The establishment of monuments for commemorating the victims of violent confrontations constitutes a major element in the construction of modern national consciousness. The Arab-Palestinian conflict is no exception in this regard. Since 1948, and particularly after 1967, when approximately 19% of all Israeli citizens, have experienced in the last 50 years an accelerated process of ‘monumentalisation’ or ‘memorialisation’ – a desire by the Israeli modernity – many monuments that commemorate their victims in the Zionist-Palestinian conflict have been established in Arab villages and towns inside Israel.

One event and one monument were crucial in triggering this process: on 30 March 1976, Israeli police shot to death six Arab citizens during violent demonstrations against the government’s confiscation of Palestinian land. This day, known as Land Day, and the monument built to commemorate the tragic event is Sakhnin. One of the many Arab communities in Israel, Sakhnin is a Muslim cemetery, but it is characterized by its modern architecture. The monument is located in the middle of Sakhnin, reflecting the evidence of the early memorial practices as national commemoration. In 1976, committees were established in the villages’ territories. These committees sought ways to commemorate their victims. The Committee for Protecting the Arab Land decided to build a central monument to commemorate all six victims in a cemetery in Sakhnin, reserving a niche for each of the six victims. The committee contacted Abed Abedi, a young artist from Haifa who returned from his art studies in Germany in 1972, and worked for the communist newspaper Al-Itihad. Abedi was concerned that his work might turn the state’s authority against him. This was one of the reasons that he asked the Jewish sculptor, Gershon Knispel, to join him in creating the monument.

The monument is located in the middle of the field of Sakhnin. A Hebrew inscription of three languages (Hebrew, Arabic and English) reading: ‘created by A. Abedi and G. Knispel for deepening the understanding between the two peoples.’ Whether this reflects a tactic to appease the authorities or stems from the consistent ideology of the then-dominant communist party, this sentence has never appeared again on any Palestinian monument. The central monument established in Sakhnin reflects a transitional phase, a historical juncture with several dimensions. First, it signals the beginning of a long process of constructing the Palestinian national identity. The events of Land Day, the moment when the Palestinian identity began to spill from the private walls into public space – in building monuments and in the annual political rallies of protest and memory – thus, they are alive – The martyrs of the day.

The Land Day monument in the Land of the Martyrs (martyrs), but this term has long been employed in secular Arab and Palestinian nationalism. The names of the six victims are written on the forefront of the monument, dedicated to the victims: ‘they sacrificed themselves (hushud); for justice, thus, they are alive – The martyrs of the day of defending the land, 30 March 1976. This is a self-aware nationalized secularized paraphrase of a Qur’anic verse – And reckon not those who are killed for Allah’s way as dead; nay, they are alive…’. The victim’s immortality is ensured not because they were killed for religious purposes but for its – the collective.

The Land Day monument is thus, it is the first attempt to carve in public space a symbol of national heroism and resistance. The monument is the starting point of the Palestinian national identity: the Land Day. Second, it is early enough to include a statement in Hebrew calling for a co-existence on a Palestinian national monument – an unimaginable scenario in later days in Israel. In this sense it is still connected to the ‘decade of hope’ that followed the end of military rule in 1966. Finally, it expresses an entrenched defeatist secularism, a moment before it became impossible to establish a political Islam.

A quarter of a century after the creation of the Land Day monument, dozens of other monuments have been established all over Arab villages and towns in Israel. These monuments commemorate the martyrs of the rebellion against the British in 1936-1939, the Nakba in 1948, and recently, the 13 victims who were shot and killed by the Israeli police during the violent demonstrations of October 2000. Where possible, there is an effort to draw a direct line between all the victims, emphasizing their common destiny. From a contemporary perspective, looking back on 54 years of the existence of the state of Israel, the crucial place of the Land Day events and Land Day monument is evident. It was the bastardization of identity and memory, the moment when the Palestinian identity of the Arabs in Israel started to gain presence in the public space.