The Palestinian Spaces of Memory’s Role in the Reconstruction of New Collective Narrative in the Nation Building Process

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Introduction:

By the advent of the 20th century, three ideological streams combated over shaping the Palestinian history and narrative within the broad geographical and political contexts of the region. The first stream were known as the Ottomans (Turks) who believed in the Ottoman Empire as the de-facto political identity. Before WWI, most Palestinian thinkers believed in the Ottoman political identity, and they were connected with Ottoman movements such as al-Itti’had wa al-Taraqqi. Asa’ad al-Shuqairi from Akka (Acre) and A’adil Jabir from Jerusalem were among those who believed in this stream. The second stream were al-Shwam (Syrians) who believed that Palestine was part of a homogeneous cultural and social entity known as the Great Syria. After WWI, most Palestinian thinkers and nationalists shifted their attention to the regional Syrian identity because of the proximity and because of the social cultural similarities. Mohamed ‘Izat Darwazeh from Nablus was one of the advocators of this stream. The third were al-Masriyen (Egyptians) who believed in the Palestinian Arab identity, represented, then, by Egypt, the logical host of the Arab national movement. Palestine, as we know it, was the result of the failure of these projects that ended by the British Occupation in 1917 and the consequent annihilation of a Palestinian self-determination project. Palestine became a de-facto geographical entity physically separated from the other three possible allies and other regional political projects.

1 Excerpts from Salim Tamari’s intervention in the Workshop “al thakira al manseyeih (the Forgotten Memories)”, Riwaq Centre, July 2006.
2 After his release from Tibnin (south Lebanon) prison after the Ottoman Constitution Declaration in 1908, Asa’ad al- Shuqairi was elected to the Ottoman Two-envoy Council (Majlis al Mab’othan) representing Acre. In Istanbul he renewed his relations with al-Itti’had wa al-Taraqqi members such as Ahmed Jamal Pasha, Anwar Pasha and Tala’at Pasha, and he became a member to the party. Along with Shukri al-‘Huseini, al-Shuqairi opened a branch for the party in Jerusalem and publicized for it in Palestine. Al- Shuqairi was one of the leading advocators of the Ottoman Islamic ideals, especially before the WWI, and hence fought the ideas of the Decentralization Associations and the separative movements. His name was connected to the slaughtering of the Free Arabs who were active in national movements in the time of Jamal Pasha (An internet source http://www.asharqalarabi.org.uk/markaz/m_rijal-a-sh.htm, accessed on 16 Sep. 2006).
3 In 1907, A’adil Jabir headed the social and literature magazine al-Taraqqi, one of the earliest journals in Palestine. The name of the magazine links the magazine directly to al-Itti’had wa al-Taraqqi Turkish party.
4 It is important to note that most of the 1936 Revolution communications were signed by Fawzi al-Din Qawiqji as the General Commander of the Arab Revolt in Southern Syria “Palestine”, which implies that there was a shift from Ottoman identity to Great Syria identity during the British Mandate (An internet source http://www.nakba.sis.gov.ps/nakba48/1936.html, accessed on 16 Sep. 2006). Mohamed ‘Izat Darwazeh is considered as one of the leading figures of the Modern Arab Nationalism stream and he was a member in the Arab Nationalism Associations which was active at the end of the Ottoman rule. Darwazeh along with ‘Awni Abd al-Hadi, Abd al-Hamid Schoman and ‘Ajaj Nweihid signed a declaration which calls for the general strike and the formation of national committees in Palestine on the 22 April1936.
5 Isa’af al-Nashashibi and Khalil al-Sakakini, both from Jerusalem and both came from Arabic literature background, backed the local Arab movement.
New attempts to re-write Palestinian history and narrative set their new coordinates in two national resistance projects that took place in the 19th century. The first was the emergence of a national resistance movement against the Zionist project in Palestine in 1882, while the second was as early as the Egyptian (Ibrahim Pasha’s) Occupation in 1832 which resulted in al-Fellahin (peasants) Revolution in 1834. Palestinian historians, such as ‘Adil Manna’ and Salim Tamari, claim that these dates are the roots of an early formation of a Palestinian sense of national identity. It is worth mentioning that the Ottomans used Palestine, as a geographical term, to refer to the Jerusalem district (Mutasarifiyyat al-Quds) and the desert of Sinai. This geographical definition, however, did not imply any administrative entity.

The Palestinian Built Heritage in the collective narrative:

During the British Mandate, Palestinians were caught in a rapidly changing landscape which was not reflected on the Palestinian perception of Palestine, but rather was manifested in the resistance of the British project of creating a Jewish homeland. Palestinians fought on this front as part of the Arab world (devastated by colonization), a process that ended dramatically with the loss of parts of Palestine and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. After an-Nakba (the Catastrophe 1948), a new Palestinian narrative emerged, the core of which was the colonization of Palestine and the victimization of Palestinians.

Palestinian political identity materialized fully with the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1968, after a disastrous six-day War which ended with disgraceful defeat of Arab armies and the total loss of Palestine as well as Sinai and the Golan heights. The PLO brought the Palestinian suffering, as a natural consequence of occupation, to the forefront. A new collective narrative with an-Nakba and the Palestinian Diaspora at its core with all its politics, heroism, destruction, sacrifices… etc, was born. In the process, the Palestinian struggle against the “other,” i.e. Israel, meant the continuous trials to retrieve a stolen history and geography.

The Palestinian lost homes gained a meaning surpassed its stone structures. It represented the dream of return of the Palestinian Diaspora fragmented community. Therefore, the nostalgia for the lost homes became very abundant in Palestinian literature such as in novels (for example Back to Haifa by Ghassan Kanfani in which Kanafani managed to reflect on the concept of return and meaning of belonging to place and a community) or in poetry (such as in Why have you left the Horse alone? by Mahmud Darwish in which Darwish rehearsals to the breathing his last father, the description of his lost home in a drama that reveals the importance of the connection to the home for both a passing and coming generation). Nonetheless, the scholar works such as those of Walid al Khalidi, namely, Before their Diaspora and All that Remains prove the connection between Palestinians and their space and glorifies “Palestine before Palestine”.

6 1982: the first wave of Zionist mass immigration to Palestine which lasted until 1914
7 Another coordinates for the Palestinian national movement could be set back as early as the second half of 18th century with al Dhahir al-Omar revolution (phenomenon) against the central Ottoman government. However, this theory is not very popular in history because the revolution, unlike the Peasants Revolution (1834) or the movement against Zionism (1882) was limited to the northern parts of Palestine, the Galilee.
The sacred places, such as al-Aqsa Mosque, the Holy Sepulcher, and the Nativity church, played a major role in compiling backing and encouragement from both Muslim and Christian world in the Palestinian struggle to retrieve these holy places. And it can be concluded that only renowned sacred places were incorporated in the Palestinian narrative while thousands of historic and archaeological site were disregarded, i.e. collective narrative was influenced by these important religious places but not the very personal, individual, home... this coincides with the fact that “architecture appears as a privileged medium of expression, representing both an instrument and a vehicle that conveys identity”\textsuperscript{12}.

\textit{An-Nakba/Holocaust in the Reconstruction of Palestinian/Israeli Collective Narratives:}

Religion, history, and contemporary history contributed to the creation of a Jewish state on parts of Palestine. Palestinians, in their attempt to write their narrative, engaged with almost the same elements of the Jewish collective narrative, trying to plant their roots in a contested land with a contested history. While the Israelis identified themselves with first, Judaism as a binding ideology, and second Zionism (the return to the Promised Land) as a political framework, and third the Holocaust as a driving force, Palestinians identified themselves with Islam/Christianity, the right of return to their original homes\textsuperscript{13} (UN Resolution 194) and \textit{an-Nakba} respectively. It is imperative to note that the instrumentalization of the memories of the Holocaust and the \textit{Nakba} are essential for this discourse between the two normalization processes and narratives\textsuperscript{14}. The Holocaust, ironically, played a major role in writing both Palestinian and Israeli narratives. After 1948, \textit{an-Nakba} and the Palestinian Diaspora were compared, and sometimes equated, with the Jewish Holocaust. It is worth mentioning that Palestinians, as a defensive strategy and as part of their collective narrative, did not acknowledge, or at the best conditions, minimized the event of the Holocaust\textsuperscript{15}. Recently, Palestinian thinkers such as Edward Said and Azmi Bishara started advocating for the acknowledgement of the event of the Holocaust as a unique stage in the history of human evil. This is an attempt to use the holocaust, as an ethical caveat, to condemn those who suffered from it but practice inhumane acts against others\textsuperscript{16}.

The Israeli construction of a collective narrative was institutionalized and instrumentalized and manifested itself systematically on the ground; first, through a swift destruction of much of the Palestinian villages and towns (1948) in order to make space for the new settlement activity and to dominate the space by making the “other” less present.

\textsuperscript{11} Palestine before Palestine was used by artist Khalil Rabah to denote Palestine as geological formation before being a political notion. However, in this context it denotes Palestine as a community before being a de-facto geographical entity.
\textsuperscript{13} The Palestinian narrative has been one of loss and suffering, of exile and refuge. That is why the refugee issue and the demand for right of return has become the most fundamental facet of their collective identity. (The New Palestinian Narrative by Gershon Baskin in The Jerusalem Post Feb. 21, 2000)
\textsuperscript{14} Holocaust/Nakbah as an Israeli/Palestinian Homeland by Ilan Gur-Ze’ev. An Internet resource; http://construct.haifa.ac.il/~ilangz/homeland5.html, accessed on 7/24/2006.
\textsuperscript{15} Palestinians also considered al-Mufti’s alliance with the Nazis as a resistance act against the British occupation and not as an ideological collaboration.
\textsuperscript{16} Beyond the Destruction of the Other’s Collective Memory co-authored by Ilan Gur-Ze’ev and Ilan Pappe. an Internet resource; http://construct.haifa.ac.il/~ilangz/shoa84.html, accessed on 7/27/2006.
Second, Israelis adopted much of the local Palestinian culture in the Israeli daily life such as housing or sacred places (occupying, adapting, and enjoying old Palestinian villages and towns for the Jewish settlers) and adopting Palestinian and oriental cuisine (Falafel\textsuperscript{17}-ization). After well establishing themselves in Palestine, Israelis claimed what remained from the “sacred landscape” by incorporating it within the Israeli narrative by simply giving places, sites, and roads new names (toponym-icaly claiming the space). In so doing, a nation was found and another was annihilated\textsuperscript{18}.

Unlike the Israeli collective narrative, the construction of a Palestinian one was not institutionalized; yet, it is remarkably noticed that Palestinians, consciously and on individual bases, contributed to the process of writing a new narrative. This could be seen in many artistic and scholar works, confirming Palestinian national ambitions and historical rights. In every discipline or field of memory, the pre-Nakba era was brought to light through tales of a missing landscape in poetry, novels, and even in caricatures through which the issue of identity, history, nationalism, community…etc were brought forward. To sum up, the Israeli narrative that builds on the Holocaust is institutionalized (by a special law) that acquires an agency, while Palestinian narrative is an agency without instrument (hegemonic structure).

**Post Oslo (1993) and the Reconstruction of Palestinian Collective Narrative:**

Six years of Intifada (first Intifada) were incorporated within the Palestinian consciousness with deep sense of community and solidarity and came to its climax with the Independence Declaration in November 15\textsuperscript{th}, 1988 (later became a national holyday). The Intifada was concluded with Oslo Agreement (1993) and a partial Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the West Bank. The Peace Accords, as a process, were a new narrative by themselves. The historical meeting between the two opponents put an end the continuous struggle, or so it then seemed, and facilitated the emergence of a new approach for solving the Palestinian problem, i.e. negotiations.

As a result, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) convention was modified to acknowledge the right of Israel to exist, hence, historical Palestine became a place for two nations/states destroying much of the Palestinian collective narrative that equated Israel with imperialism, colonialism, and saw it as an apartheid system that should be dismantled and uprooted. And only after Oslo Agreement, Palestinians started to re-write a new narrative; normalizing and neutralizing relations between the two nations were the new headlines of that era; these found their expressions in re-writing school curricula and media management, among others. The new Palestinian normalized curricula were introduced to allow for the existence of Israel; the highest mountain in Palestine became al-‘Asur Mountain near Ramallah instead of al-Jarmaq in northern Galilee, the main harbor became Gaza instead of Haifa and Israel became the state bordering Palestine from the north instead of Lebanon. On the Israeli side some of Mahmoud Darwish’s Palestinian national poetry was introduced to the Israeli curricula as a window to the other, the Palestinians. It is fair to say that Palestinians within their new normalized education insist on the connection to historic Palestine and right of return of refugees to the original homes. They also insist on retrieving the holy places as a

\[\text{Falafel is grilled balls of smashed Chickpeas with spices.}\]

\[\text{The new Israeli settlers would not acknowledge the developed taste of Palestinian home such that they related the Palestinian houses to favored stage in history. Houses of Late Ottoman period were ironically sent back to the Crusades times. See Benvenisti, Meron: Al-Mashhad al Moqaddas: [Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948]. Berkeley: University of California Press. Transl. Mosallam, Sami. Madar-the Palestinian Forum for Israeli Studies: Ramallah. 2001}\]
major cause of the struggle. This could explain why the negotiations were divided into two phases, the short term and the long term agreement which will include the issues of Jerusalem, Return, water…

The post Oslo era allowed for new expressions of the collective narrative; there were numerous new attempts to make the pre-Nakba era visible; this manifested itself through publications, inventories, restoration or reconstruction of pre-Nakba building styles, revival of folk traditions, materializing the memory of pre-Nakba era by scholarly studied volumes, novels, collections, memorizing freedom martyrs…etc.

The revival of the built cultural heritage in Palestine is, in fact, an act of making Palestinians proud of what Palestine once looked like; a part of a process to reconcile with a broken history and the construction of visual narrative. Most of conservation works, inventories, restoration of built heritage projects in Palestine (Jerusalem, Hebron, Bethlehem…) were politically driven. This may explain the on-going, vigorous efforts of so many organizations, institutions, and individuals to restore historic centres, monuments, sacred places…etc.

In recent efforts, Palestinian officials and experts were involved in the compilation of a list of twenty sites to be nominated to the World Heritage List as sites of universal value. And according to the Program Coordinator from the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage “the list reflects the cultural and natural diversity in Palestine and places Palestinian culture within the setting of human history”19. However, these sites are of national value before being of universal one because they oppose the Israeli narrative and create a new subjective historical stratification of Palestine. Among these twenty sites are Wadi Natuf and Shuqba Cave that contain two major prehistoric settlement indications that date back to the Early Bronze Age. Another site is Tel es-Sultan which is thought to be the first agricultural settlement in the world with 23 layers of settlement, some of which date back to the 10th millennium B.C. The list continues to include cultural and natural sites such as Samaria (Sebastia), a Hellenistic and Byzantine site, Bethlehem-Christ’s birthplace, trade roots, religious roots, forests and wet lands… all of which reconstruct new historical narrative of Palestine. And suddenly one may come to the conclusion that Palestine, before the interruption of the Iron Age (Jewish tribes), was busy with life and culture. This detonates the Israeli narrative that builds on the fact that Palestine was a vacant place before its desert bloomed with the efforts of the “Chosen People”. This engagement in adopting a national, supra-national and universal approaches towards Built Cultural Heritage and Landscape, the Palestinian lieux de mémoire, attained new dimensions it never meant to attain, that is objectivity. On the list Israel is mentioned several times especially when detailing the threats of the occupation on the nominated sites. In other occasions Israel is mentioned when comparing the nominated sites with other sites that acquire similar significance, and located inside the green line (Israel). In so doing the Palestinians point out the fact that Palestine is still occupied on one hand, and acknowledges the fact that Akka (Acre) is not anymore part of Palestine but Israel on the other.

These compiled memories did not only find their way to scholarly volumes but also to exhibition places, mainly museums; after Oslo agreements, there were many initiatives to formulate and create museums. Good examples are an-Nakba museum (a project by the Ministry of Culture) which aims to make Palestinian suffering as a sole result of occupation.

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19 Inventory of Cultural and Natural Heritage Sites of Potential Outstanding Universal Value in Palestine. Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, 2005.
visible, the Palestinian Museum for Natural history and Humankind (an ongoing art project by artist Khalil Rabah) that moves from fact to fiction and vis-à-vis, and the Ethnographic and Art Museum in Birzeit University along with many folkloric and vernacular museums that glorifies the pre-occupation period (sometimes real sometimes imagined). Nonetheless, the promotion of collecting old photographs\textsuperscript{20}, documents\textsuperscript{21} and the symbolic annual celebration of handing original homes' keys from elders to younger generations in Diaspora refugee camps, and the building of memorials in villages, towns and camps to commemorate martyrs are also, new fields of formulating and claiming a new collective narrative.

\textsuperscript{21} For example the encyclopedia of Palestinian history: 100 Years of Palestinian History, a 20\textsuperscript{th} Century Chronology. PASSIA: Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, Jerusalem. 2001.