

Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine

The Politics of National Commemoration

Laleh Khalili



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Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine

The history of the Palestinians over the last half century has been one of turmoil, a people living under occupation or exiled from their homeland. Theirs has been at times a tragic story, but also one of resistance, heroism, and nationalist aspiration. Laleh Khalili's fascinating and unsettling book is based on her experiences in the Lebanese refugee camps, where ceremonies and commemorations of key moments in the history of the struggle are a significant part of their political life. It is these commemorations of the past, according to Dr Khalili, that have helped to forge a sense of nationhood and strategies of struggle amongst the disenfranchised Palestinian people, both in Lebanon and beyond. She also analyzes how, in recent years, as discourses of liberation and rights have changed in the international community, and as the character of local institutions has evolved, there has been a shift in the representation of Palestinian nationalism from the heroic to the tragic mode. This trend is exemplified through the commemoration of martyrs and their elevation to tragic yet iconic figures in the Palestinian collective memory.

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1 Introduction

In a situation like that of the Palestinians and Israelis, hardly anyone can be expected to drop the quest for national identity and go straight to a history-transcending universal rationalism. Each of the two communities, misled though both may be, is interested in its origins, its history of suffering, its need to survive. To recognize these imperatives, as components of national identity, and to try to reconcile them, rather than dismiss them as so much non-factual ideology, strikes me as the task in hand.

Edward Said, "Permission to Narrate"

Discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behaviour, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them.

Michel Foucault, "History of Systems of Thought"

By now, we know the images that flicker across the television screens during CNN or BBC or al-Jazeera news broadcasts about Palestinians: mournful or angry funerals of martyrs; walls papered with images of young dead men and, now and again, women; poignant or proud commemorations of collective death spoken in the idiom of battles and massacres; pasts that seem to linger; exile that is not forgotten; histories of suffering that are declared and compared. We hear about a surfeit of memory. Some claim that this mnemonic abundance is the final bulwark against capitulation – or compromise, depending on where you stand politically. Everyone may disagree about the causes and effects, but no one denies that the nationalist claims of Palestinians – and Israelis – are bolstered by stories about the past: memories and histories.

All nationalist commemoration is associated with iconic images, objects, and persons. These icons are part of a larger narrative about the nation, as the nation itself is often anthropomorphized and portrayed as having an identity, a "national character," and a biography. It is thought that the story of the nation, celebrated and commemorated in so many ways and venues, is passed from one generation to the next, forming the

essential core of the nation and its character. French nationalism has *la Marseillaise*, the Bastille, and de Gaulle. US nationalism has the flag, Fourth of July, the Civil war, and Ground Zero. Massada, the *Sabra*, David Ben-Gurion, and “If I forget thee, Jerusalem” are the emblems of Zionist nationalism. Palestinian nationalism has the *Nakba*, the *Intifada*, the Dome of the Rock, Sabra and Shatila massacres, the chequered *keffiyeh* scarf, and martyrs’ posters. But in listing these recognizable yet selective icons, these nationalisms and their pageantry of memory are reified: none of these icons are stable, historically unchanging, or uncontested. National(ist) narratives – and the crucial symbols at their core – are challenged from within and without.

This study is about performances of remembered Palestinian (hi)stories and transformations in national commemoration over the last few decades. I examine icons, events, and persons commemorated in ceremonies, calendars, schoolbooks, and history-telling, and by doing so, I shed light on transformations in the character, affinities, values, and mobilizing strategies of the Palestinian national movement. In order to understand nationalist commemoration, this book has posed and pursued an array of questions. Some concern the qualitative content of nationalist commemorations: in what ways are past heroisms and tragedies celebrated or mourned? Has Palestinianness always been about martyrdom – as both detractors of Palestinian nationalism and some proponents of an Islamist version of it (Abu-Faris 1990) claim? Or is it possible that at other times, martyrdom was not so central to Palestinian nationalist commemoration? Other questions examine the internal workings of commemorations. If, as I argue, nationalist narratives are not stable, and as such, commemorations are also fluid in their object, tone, and resonance, *how* do political and social transformations affect the way Palestinian refugees remember and commemorate their history of exile, and their lives and losses? In a deterritorialized nation, where the diasporic population has resided in camps and shantytowns rather than cosmopolitan metropolitan centers, and unlike nationalists cited by Gellner (1983: 101–109) who have not been prosperous and embourgeoised, what form does nationalist narrative-making take? A final series of questions interrogate sources and discursive boundaries of nationalist commemoration. Are nationalist commemorative forms and narratives borrowed transnationally or locally imagined and reproduced? How do seismic shifts in global politics – the end of the Cold War, the rise of human rights and humanitarian politics – affect local practices? Do transnational discourses, not all of which are Europe-centered, inform local vocabularies of mobilization? What roles do these discourses play in mediating the relationships between national communities and transnational institutions?

Ultimately, this study wants to know why representations of the past are so central to nationalist movements and sentiments.

Nationalist memories

Nationality requires us all to forget the boundaries between the living and the dead, the discrepancies between individual experience and the national history.

Anne Norton, "Ruling Memory"

In his seminal work on nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1991: 6) writes that imagined communities "are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined." Accordingly, in this study, I examine national narratives – or "stories of peoplehood" in Rogers Smith's evocative phrase (2003) – promulgated by commemorative acts, events, and objects. I argue that *what* is valorized, celebrated, and commemorated in different nationalisms reveals a great deal about *how* that nationalism is formed: I focus on the mechanics of production of national stories, rather than analyze them as "natural" by-products of an already existing national sentiment. My aim is to show that, contra Anthony D. Smith (1986), even the most intensely felt and fought-for nationalisms contain narratives of the past – "memories" – that are *not* (or not necessarily) ethnic, historically continuous, and unequivocally durable. I argue that while particular events are "remembered" as the shared basis of peoplehood, the construction and reconstruction of these events, the shifting mood of commemorative narratives, and ruptures in commemorative practices surrounding these events all point to a far less stable notion of historical or national memory – and consequently national sentiment – than some might think.

To make this argument, I contend that valorized national narratives – themselves so influential in shaping political strategies and aims – are often hotly contested and their reproduction often requires institutions whose power and resources affect what sorts of discursive modes are chosen, what types of narratives are promulgated, and which audiences are engaged. Furthermore, the affinity of local nationalisms with broader transnational discourses negates the idea that Palestinian nationalist practices are *sui generis* products of a static and unique Palestinian culture. By transnational discourses, I not only indicate global discursive trends but also those discourses borrowed from neighbors such as Iran and allies such as Hizbullah. As such, I challenge the notion of an "authentically" organic and unchanging nationalism nurtured by a prosperous bourgeoisie in the hermetically sealed greenhouse of a clearly

bounded territory. I contend that in the crucial interface between the local and the transnational, nationalist commemorations, stories of peoplehood, and strategies of mobilisation are forged, reproduced, and transformed.

Histories, memories, stories

In this book, I have chosen to examine commemoration – *public* performances, rituals, and narratives – because I am concerned not with memories but with “mnemonic *practices*” (Olick 2003), not with images inside people’s heads but with the *social* invocation of past events, persons, places, and symbols in variable social settings.

In his monumental work on *lieux de mémoire* in France, Pierre Nora (1996: 3) distinguishes memory from history:

Memory is always a phenomenon of the present, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, being a phenomenon of emotion and magic, accommodates only those facts that suit it . . . History, being an intellectual, nonreligious activity, calls for analysis and critical discourse. Memory situates remembrance in a sacred context. History ferrets it out; it turns whatever it touches into prose. Memory wells up from groups that it welds together, which is to say, as Maurice Halbwachs observed, that there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple yet specific; collective and plural yet individual. By contrast, history belongs to everyone and to no one and therefore has a universal vocation . . . Memory is an absolute, while history is always relative.

Though certain aspects of Nora’s definition of memory are suggestive – namely its selectiveness and polyvalence – his descriptions of historiography as universal and of memory as essential are problematic, and the distinctions made between history and memory are hyperbolic. This view of memory and history as respectively “popular” and intellectual stories about the past ignores the mutual imbrication of these two categories of narratives and dehistoricises and sanctifies an object called memory. In this view, memory bubbles up “naturally” from the collective experiences of a group and it is absolute, emotional, magical, and as such insusceptible to reason, dynamism, or change.

By contrast, I shift the focus of analysis from metaphysical or cognitive aspects of memory, to its effect and appearance in practice. This heuristic shift *externalizes* remembering (Olick and Robbins 1998), and allows us to look at processes of remembering and commemorating in a social setting, and in relation to particular audiences and contexts (Bruner 1984; Bruner and Gorfain 1984). I historicise commemorative practices and examine their multiple sites of production and reproduction. I consider