ERASING PALESTINE TO BUILD ISRAEL:
LANDSCAPE TRANSFORMATION AND THE ROOTING OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES

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Perhaps the greatest battle Palestinians have waged as a people has been over the right to a remembered presence, and with that presence, the right to possess and reclaim a collective historical reality.
(Said 1999, 12)

Although the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians might be defined as a territorial one, it involves more than just land. It is an intense ideological clash of two contradictory and exclusive nationalist narratives. In constructing collective memory and identity, both sides appeal to fields as diverse as history, archeology, geography, cartography, and even ecology.

The fact that history is always written by the victors is a truism. However, victors also dominate the aforementioned fields. In the case of Israel’s victory, the issue is not merely about one of two versions being more widely disseminated or more influential than the other but about meticulous, multi-disciplinary, and concerted work to make reality reflect the Zionist agenda and to erase all traces of Palestinian presence from space and time.

Anthropology has shown that space is not an inert container for social life. Instead, societies shape space so that it reflects their values and embodies their identity and historical memory (Feld and Basso 1996). In that light, space is a highly suitable tool for spreading these symbolic objects almost instantly since, once they exist in space, they appear to be natural and therefore undeniable truths. Far from being a simple unrefined environment, space is the product of “politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local, and multiple constructions” (Rodman 2003, 205).

This process plays out in all societies. However, in Palestine, it was unusually rapid and intense. Various agents (both public and private) have made concerted efforts to deprive Palestinian space of all meaning in order to clear the way for Zionist space. The Israeli landscape can be interpreted as the outcome—or at least the expression—of land development practices that aim to give the historical narratives and values of the new Hebrew State a material reality. Israeli’s military victory in 1948 was also the victory of one representation of land and nation, which had instant impacts on the landscape. In just a few years, the landscape was aligned with this vision of reality, with the new alignment in turn serving to corroborate that vision. Israel today contains few material traces that contradict the resounding victory of the Zionist narrative and its territorial implications. Palestinian memory is one such trace.

Even during the Oslo process, which was supposed to lead to the creation of a Palestinian State on at least a part of the territories Israel occupied in 1967, the Palestinian landscape continued to be erased from Israel and the Occupied Territories through the seizure and methodical destruction of land and buildings under the pretext of ensuring

1. Unless otherwise indicated, this term refers here to historical Palestine.
security or to make way for Israeli settlement colonies. This symbolic confrontation and its implications for space shed new light on this contemporary conflict and the failure of peace talks.

In this paper, landscape is not understood as a natural context but as an “ethnoscape” (Appadurai 1991), that is, a social and political construct produced by – and aiming to produce – a national culture and identity. This approach views land less as a territory claimed by two nations than as a symbolic element critical to the construction of identity and the memory of Palestinians as well as Israelis. My approach is a historical one. Through it, I hope to spotlight the power relationships and the instruments through which these representations have acquired material reality in space.

I begin with a brief discussion of the Christian West’s representations of Palestine as a Holy Land, which facilitated the establishment of a Zionist discourse in space. I then address various actions (technological, political, or private) taken by Israel to shape an entirely new landscape in line with its myths. Lastly, I review the Palestinian strategies aimed at resisting that new landscape and to give itself a historical voice through memory narratives that revive a landscape now over-taken by the Zionist landscape. The tree – a symbol of a people’s roots in a land – holds a central place in both sides’ representations and policies.

From Holy Land to Promised Land

Mitchell (1999, 248) argues that the Holy Land is the greatest collective landscape mirage the human imagination has ever produced. Further, the Zionists turned this mirage into a reality by making the State of Israel the territorial embodiment of the Promised Land.

Christian representations shape the perception of Palestine and its inhabitants. Although this geographical space has a long history of being defined as a Holy Land, as Whitelam (1996) points out, that definition was written by the Christian West and Israel. The inhabitants of this land and the material traces they left behind are only recognized within the framework of biblical discourse. As a result, Palestinians’ existence began being denied in the nineteenth century.²

The American scholar Edward Robinson played a key role in reconstructing what he called the “authentic historical landscape of Palestine” (cited in Silberman 2001, 103). In the first half of the nineteenth century, Robinson identified dozens of biblical sites, which he classified using an empirical method (as opposed to religious methods of site identification). His findings aligned the geography of the Holy Land with the notion of “positive history.”

His work was the first to superimpose a map of ancient Palestine on a (then) modern map in order to pinpoint the location of hidden treasures. From the outset, the groundwork was being laid for a new venture that merged research, religion, and politics, namely biblical archeology. Following Robinson’s pioneering work, numerous researchers of various

² For more about Western representations, practices, and the power politics of nations for the control of religious sites, see Silberman (1982).
nationalities were trained in this discipline, thanks primarily to the Palestine Exploration Fund created in London in 1865.

Biblical archeology views the landscapes of Palestine as living and timeless representations of the landscapes described in the Bible. The scientific, artistic, and popular imagination perceives and portrays the inhabitants and their daily lives as biblical allegories. This approach resulted in the association of villages with hitherto unidentified biblical sites and in an interpretation of Palestinian lifestyles and behaviors as a way of understanding the role of archeological objects discovered during excavations. The rural culture of Palestine was therefore depicted as frozen in time. Scholars were only interested in it as a cultural remnant of biblical times.

With its biblical and orientalist bias, that representation negatively affected historical and archeological output. Moreover, its social and political implications would later work against the Palestinians. From it emerged “an essential dichotomy of the physical landscape of Israel between past and present, modern and primitive, Arab and Jew” (Silberman 2001, 107).

This representation paved the way for the acceptance, then the implementation of the Zionist project. With biblical discourse serving as a convergence point between European and Zionist historical and archeological thinking, it was not hard to turn the Holy Land into a Promised Land for Israel. The viability of the idea of “a land without people for a people without a land” in the academic and political spheres was directly influenced by research that constructed a biblical past while totally overlooking the historical existence and role of indigenous populations, and of contemporary Palestinians in particular.

At the turn of the twentieth century, with the first waves of Jewish settlers and the Zionist movement gaining traction, representations of Palestine evolved in two directions.

First, the biblical imagination was still very much alive among Christians, of course, but also among Jews. In the 1920s, oriental (or even orientalist) landscapes were the preferred themes of Jewish painters. These artists depicted ancient scenes more in line with visions of biblical history than with reality (Manor 2003). Their images were powerful tools as they situated an imaginary homeland in a real geographic place.

Second, the rare paintings of “Zionist” landscapes have no orientalist dimension at all. Instead, they depict well-tended lands and purvey the ideal of a “conquest of the desert.” In addition, photographs and postcards also depict a schism between Arabs and Jews so pronounced that the two groups do not even seem to belong to the same space or timeframe. These images depict Palestinians as old, withdrawn, and in traditional attire, situated in barren places performing tasks with biblical resonances (a shepherd tending his flock, an old man on a donkey, etc.) In other words, they are portrayed as outside of time, while

3. Moors (2001) analyzed pictures of Palestine in circulation between the late nineteenth century and 1948, and showed how Palestine was turned into a “living museum” instead of being studied in light of its historical and contemporary features.

the Zionists are portrayed as representing the present and especially the future: young, hard-working, and eminently modern. They are not disconnected from the biblical imagination, but instead of being represented as biblical figurines, alive yet decontextualized and ahistoricized, they are depicted as pioneers who, through hard labor in redemptive agriculture, are renewing ties with the land of their ancestors (Oren 1995). The titles of sets of postcards (such as “We Build Palestine”) and the captions on the reverse side focused on working the land or preparing it for a new Jewish society that would unite the diaspora (Moors and Wachlin 1995, 17).

Visual stereotypes depicting Zionism as the embodiment of the new relationship between humankind and nature turned the landscape into a powerful metaphor that worked in favor of the establishment of a Hebrew State. Zionism stood for a rebirth, not a return to the past. The locations new immigrants selected illustrate this, with nearly 80% living in cities and, from 1882, farming communities being established in the coastal plain, which had only a peripheral status in Jewish history. Land purchases thus followed a strategy for forming a political territory, not for a mimetic return to the past. Zionists’ relative ambivalence toward the historical sites of Judaism attests to that fact (Dieckhoff 1996, 165).

This rebirth relied, among other things, on creating a meaningful association between land, the landscape, nature, and the resurgence of the nation, as well as on the idea that pioneers were shaping the landscape for the better (Selwyn 1995, 114). Molded to Zionist ideology, nature became a key component in the construction of identity.

Palestine thus lost its status as a concrete and contemporary entity because it was only viewed through the lens of Christian and Jewish religious narratives. In effect, it was placed in a dual temporality as both a place of origin, as depicted by the biblical narrative, and as a perspective for the future, whether as the religious utopia of the end of time or as the much more immediate Zionist vision.

1948: Israel Envelops Palestine

In the early phases, political Zionism did not have its sights set on a specific territory. It did not choose Palestine for religious reasons but due to a historical attachment to a territory where the national destiny of Jews was forged. The attachment was to the historical legacy of a territory, not to the sacredness of a land (Dieckhoff 1996, 161).

After choosing Palestine, the next step was to ensure a territorial base there by purchasing land for migrants and, more importantly, to provide a legitimate basis for territorializing a “landless people” and creating the State of Israel.

To accomplish this, proponents of Zionism stressed the idea that nature, and land in particular, are both sources of salvation and something in need of saving. It was depicted as empty, desolate, and yearning for the return of its ancient Hebrew inhabitants (Zerubavel 1995, 215).

The interpretation of the 1948 war reflects that discourse perfectly. It disregarded Palestinians

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5. This policy had limited success. In 1948, Jews only owned 7% of Palestinian land (Farsoun and Basso 1998, 78).
completely and depicted the war as a war for “independence” (azma’ut) against the British and for “liberation” from the yoke of a scattered existence (shihrur) (Pappé 1997, 31). In other words, it was depicted as a simple anti-colonial struggle accompanied by the return of exiles. Israel immediately put that vision of events into practice through policies aimed at erasing signs of Palestinian existence.

This paper does not address historiography, political science, or the repression of any expression of Palestinian identity or culture, which was particularly intense after the 1967 war and the territorial occupation that ensued. Instead, it examines various public and private policies designed to radically and sustainably alter the landscape in order to ensure that it only reflected Jewish presence and identity.

The Zionist interpretation of the Palestinian exodus served as the theoretical framework for land development policies. It was interpreted as voluntary and, in some cases, ordered by Palestinian leaders, which bolstered the idea that Palestinians were immigrants recently arrived from other countries and without any attachment to the land. For a long time, that representation went practically unchallenged, except by the Palestinians themselves. However, their side of the story was considered illegitimate. Today, it is being challenged by the “new history” of Israel. Yet that representation is still alive, and some academic circles continue to embrace it.

Not only did this version of history exempt Israel from any responsibility for the “refugee problem,” but it ensconced a myth central to Zionist ideology, namely that of a land without people. In effect, Palestinian villages were emptied and then systematically destroyed. In June 1948, this destruction became a political tactic for preventing refugees from returning to their homes. In late 1948, the international community began applying pressure for the return of Palestinians and, in May 1949, the government decided to obliterate all the remaining villages.

In contrast to the collateral damage expected of a normal war, Falah (1996) calls the 1948 conflict a “total war” due to the concerted and methodical annihilation of the Palestinian landscape. His in-depth study of the erasure of Palestinian material culture revealed that living spaces and other structures that could bear witness to the Palestinian past disappeared. Structures left standing were schools, khans (caravanserais), monasteries (with direct ties to European countries), or attractive buildings.

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6. For more on how this was reflected in academic research, see Kimmerling and Migdal (2003), Pappé (1997), Said and Hitchens (1988), and Whitelam (1996). For more about Israeli repression of Palestinian culture, or, in some cases, its re-appropriation, see Abu-Hadba (1994) and Benvenisti (1983).

7. Peters (1984), for example, did so in a recent work, which, after being praised by some critics, was accused by Finkelstein (1995, 22) of being among the “most spectacular frauds ever published on the Arab-Israeli conflict.” Citing archive documents, Finkelstein (1995) and Said and Hitchens (1988) refuted Peters’s claims. For more on the myth of the Palestinian exodus, see Flapan (1987).

8. Various figures have been cited. Morris (1987) counted 369 villages, while other Palestinian writers counted up to 480. Khalidi (1992, xix) claims that 418 villages were emptied, 382 of which were almost completely razed. Only seven villages were left more or less intact and were resettled by Jews.

9. These were most often built in villages by the British.
considered non-Arab (built, for example, during the Crusades).

New farming settlements were established in the wake of this destruction. Between 1948 and 1949, 170 farms were created, and 130 the following year. Existing farms were enlarged in order to incorporate land from neighboring Arab villages. These farms had military and political significance because they were generally set up in zones that, according to the 1947 United Nations Partition Plan, belonged to an Arab State.

In just two years, the Palestinian space was entirely restructured to achieve two objectives: territorial control, and the obliteration of all places representing the region’s Arab history. With the land now wiped clear, a new identity could be planted. The disciplines of archeology, geography, or cartography were tasked with nationalizing the landscape so that it reflected and legitimated the Zionist project. The Zionist vision of conquered space and, in particular, the direct link between present and past were made “objective realities” by being tied to the territory, which, in turn, reinforced them by giving them an almost instant material reality. This reflects the idea of “homescapes” (Azaryahu 2002, 149), whereby the homeland was transformed by an abstract idea into a reality that represented it as much as it produced it.

Israel’s 1978 antiquities law is a good example of a practice with one foot in politics and the other in scientific research. The law only applied to material objects made before 1700 or to those with historical value. It therefore completely discounted three-hundred years of history. Except for a few buildings built by the earliest Jewish pioneers, the law considered no other historical structure from that time as an antiquity in need of preservation (Benvenisti 2000, 305). Moreover, in blatant violation of the law, some Palestinian monuments built before 1700 were destroyed without a second thought. The Palestinian people thus disappeared from the space and the history of what, since 1948, has been referred to as “Israeli.”

As regards excavations in Jerusalem, Abu El-Haj (1998) highlights the central role archeology plays in producing a material culture that aligns the landscape with certain aspects of history while disregarding others. Like many scientific fields, it played a part in the conflict by producing the tangible signs that justified political and cultural claims.

Cartography also played a role. Under the British Mandate, Zionist requests to give Hebrew names to some sites were typically denied. The map drawn up by the British in the 1940s had only around 200 Hebrew names, and these belonged to Jewish colonies. Other than a few names of religious sites that already had English names (Jerusalem, Hebron), place names were transcriptions of Arabic.

Once the State of Israel was created, great efforts were made to disseminate maps that reflected the drastic changes to space that were taking place and used Hebrew names for

10. Or 300 in under three years. By comparison, 243 agricultural colonies were set up during the 66 years of Jewish immigration to Palestine before the creation of the State of Israel (Benvenisti 2000).

11. This erasure was also accomplished by the terms used to refer to Palestinians living in Israel. When they could not be pushed aside, they became “Arab-Israelis.” Those whose property was confiscated or who were denied certain civil rights were referred to as “absentees.”
roads, sites, rivers, and more. This had a two-fold purpose: to restore biblical toponymy, and to serve nationalist interests.

Paradoxically, many current names are derived from Arabic. The Old Testament and Jewish historical sources name only 174 places (Azaryahu 2002, 159). However, biblical historians and archeologists theorize that contemporary Arabic toponymy is a distortion of ancient names. Two tactics were used: some Arab names were translated into Hebrew, and new names were created based on homophony with Arab terms.

In any event, thousands of names changed their meaning. This erased one world to replace it with another. As Benvenisti (2000, 38-9) points out, names became a reality once they were entered on a map.

Although the commission overseeing this work claimed not to have altered any spatial characteristics of maps, it admitted omitting “invisible ruins.” However, many Palestinian villages do not appear on maps despite the presence of visible ruins. Others have a new name, beside which appears the symbol for an “ancient ruin.” Once these “ancient ruins” are covered up by nature or time, the symbols disappear. Therefore, “the process of consolidation of the ‘current map’ with the ‘Hebrew map’ went on as long as the eradication of all signs of habitation in the abandoned Arab villages continued; thus were the ‘ruins of which no visible traces remained’ wiped from the map – along with their names” (Benvenisti 2000, 42).

In the early 1960s, a new map of the country was published containing only Hebrew place-names and depicting an entirely different reality. Not only was this map a tool for territorial control, but more importantly, it was a way of depriving of space those lacking the power to name things and therefore to make them exist: no Arab name meant no Arab space.

Names were chosen according to two principles. One focused on biblical “continuity,” and the other on modernity and the nationalist angle. Interestingly, Likud’s 1977 victory brought about two changes: biblical-sounding names were prioritized even more, and the West Bank, which had been occupied for ten years, was renamed Judea and Samaria immediately following the party’s political victory. Much of its geography was renamed in Hebrew to allude to the Bible and the ancestral homeland. Although only 20% of names in Israel have a biblical connotation, in the West Bank, that figure reaches 47% (Cohen and Kliot 1992, 666). Therefore, after a phase of Hebrization aiming to nationalize space, came a phase of Judization of the landscape in order to give it a religious meaning. This practice illustrates the power that comes with place naming. Although the West Bank was not officially annexed, Israel carried out both symbolic and real acts that suggest otherwise. For instance, many roads were reserved for Jews and many plots seized. Clearly, the intent was to take possession of the land. Following the political events of 1977, land appropriations for settlement colonies rose dramatically. These resolved the territorial paradox of the first wave of Zionist immigrants, who opted to settle in the coastal plain instead of the “biblical” hills.

12. This is in fact a fictitious continuity linking biblical times to the new Hebrew State, since it totally disregards everything that occurred in between.
Segel and Weizman (2004, 86) analyzed the principles behind the placement and architecture of these colonies and identified an essential strategic aspect in addition to the religious one. They argue that these colonies are not places of residence but instead form a vast network of “civilian fortifications.” Having scattered them throughout the landscape, the Israeli government uses them to enforce its authority over Palestinians in the absence of formal institutions (such as an army or a police force). In effect, these settlements can be likened to an occupation of the hilltops. In addition to the fact that they meet a security need by offering panoptic surveillance of the valleys where Palestinian villages are located, they help establish two national geographies that overlap along a vertical and symbolic axis.

In the words of Rotbarb (2004, 52):

Above, “Judea and Samaria,” the land of settlements and military outposts, bypass roads, and tunnels, and below, “Palestine,” the land of villages and towns, dirt roads, and paths. [This is] the way Israelis perceive the space in which they live, which in turn maps out the values themselves: the observers versus the observed, a Cartesian ghetto versus a chaotic periphery, a threatened culture versus “desert makers” (in the words of Ben Gurion), city versus periphery, future and past versus present, Jews versus Arabs.

Palestinian space was therefore replaced by Israeli space. The landscape was transformed, villages were buried or surrounded by settlements, and maps were drawn up with new place names. These are the territorial ramifications of a political and military triumph over the Other. Unnamed, and with neither history nor geography, the Palestinian Other was reduced to act as a foil to Israel’s own legitimacy. Benvenisti (2000, 47) suggests that the reason Israel made such strenuous efforts to eradicate non-Hebrew history was because it was fully aware of the deep attachment Palestinians have to their land.

Palestinian memory may be the only tangible trace of a past that Israel has thus far been unable to eradicate. Through narratives and customs, refugees create and re-create their land and their landscape. Palestinian symbolic strategies for reclaiming a past, present, and future existence include using pre-1948 maps (now considered “historical”), using the Arab names of destroyed villages instead of their current Jewish names, and continuing to use old place names.

Trees played a central role in these events as both place markers and symbols of both peoples’ rootedness in the land.

“Tree for Tree”

Compared with the destruction of several hundred villages, uprooting trees might seem attractive. However, it holds special importance for two reasons: (i) afforestation, deforestation, planting, and uprooting are effective ways of transforming the landscape in the long-term, appropriating space, and asserting dominance over it; and (ii) the tree symbolizes people’s
rootedness in a land. In this context, the tree is a medium of national memory and a gauge of ownership of contested land.

Many Palestinian popular songs pay homage to olive and orange trees, and trees considered holy are often associated with burial sites. The tree has become a key symbol of resistance to Zionism, as olive trees, cactus trees, or any other ancient trees have the power to mark places and to pull back to the surface land buried under the Israeli landscape.

To Zionists, trees have a different meaning. First, they represent the successful reseeding of the “ancient” homeland and a symbolic continuity between the past, as described in the Torah, and the present. Second, uprooting trees is a way of clearing the land of any sign of Palestinian history that might challenge the establishment of the Hebrew nation.

Uprooting another’s tree to plant one’s own is a powerful symbolic act.

Interestingly, the same symbol became a central aspect in both peoples’ identity and memory, although in different ways. Three types of trees have great symbolic value. The first is the cactus tree, which Palestinians often planted on the boundaries of plots of land and villages. Highly resistant, cactus trees still cover the land despite Israeli attempts to eradicate them. The tree symbolizes prior presence as well the resilience of Palestinian roots in the face of adversity. In fact, in Palestine, the Arabic word sabr means both “patience” and “cactus tree.” In literature, film, painting, and music, this tree often symbolizes national struggles and collective memory.

In the 1930s, cactus trees came to symbolize Jews born in Palestine as opposed to those who migrated there. Not only did cactus trees represent those Jews’ legitimate rights to the land, but they also embodied the new Zionist personality: hard and prickly on the outside, soft on the inside, highly resilient, and deeply rooted to the Promised Land.

Orange and olive trees are also highly symbolic in both cultures. Palestinians cultivated the first orange trees in the region and exported their fruits before the Jaffa orange became the leading Israeli export. With its long lifespan, the olive tree – the biblical tree par excellence – symbolizes a link to the ancestral past. Olive trees have great symbolic value to Palestinians for two reasons: (i) they have been fixture of regional culture since time immemorial, and they are highly resilient due to the depth of their roots; and (ii) they are the trees most often uprooted by Israelis and thus represent the plight of Palestinians who, despite the occupier’s numerous attempts to have it otherwise, endure and remain rooted to the land.

Trees are a key theme in both peoples’ claims to rightful ownership of the land.

14. For more on the symbolism of trees in Palestinian and Israeli literature and poetry, see Bardenstein (2005).
15. See the documentary on Palestinian memory entitled Al-Sabbar, by Swiss director Patrick Bürge (2000).
17. One Palestinian band is called sabrîm (plural of sabr). Its music is inspired by folklore, and its lyrics describe the social, political, and economic realities in the West Bank.
18. The term sabra, an internationalized version of the Hebrew tzabar, is also used in French to designate Zionists born in Palestine and later Israel.
Palestinians and Israelis alike thus appeal to nature as a source of territorial legitimacy.

Trees are not only symbolic. They have played a role in the conflict itself. To take the other’s place in space, a relentless policy of uprooting and then replanting trees is pursued.

Yet the policy of village destruction initiated in 1948 was not enough to erase the Palestinian presence. To purge all traces and history of that presence from the landscape, Israel adopted emergency measures (Mitchell 1999, 250). In 1948, a law was passed that empowered the Ministry of Agriculture to seize fallow land and hand it over to another farmer. This law was a way of confiscating Palestinian lands prior to the passage of the Absentees’ Property Law (1950), which authorized the nationalization of land and property assets worth billions of dollars. However, in the face of pressure from agricultural settlements and a mounting desire to take over land from neighboring Arab villages, those measures proved inadequate. As a result, in many regions, Palestinians’ farmlands were declared closed zones, which prevented Palestinians from tending their crops. Once their land turned fallow due to neglect, it was seized and handed over to Jews. In some instances, crops were destroyed in order to make farmland fallow and thus eligible for seizure sooner. Tens of thousands of dunum of olive groves were torn from the earth.

In 1948, 500,000 dunum were handed over to Jewish farmers so that they could “make the desert bloom” (Benvenisti 2000, 158). Presented as a necessity for modernizing agriculture, this land transfer made it virtually impossible for Palestinian farmers to return, since their sources of livelihood had been taken away. Their spaces were cleared of all trees because the trees served as visible reminders that the land was not in fact desolate, but had belonged to a population that cared for it.

In parallel to this development, dozens of Palestinian villages were plowed or planted over with trees so they were no longer recognizable. Numerous tiny forests sprung up among the cultivated fields as proof that nature was flourishing. In reality, those copses often concealed the remains of villages. Traveling with old Palestinians in shared taxis taught this author how important “memory maps” were. After learning about my research topic, my fellow passengers described the geography that had been erased from the visible landscape. Along the road from Gaza to Jerusalem, I discovered a now hidden landscape, but one still very much alive in the memory of its former inhabitants.

Most of these forests were planted by the National Jewish Fund (NJF), which sponsored numerous initiatives starting in the early twentieth century. At first, fruit trees were planted because they fostered redemption through farm labor and were able to sustain the first agricultural settlements. The symbolism of tree-planting was even more significant during that period because it denoted the restoration of ties to the land and the legitimacy of

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19. The definition of “absentee” owner was very broad. It included any person who was living in an Arab state, had left his ordinary residence in Israel, or whose property was located in a place held by forces working against the establishment of Israel (Abu Hussein and McKay 2003, 70). According to Kimmerling and Migdal (2003), under this law, 40% of Palestinian lands were confiscated, accounting for around 2 million dunum (an Ottoman unit of measurement used in the region and equal to 1,000 m²).
Zionist claims. The incidents at Herzl Forest, the planting of which began in 1906, illustrate how powerful the symbol of tree-planting was. According to Carol Bardenstein (1999), the agronomist in charge of planting the forest hired Arab workers. In response, Jewish workers protested vehemently and held a march demanding the right to plant the trees. During the protest, they uprooted saplings and replanted them. Their demands were ultimately met.

After 1948, the main goal of tree-planting was to erase the material traces of the Palestinian landscape and to put down the roots of Jewish identity and memory.

Today, the NJF continues to perpetuate the myth of a land without people. As its website states:

> Forests and parks were not always part of the landscape of Eretz Israel. The first Jewish pioneers who came to the land of Israel toward the end of the nineteenth century found a desolate land that provided no shade whatsoever.

All NJF literature depicts Zionists as the legitimate owners of the land, in contrast to inhabitants who were present only temporarily, neglected the land, and caused its desertification. The Fund’s image archive contains “before” and “after” pictures of the Zionist return. These portray Zionism in the same positive light:

> We have returned, we have inseminated it, therefore it is ours. (Bardenstein 1999, 158-9)

Today, tree-planting has almost become a national activity, if not a mandatory ritual. In schools, during holidays, to commemorate an event or a death, Israelis, Jews abroad, even tourists are encouraged to plant a tree.

One NJF website created in 2003 in memory of the 1973 war beautifully expresses the symbolism of tree planting:

> The KKL [the Hebrew acronym for NJF] has planted 220 million trees since 1908, or three and half million yearly. Planting trees proves our ownership over this land. This land has but one owner, who develops and cultivates it [. . .] 20 million more trees need to be planted to reforest the Negev [. . .] Each day a tree is planted is a day we become more rooted to the land of our ancestors.

Here, trees have a dual symbolic meaning, as they represent not only the owners of the land but also their work and their ability to make the desert bloom, or rather bloom again, since the Negev is said to need re-forestation. This symbolism delegitimizes Palestinian claims, since it portrays them as causing the desertification of the land due to a lack of care and attachment.

Since salvation comes from work and work is reflected in the landscape by newly-planted trees, nature plays a major role in the construction of Israeli identity.

In a similar vein, the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) organizes

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20. This is the Hebrew term for “Land of Israel.” This term refers to all territories that at one time or another were part of one of the Jewish kingdoms. In addition to all of historical Palestine, it also includes a portion of modern-day Jordan.


hundreds of tours of the countryside and of Jerusalem each year for students and adults (both civilian and military). The website of this NGO, which has close ties with the government, states that its objective is to promote “respect, love, and understanding of nature and the land.” To make natural history and social history appear intrinsically linked, guides “dig through history, anthropology, and biology, and leave politics aside.”

In fact, as Selwyn shows (1995, 119-22), these tours foster patriotism through hands-on learning while in direct contact with the land, ancient and contemporary social history, and architecture while stressing strategic points such as the “war for independence” or modern settlements. The tours make almost no mention of Arabs. A few references are made to Egyptians (in relation to the 1948 war) and to effendi, the large Arab landowners who sold plots to the first settlers. The talks given during these tours encourage moral judgments between Self – which is good – and the Other – which is bad and a destroyer of nature and culture, of which Palestinians, among others, are the embodiment. Israel is depicted as both the guardian and the sole legitimate and competent manager of nature.

In Israel, the defense of the State and of nature are interrelated. In fact, the Hebrew word haganah refers to both. Protecting the landscape is thought to be the surest way of protecting the nation, which is why the Israeli government classifies the work of the SPNI as a war effort (Selwyn 1995, 131).

In fact, trees became stakes of war, in particular in the early phases of the first intifada. Between 1988 and 1990, on the order of their commander, Palestinians set fire to numerous forests. In addition to causing Israel to lose money, the destruction by Palestinians of trees planted illegally on their lands to cover up their villages was a symbolic act of decimating the occupier.

Israelis reacted strongly to what they saw as a challenge to their national identity. Rather than interpret tree burning as a political act, some claimed that it typified Palestinians’ gratuitous desire for destruction, which made Israel seem an even more legitimate owner of the land (Zerubavel 1996, 85). A caricature of Arafat published in an Israeli newspaper depicted him issuing a “tree burning” certificate to tree burners modeled after the tree-planter certificates issued by the NJF (Bardenstein 2005).

The Israeli reaction included two radically opposed yet nonetheless complementary components. First, the NJF quickly launched the “Tree for a Tree” campaign in reference to the biblical saying “an eye for an eye.” In order to visibly alter the landscape, it encouraged the public to replant every tree torn down. Since new Israeli forests proved land ownership, it was not by chance that the sites of old Palestinian villages were chosen for reforestation. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Palestinian trees were uprooted in the Occupied Territories, primarily old fruit trees. Perhaps the care they required was an all too visible reminder that the land was not desolate before

24. Human Rights Update 6 reveals that over 160,000 trees were uprooted in the West Bank from December 1987 to March 1993 (Palestinian Center for Human Rights 2001).
the arrival of Jewish farmers. Most were olive trees, and the healthiest ones were replanted in Jewish settlements. When for one reason or another, they could not be uprooted, they were sawn off at the base. However, this did not have the anticipated effect, as after some time, new shoots begin springing from the stumps, and these olive trees came to symbolize the Palestinians’ resilience to Israeli attempts to destroy them.

Rooted in the land, the tree is by any standard a natural symbol of a people’s social and cultural roots. The purpose of this so-called “ecological” policy was to uproot one people in order to plant another. These practices impacted the landscape in two ways: the desertification of Palestinian farmland, and the forestation of Israeli land. These changes to the landscape symbolically entrenched Zionism. Israelis were able to consecrate their ownership over the land by controlling space and the superiority of their values by creating visible evidence that only they could make the desert bloom.

How does this situation fit in with the Oslo Process, which was intended to bring peace and acceptance of a shared and no longer exclusive presence on this land? My intent here is not to outline all the complexities of this process but to explore in greater depth the points raised above by briefly examining the Zionist narrative and its inscription in the landscape during this period.

**Land in Exchange for Peace**

The Oslo Process focused on an exchange of land for peace. However, that exchange has proved particularly hard to implement in this part of the world.

The media focus on any potential agreement, resumption of talks, or progress on the ground. However, the everyday reality in these areas is hardly ever mentioned, even less the symbolic aspects underlying that reality.

Landscapes are more transparent than politicians. Since the start of the Oslo Process, three new settlements have been officially established (42 unofficially) in Palestinian territories, bringing the total number of official settlements to 145 (or 200 if illegal settlements that now appear firmly implanted are included). Between September 1993 and July 2000, the number of houses in these

25. This desertification is also due to Israel’s water management policy, which greatly limits water extraction, transfers, facilities, or consumption in the Occupied Territories (Selby 2003).

26. This has been done by others on both sides of the political spectrum. See for example Botiveau (1999) and Giacaman and Dag Jrud Lonning (1998).

27. The start of the Oslo Process was symbolized by the handshake between Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin on September 13, 1993 in Washington at the ceremony marking the signing of the declaration of principles that would serve as the framework for talks. Although the failure of Camp David II in July 2000 was a major setback, the process did not officially end until the following September when the second intifāda was declared.

28. For more on the degradation of living conditions during the Oslo Process, see Roy (1999). For an overview of the social and economic situation since the second intifāda, see Bocco et al (2003).

29. These figures are cited in a report by Israeli NGO Peace Now entitled “Housing Starts in the Settlements since the Oslo Agreement,” Jerusalem, December 2000. Between December 1993 and June 1999, the population increased by 52%, with a 72% increase predicted by the end of 2000.
settlements rose by 52.5%. In parallel, the surrounding lands were seized in the name of “natural expansion.” Since the second *intifāda*, colonization has intensified. Just five days after announcing its unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip on February 20, 2005, the government approved 120 illegal settlements and announced plans to build over 6,000 homes in the West Bank in 2005.

From 1995 to 1997, over 20,000 *dunum* were seized to build some thirty roads linking settlements to Israel. In 1998, 12 new roads were approved. The roads themselves range from 50 to 100 meters wide. However, they are lined with security areas off limits to Palestinians, which increases their total width to 200 meters (Fouet 2000). These roads have resulted in the destruction of numerous farms and cut Palestinian farmers off from their land. This fragmentation of space renders it socially uninhabitable.

In addition to government actions, settlers themselves committed numerous abuses, including the uprooting of trees and the destruction of crops. Their encounters with Palestinians sometimes turn violent, resulting in injuries or even loss of life. However, thanks to their extra-territorial status, the settlers are not subject to Palestinian jurisdiction. In most cases, Israeli authorities turn a blind eye to their actions. In fact, the report by Dudai (2002) on the application of the law to settlers in the Occupied Territories states that only 7% of Israelis who kill Palestinians are found guilty of murder. In nearly one-half of these instances, the case is closed or no investigation is conducted, and most sentences are symbolic.  

In many cases, Israeli law sanctions the destruction of Palestinian land. In an article published in the daily *Ha’Aretz* on January 23, 1999, journalist G. Levy tells the story of Avish Abu Hilwan, a farmer from Bayt Dijan, an area east of Nablus in the West Bank. In 1987, this farmer planted some 600 olive trees and cared for them for twelve years. In 1999, the Israeli authorities ordered their destruction on the legal grounds that his grove had been planted illegally despite the fact that Abu Hilwan owned the land. Due to the rocky soil in this region, olive trees only start producing after twelve years. As Abu Hilwan was about to harvest the first fruits of his long labor, the Israeli authorities suddenly “found out” that the grove was illegal. Here again, the idea seems to be to show who is master of the land.

Since the start of the second *intifāda*, the situation has grown much worse. More and more plots of land have been destroyed and more and more trees uprooted. In addition, Israel has been inflicting collective punishment. In the Gaza Strip alone, the Israeli army razed over 7,000 *dunum* between September 29, 2000 and February 14, 2001, of which 80% was under cultivation (Palestinian Center for Human Rights 2001). Human rights advocacy groups looking into these daily acts have noted that land destructions spike during harvest season.

Lastly, since June 2001, a 660 kilometer-long fence has kept Palestinians from entering Israel. In July 2004, the International Court of Justice in The Hague ruled against this

30. The report mentions the case of a settler who was sentenced to six months of community service after being found guilty of murdering an 11 year-old Palestinian child.
unilateral measure by the Israeli government. The fence is 8 meters in height and is bordered by a security area that extends up to 50 meters on each side, with 90% of it built on land seized from Palestinians and then deforested. In addition to radically changing the space, the fence prevents Palestinians from accessing their land and confines them to their towns and villages. Furthermore, on July 8, 2004, Ariel Sharon’s government quietly reinstated the 1950 Absentees’ Property Law, which legalized a rash of seizures without any compensation for land and buildings from which Palestinians had been cut off by the wall. On January 21, 2005, the daily Ha’Aretz quoted Meron Benvenisti as saying that half of East Jerusalem properties were subject to seizure.

In brief, the Hebrew State continues to territorialize Israeli history and identity through a combination of ideology and Zionist values, by making use of cartography and archeology, and via land development policies and other public and private practices, whether carried out through legal channels or by force. This process denies the legitimacy and even the existence of the Palestinian past, which has literally been wiped of the map. Clearly, land and landscapes are at the heart not only of the conflict but also of Palestinian and Israeli symbolic representations. As a backdrop to both peoples’ national identities, land and landscapes depend more on culture than on nature, since on both sides they serve as mediums between past and present, between memory and forgetfulness. Israeli symbols are inscribed in space as visible proof of possession, whereas Palestinian symbols are inscribed in their collective memory.

A paradox remains: in trying to erase all traces of the Palestinian past and to enconce its own legitimacy, Israel – with its roads, settlements, intensive farming, forests, and wall – has totally transformed the landscape. Nature no longer resembles the Jewish representations that were intended to express continuity between the biblical past and the present. In the words of Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman (2003, 92):

The very thing that renders the landscape “biblical” or “pastoral” – its traditional settlement patterns and its cultivation in terraces, olive orchards, stone buildings, and the presence of livestock – is produced by the Palestinians, whom the Jewish settlers came to replace. And yet the very people who cultivate the “green olive orchards” and render the landscape biblical are themselves excluded from the panorama. The Palestinians are there to produce the scenery and then disappear.

Bibliography


Abstract

Christine Pirinoli, *Effacing Palestine to Build Israel: The Changing Landscape and Deeply Entrenched National Identities*

State-building requires nationalizing a territory. In 1948, Israel began appropriating territory and reshaping its landscape in order to make it reflect Zionist identity and memory instead of Palestinian identity and memory. This paper looks at the history of the relationship between Israel and Palestine and exposes attempts to eradicate all symbols of Palestinians’ relationship to the land. It notes that trees are of particular strategic importance as they symbolize an identity’s roots in the land itself. Uprooting one identity in order to plant another has been the primary objective of many past and present Israeli policies.

Résumé

Christine Pirinoli, *Effacer la Palestine pour construire Israël. Transformation du paysage et enracinement des identités nationales*

La construction d’un État requiert la nationalisation du territoire. Dans le cas d’Israël, cette appropriation territoriale s’est caractérisée, depuis 1948, par un remodelage du paysage afin que ce dernier dénote l’identité et la mémoire sionistes tout en excluant l’identité et la mémoire palestiniennes. À travers un parcours historique, cet article examine la façon dont ce processus a éliminé tout ce qui, dans l’espace, exprimait la relation palestinienne à la terre. Parmi les stratégies utilisées, l’arbre revêt une importance particulière pour signifier l’identité enracinée dans le territoire : arracher l’une pour mieux (ré)implanter l’autre, tel semble être l’enjeu de nombreuses politiques, passées et présentes.