school textbooks, in the naming of various sites, in promoting the 6 of October as a national holiday, in dedicating museums to the war, and issuing stamps (Meital 2003; Wedeen 1999). Despite that, in the present study's sample, the Karamah battle was not mentioned even once, and the 1973 war was mentioned by only 7 respondents (1.3 percent), only one of them under 50 years old.

The salience of the July 2006 war and the absence of Karamah and the 1973 war illuminate two aspects of the construction of collective memories by national minorities. First, in the absence of strong support by the state, events that the vast majority of the population did not experience personally are not likely to survive long term in collective memory. Both Karamah and the 1973 war might have promoted collective pride among Palestinian citizens of Israel in the months and several years after their occurrence, but their memory was not maintained, nor was it transferred to the next generation (unlike the 1948 war that had lasting consequences for every Palestinian household). The quest for triumphal myths, therefore, had to be satisfied by another event, and the July war was the most available in 2008, only two years after its occurrence.

Second, the technology available in 2008 enabled the transnational flow of information and meanings, mainly through Arab satellite TV, which described the July war as a defeat for Israel. This new technology facilitated communication between the Arabs in Israel and the rest of the Arab world. This same technology was not available in the years following the Karamah battle and the October 1973 war.

### **Concluding Remarks**

There are several theoretical implications of this study. First, social memories of individuals might serve as an important predictor of their national identification. This finding fills a lacuna in the literature about memory and national identity, which so far assumes this relation without attempting to validate it empirically. To be sure, I do not argue for any causal order here. Collective memories are key elements of national identity and this is why they have partial power in predicting it. Second, both the nation-state's power and the limits of its power in shaping collective memory have been

illustrated. Without the support of a state apparatus, triumphs (real or imagined) that occurred only one generation ago but were not directly experienced by most of the population seem to fade away from collective memory. At the same time, the quest for victory might be strong enough to overcome the state's antagonism by nurturing the victorious aspects of recent events and use them to balance the victimization ethos.

Most important, however, is the lesson learned about the way symbolic themes connect collective memories with national identifications. While both victimhood and triumphal myths are important for mobilizing national identification, their co-appearance is especially valuable – even in the context of the most victimization-oriented national narratives. The interaction effect that was found demonstrates the need for some balance between the two themes. There is no doubt that the *Nakbah* plays a major role in contemporary Palestinian national narrative and this study should not be interpreted as denying this role. It seems, however, that balancing the humiliating experience of being a victim with images of prowess and success has an added value for national identification.

In the Palestinian case achieving this balance is especially challenging. The Palestinian revolts (which indeed predicted Palestinian identification) are not necessarily remembered as victories but more as heroic defeats (Collins 2004; Swedenburg 1995). The scarcity of clear Palestinian victories is probably so evident that even achievements of non-Palestinians against Israel such as the July 2006 war (which was expressed mainly in causing damage to Israel, but not improving the Palestinian condition) have been adopted.

One might ask what would have been the result had this study been conducted prior to the 2006 war. If the argument about the need for a semiotic balance is correct, I would have expected other triumphal myths to take its place. Before the 2006 war, the withdrawal of Israel from South Lebanon in May 2000 was celebrated in the Arabic-language media as a great Arab victory. At that time, 'Azmi Bishara's party, the National Democratic Assembly, convened to celebrate the victory and Bishara himself stated: "Hizballah triumphed and for the first time since 1967, we tasted the taste of victory". Following the drama of the summer of 2006, the 2000 withdrawal drastically lost its centrality. Had this

study been conducted in 2005, I would hypothesize that respondents who self identify as Palestinians would have mentioned this withdrawal very frequently and the interaction effect (Arab victories \* Nakbah) would have still been valid. Self-agency and prowess are too important for national identification to be neglected, and therefore victorious myths are constructed in different times and under changing circumstances.

It is not a coincidence that leaders of peoples who have suffered major catastrophes tend to make a conscious effort to add themes of prowess to the collective narrative. In March 1998, for example, the Follow-Up Committee (Lajnat al-mutaba'a) of the Palestinians in Israel decided to name the day of remembrance for their collective tragedy in 1948 *Yawm al-Nakbah wal-Sumud* (Day of Catastrophe and Steadfastness). To a certain extent, this decision echoes the official commemoration of the Holocaust in Israel. In 1951 Israel inaugurated a day of remembrance for the Holocaust, but named it '*Yom ha-Shoah ve-ha-gvura*' (Day of Holocaust and Heroism). The date that was chosen as a remembrance day is the supposed date of the beginning of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1943 (according to the Hebrew calendar).

A similar phenomenon can be identified in the way the Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic, presented the 1389 Battle of Kosovo (in which the Ottoman Army defeated the Serbs), an event that became a founding myth of Serbian nationalism. Milosevic chose to portray his people as victorious by opening his famous speech delivered at a celebration marking the 600th anniversary of the battle, with the argument that in 1989 Serbia "...has regained its state, national, and spiritual integrity" and therefore the event is celebrated as a "distant past which has a great historical and symbolic significance for its future".<sup>3</sup> In all three cases, the Israeli, the Palestinian, and the Serbian political leaders sought to ascribe some agency to their respective peoples, or to balance the passivity of the victim image with that of an active and supposedly effective heroism.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Commemorating the events of 30 March 1976. During protests against land confiscations, six Palestinians were killed by the police.

<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, phone interviews have an important advantage over face-to-face interviews and this should not be underestimated. In particular, it is much easier to monitor the activity of phone interviewers because they are more centrally located and supervised. Interviewers are typically paid by the hour or by questionnaire and are rarely permanent employees of the institute that hires them. Their commitment to their work, therefore, is usually not optimal. Based on personal experience and on well-known publicized cases in Israel, face-to-face interviews are more likely to be forged by the interviewers, and it is unknown how many published articles are corrupted by answers that have been falsified as a result of this forgery.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.slobodan-milosevic.org/spch-kosovo1989.htm> (retrieved on 29 April 2010)

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