

Israel/Palestine

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Memory and Identity The Land Day Monument

The establishment of monuments for commemorating the victims of violent confrontations constitutes a major element in the construction of modern national consciousness.¹ The Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel, approximately 19% of all Israeli citizens, have experienced in the last five years an accelerated process of 'monumentalization' of their identity as a national minority – 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 signify the stage in which Palestinian memory began to be carved in the public space of the Arab minority in Israel.

Rabinowitz² describes the discursive ways in which the state of Israel denied the Palestinian national identity of its Arab citizens, and how it tried to create a new, local Arab identity, loyal to the state of Israel. The main element in denying the Palestinian identity was denying the past, notably everything that happened before 1948. The Palestinians were expected to ignore their common destiny as victims of the war in 1948 and the memories of their existence as a community before 1948. The exile of the Palestinian leadership, as well as many years of worry about possible repressive action and the disapproving stance of the Jewish majority, forced demonstrations of Palestinian national identity into the private sphere.

Private memories of the 1948 war and longings for exiled family members were transmitted orally within families. Poets and authors like Emil Habibi, Tawfiq Zayad and Hana Ibrahim wrote about the Nakba (the destruction of Palestine in 1948) in their poems and novels, bringing this to the public sphere. However, public rallies and demonstrations were highly restricted and not a single Palestinian national monument was founded.

The year 1976 constitutes a turning point in the ways the Palestinians in Israel remember their past. In February of that year, the Israeli government declared its intention to confiscate land from its owners in the villages of Sakhnin, Arabeh and Deir-Hana in central Galilee. The wide protest demon-

stration planned for 30 March developed into a violent confrontation between the demonstrators and the Border Police troops, who entered the villages and the houses. The Israeli police killed six people and injured 70.

It was not the first time that the Arab citizens of Israel suffered fatal casualties from the shooting of Israeli security forces. Twenty years earlier, on 29 October 1956, a group of peasants from Kufr-Qassem returned to their village from the fields, not aware that their village was under curfew. Forty-seven of them were murdered by Israeli troops. The event is commemorated annually and two monuments were built in the village.³ However, it is difficult to consider those early memorial practices as national commemoration since they were not articulated by any Palestinian symbols and did not invoke, explicitly or implicitly, a common Palestinian past. However, the collective self-image of the Palestinians in Israel produced by this commemoration of Kufr-Qassem is one of a passive victim and not of an active political agent fighting heroically for rights.

In contrast, Land Day was a clear political issue. What was at stake was the core of the struggle between Zionism and the Palestinian people: land. The Palestinian national narrative could be summarized in one sentence – 'the Palestinian peasants' land was robbed by the Zionists'. 'Land' occupies a central role in Palestinian experience and mythology. After the end of military rule in 1966, the Arab citizens had reason to believe that Israel was going through a process of democratization, progressing toward civil equality. The confiscation of lands in 1976 and the victims of the police shattered this illusion. But in contrast to the massacre in Kufr-Qassem, the absence of military rule enabled the protest to gain presence in the public space and to be

linked to a shared Palestinian memory. Thus, the events of Land Day signify a historical turning point where Palestinian identity began to spill from the private walls into the public space – in building monuments and in the annual political rallies of protest and memory.⁴

The Land Day monument

Following the Land Day events of 1976, committees were established in the victims' villages. These committees sought ways to commemorate their names. The Committee for Protecting the Arab Land⁵ decided to build a central monument to commemorate all six victims in a cemetery in Sakhnin, residence of three of the victims. The committee contacted Abed Abedi, a young artist from Haifa who returned from his art studies in East Germany in 1972, and worked for the communist newspaper *Al-Ittihad*. 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 co-creating the monument.

The Arabs in Israel had indeed gained more freedom by then but were still closely surveilled by the authorities who restricted their freedom of expression. When the foundations for the monuments were built, the police arrested Sakhnin's head of local authority, Jamal Tarbieh, accusing him of 'illegal construction'. There was no legal basis for this accusation and he was released after hours. This pattern of intimidation likely reflected the authorities' awareness of the far-reaching significance of Land Day commemoration for Palestinian identity in Israel.

Abedi and Knispel created two separate monuments. The smaller monument is a sculpture of a plough, with no accompanying text. Beside it, the main monument deals explicitly with the relations between the people and the land. It is made in the form of a sarcophagus with four bulkheads decorated with human figures touching the soil in various ways – a man bending over to lift a rock, a woman taking a handful of soil. In all the cases, this is a determined bending, not a submissive one. The eastern bulkhead presents figures lying still, most likely dead. These figures were developed from a drawing of Abedi following the Arab-Israeli war in 1973 in which he intended to express his identification with the sufferers and victims of both sides.

The monument is located in the middle of a Muslim cemetery, but it is characterized by an explicit secularism. No religious expressions are used, except perhaps the word *shuhada* (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, titled by the words: 'They sacrificed themselves [*istashadu*] for us to live... 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 reckoned not those who are killed for Allah's way as dead; nay, they are alive...'. The victims' immortality is ensured not because

they were killed for religious purposes but for 'us' – the collective.

On the back of the monument there is a sentence in 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 'stitching the rupture' of Palestinian memory. It is the first attempt to carve in public space a symbol of national heroism and sacrifice, linking it to the major Palestinian theme: the land. 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 extroverted defiant secularism, a moment before it became impossible with the rise of 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 watershed of identity and memory, the moment when the Palestinian identity of the Arabs in Israel started to gain presence in the public space.

Notes

1. G.L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers – Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars 1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
2. D. Rabinowitz, 'Oriental Nostalgia – How Did the Palestinians Become "The Arabs of Israel"?' (in Hebrew), *Teonia Uvicoret*, 4 (1993): 141–151.
3. S. Robinson, 'Local Struggle, National Struggle: Palestinian Responses to the Kafr Qasim Massacre and its Aftermath, 1956–1966', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (Forthcoming).
4. O. Yiftachel, 'Minority Protest and the Emergence of Ethnic Regionalism: Palestinian-Arabs in the Israeli "Ethnocracy"', in S. Ben-Ami, Y. Peled, and A. Spectorowski (eds), *Ethnic Challenges to the Modern Nation-State* (Macmillan and St. Martin's Press: London and New York, 2000), 145–180.

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Sakhnin statue



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