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ARTICLE

Material Memories: Narratives of the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict

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Abstract
Since 1948, the state of pervasive tension and mutual distrust that characterizes Israel/Palestine has produced both structural violence and resistance to occupation. This article analyzes people's everyday experiences of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict as well as their "material memories" to examine how historical memory and recurring interactions with objects and images inform the widespread tension, structural violence, and resistance of ordinary Israelis and Palestinians. Drawing on more than thirty interviews and hundreds of hours of participant-observation in Jerusalem and the West Bank, I suggest that divergent memories of brutal conflict, structural violence, and dehumanization shape the perceptions of Israelis and Palestinians and fuel everyday tension and mutual distrust. I also argue that individuals in Israel/Palestine employ objects and images as "material memories" to construct and recollect the near and distant past that both perpetuate and resist prevailing violence.

Keywords
Israel/Palestine, conflict, material memories, violence, resistance, tension

During my first week conducting fieldwork in Jerusalem in the summer of 2022,[1] my research assistant and I stopped to speak with three Palestinian men in the Muslim quarter of the Old City. Jerusalem Day had just passed, and one of the men was eager to share his experience. He said, "When the flag march happened, there were many problems here in the city. The settlers [Israeli nationalists] went inside many Palestinian homes in the Old City, and they entered my house, too. My wife and kids were in the kitchen. […] They drew the Israeli flag on the house door, and they wrote 'death for Arabs,' and they also had guns. Thank God my kids threw rocks at them from the roof. That's when they left."

My ethnographic research quickly taught me that even during times of supposed "peace" in Israel/Palestine, experiences of violent conflict never truly abate. The harassment this man and his family faced is not uncommon for Palestinians living in Jerusalem, although they are not the only ones who encounter unjust violence. Israeli civilians are also victims of the ongoing conflict. One Jewish American man recounted an experience walking through the Jewish Quarter with his friend when a Palestinian man approached them, visibly unsettled, holding a knife. Although the man did not attack the two Jewish men, the threat of violence left a mark: one of trauma, tension, and distrust. The Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the ongoing Israeli offensive have only further exacerbated trauma and tension in Israel/Palestine. Although this study is based on fieldwork I carried out in June and July 2022, I will briefly comment on the post-October 7 implications of my research in the conclusion of this article. Building on a month of participant-observation and more than thirty interviews conducted in Jerusalem and the West Bank, I argue that Israelis' and Palestinians' incommensurable memories of ancestry and past violence shape the two parties' perceptions of one another and fuel a pervasive sense

1 I want to extend my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Amy Allocco for her mentorship and encouragement throughout this two-and-a-half-year research project. I am especially grateful for Elon University's Ward Family Excellence in Mentoring Award, which allowed Dr. Allocco to join me in Jerusalem and the West Bank for an intensive fieldwork methods workshop. I am also indebted to Dr. Geoffrey Claussen, Dr. Sandy Marshall, and Dr. Brian Pennington for their support, guidance, and collective expertise. I want to extend a special thanks to Alissar Haddad and Rony Ohad for dedicating more than a month of their summers to provide critical assistance and contextual background for my fieldwork. This research would not have been possible without the generous support of Elon University's Multifaith Scholars and Elon College Fellows programs, as well as grants from the Summer Undergraduate Research Experience (SURE), Center for Research on Global Engagement (CRGE), and Rawls endowment at Elon University.

of tension and mutual distrust. As we shall see, while these perceptions and feelings have emboldened many Israelis to participate in systems of structural violence, there is also evidence of many Palestinians resisting Israeli occupation through both violent and nonviolent means. Drawing on personal narratives and storytelling related to objects and images, I emphasize less-told accounts of everyday life and experiences of the conflict in Israel/Palestine.

Diana Allan and co-contributors of *Voices of the Nakba* argue that tensions between Jews and Palestinians stem from British colonialism and the advancement of Zionist ideologies in the early twentieth century.[2] Prior Jewish-Arab relations were not free from violence, however. The 1834 massacres in Safed and Hebron, for example, are evidence that tensions erupted into violence on at least some occasions.[3] The Jewish, Christian, and Muslim residents of Ottoman-controlled Palestine primarily distanced themselves from politics, and these acts of violence were sporadic throughout the nineteenth century.[4] In the twentieth century, however, leaders and followers of the Zionist movement incorporated themes of chosenness, redemption, and messianism as represented in the Hebrew Bible in their beliefs that Jews constitute a national community,[5] not just a religious or ethnic one, and that the establishment of a Jewish state was the only possible antidote to antisemitism.[6] Since the founding of the modern nation-state

2 Diana Allan, ed., *Voices of the Nakba: A Living History of Palestine* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

3 Egyptian leaders assumed control over Palestine in the 1830s, imposing heavy taxes, requiring military conscription, and attempting to disarm the indigenous population. When predominantly Muslim peasants revolted against the Egyptian authorities on June 15, 1834, the uprising spread throughout Palestine. The uprising in Safed turned into violent rioting against the Jewish population, lasting 33 days, and Egyptian troops trying to contain the revolt in Hebron failed to distinguish between perpetrators and victims and attacked the Jewish community as well as the Muslims. Martin Sicker, *Reshaping Palestine: From Muhammad Ali to the British Mandate, 1831–1922* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1999), 12–13.

4 Ilan Pappe, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*, Second Edition (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 20.

5 While Zionism is often considered to be a secular movement, it is important to explore the relationship between messianism and nationalism in the Israeli context. Ammon Raz-Krakotzkin, "Religion and Nationalism in the Jewish and Zionist Context," in *When Politics Are Sacralized: Comparative Perspectives on Religious Claims and Nationalism*, ed. Nadim N. Rouhana and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 35.

6 Joel Beinin and Lisa Hajjar, "Palestine, Israel, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Primer," (Washington, DC: Middle East Research and Information Project, 2014),

of Israel in 1948, Palestinians have struggled to maintain their rights and identity, and many now exist outside the boundaries of law and citizenship because of their status and ethnicity.[7] Histories of ancestry in Israel/Palestine and memories of wars in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries dominate the way Israelis and Palestinians perceive themselves and one other. These mismatched histories and memories ultimately produce incommensurable positions: both Israelis and Palestinians regard themselves as the rightful inhabitants of Israel/Palestine and the other as perpetrators of violence bent on wrongfully exercising authority over the land. As such, a state of enduring tension and distrust has prevailed in Israel/Palestine since 1948.

In an effort to move beyond the metanarratives that dominate media coverage of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, I centered my research on alternative micro-narratives that find less representation in popular and political sources. Inspired by the stories of displaced Syrians recorded by Wendy Pearlman,[8] I sought to learn from ordinary human beings whose

2; Raz-Krakotzkin, "Religion and Nationalism in the Jewish and Zionist Context," 35.

7 Palestinians in refugee camps, the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel face varying degrees of discrimination under Israeli law as byproducts of their distinct geographic and political circumstances. Refugee camp residents displaced from Israel's 1948 borders currently face severe mobility and economic restrictions. Two of my interlocutors from the Balata refugee camp in Nablus, for example, characterized Balata as an "open-air prison" under Israeli and United Nations military control. My Palestinian interlocutors in the West Bank describe experiencing military law, limited autonomy, and restrictions of their ability to enter Israeli territory. The West Bank is divided into Areas A, B, and C, each marked by various levels or extents of Israeli control. Several of my interlocutors from Area A, which is supposed to be governed by the Palestinian Authority, note that they are still under the dominance of the Israeli military, which conducts raids every night. While my 2022 fieldwork was not conducted in Gaza and conditions there are therefore outside the scope of this article, Pearlman notes that many Palestinians in Gaza have little access to basic facilities for survival and are treated as less than human, with no rights under Israeli military siege. Palestinians who reside in Israel enjoy greater mobility, education, and economic opportunities but remain second-class citizens, facing racism, limited freedom of speech and assembly, and identification that marks them as non-Israeli. Nadera Shalhouh-Kevorkian, "Sacralized Politics: The Case of Occupied East Jerusalem." In *When Politics Are Sacralized: Comparative Perspectives on Religious Claims and Nationalism*, ed. Nadim N. Rouhana and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 141; Wendy Pearlman, *Occupied Voices: Stories of Everyday Life from the Second Intifada* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2003).

8 Wendy Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled* (New York: Custom House,

everyday lives are shaped by the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. An ethnographic approach enabled me, in the words of anthropologist of religion Alyssa Maldonado-Estrada, to "study humans who always talk back, who are always multidimensional, who can never simply fit the easily indictable or stock character of patriarch or villain."[9] Informed as it is by the countervailing narratives and material memories shared by dozens of Israelis and Palestinians, the complex portrait of Israel/Palestine that emerges here defies neat categorization.

Building on the work of Matthew Engelke, Arjun Appadurai, and Laura Levitt, I also analyze the material dimension of people's memories and experiences of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.[10] Engelke asserts that tangible objects are given importance by people and groups with competing interests and arguments.[11] I explore how Israelis and Palestinians accord value to various objects, aligning with their incommensurable experiences of violence in Israel/Palestine. Appadurai explains that "things have not been so divorced from the capacity of persons to act and the power of words to communicate,"[12] while Levitt demonstrates that profane objects "are transformed into talismans, offering a different form of doing justice and living on."[13] In the context of Israel/Palestine, objects and images provide an alternative mode of communication, offering what S. Brent Plate has called "visible, tangible, political, and personal clues that speak silently about who we are and to whom we belong."[14] Much as Kobi Peled suggests that objects can portray the past as embodiments of present desires, I propose that objects and images engaged by Israelis and Palestinians represent their ancestries in Israel/Palestine and their present desire to inhabit or re-inhabit the entire territory today.[15]

2017).

9 Alyssa Maldonado-Estrada, *Lifeblood of the Parish: Men and Catholic Devotion in Williamsburg, Brooklyn* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 18.

10 See Matthew Engelke, "Material Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert Orsi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 209–29; Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63; Laura Levitt, *The Objects That Remain* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2020).

11 Engelke, "Material Religion," 219.

12 Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," 4.

13 Levitt, *The Objects That Remain*, 33.

14 S. Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5 1/2 Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2014), 164.

15 See Kobi Peled, "Things That Matter: Nostalgic Objects in Palestinian Arab

Historical and Material Memories in Israel/Palestine

In this section, I outline how my interlocutors interact with historical and material memories in their everyday lives. Historical memory refers to "the ways in which groups, collectivities, and nations construct and identify with particular narratives about historical periods or events."[16] Historical memory is not, therefore, an objective historical record of a period or event but rather something that restructures the past, creating "its own version of historical time as it elaborates, condenses, omits, or conflates historical events."[17] Israelis and Palestinians hold contrasting historical memories regarding past events, and these memories shape their present perceptions of themselves and the other. On the one hand, the Israeli historical memory tends to focus on ancestral claims to the land of Israel and violent wars with their Arab neighbors. On the other, the Palestinian historical memory is shaped by their exile from Palestine in 1948 and the ongoing violence and dehumanization they face. As I heard and observed daily in Jerusalem, Israelis and Palestinians each perceive themselves as the victims of violence and war and the other as the perpetrators of conflict.

Yael Zerubavel contends that Zionists evaluate the past based on "the bond between the Jewish people and their ancient land."[18] This position was confirmed by Simon, an Israeli man who lives in the Eli settlement in the West Bank.[19] He described how children in Eli not only study the Torah and the Tanakh and read about figures like Joseph, but are also able to look outside their windows to see exactly where Joseph walked to check on his brothers. This perceived bond between the Jewish Israelis and their ancient land is further reinforced in their national identity. Zionist national consciousness is an interpretation of the fulfillment of the Jews' return to the land they know as Zion after years of exile and longing.[20] Laila, a French woman who has lived in Jerusalem for more than four decades, asserts that *Eretz Yisrael*, or the land of Israel, belongs to the Jewish people, and that while the Arabs who inhabited Israel/Palestine during the 2,000 years of

Homes in Israel," *Middle Eastern Studies* 53, no. 2 (2017): 233.

16 Katherine Hite, "Historical Memory," in *International Encyclopedia of Political Science* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2011), 2.

17 Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 9.

18 Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 15.

19 Per my IRB protocol, all names are pseudonyms.

20 Raz-Krakotzkin, "Religion and Nationalism in the Jewish and Zionist Context," 38.

Jewish exile cared for the land, it is not theirs. Where Laila's position that Arabs were merely tenants of the land is more extreme than that of many other Israelis, the premise that Israel/Palestine is the ancestral homeland for the Jewish people is the common assumption shared by many of my interlocutors. The invocation of the historical memory of Eretz Yisrael as the Jewish people's homeland advances the rationalization that Israeli Jews have the exclusive right to inhabit Israel/Palestine.

Many Israelis also draw on objects and images to support the historical memory of Eretz Yisrael and justify their claim to the land. For instance, one of my participants discussed a bottle of sand that his rabbi took after the Israeli government evicted Jewish settlers from Gush Katif, a Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip, due to intensifying violence by Palestinians in Gaza and efforts to make peace by Israel. This bottle of sand represents a past life now lost due to the ongoing conflict, and this "material memory" fuels his conviction to remain in and fight for the state of Israel. Likewise, Israel's abundant museum displays from archaeological projects—including remnants of temples, jewelry, clothes, and weapons from centuries-old civilizations—reinforce these memories and claims. Consistent with Engelke, these objects serve as vehicles for Israelis to communicate their past and present connection to the land of Israel.[21] By strategically deploying the materiality of the past, Israelis seek to demonstrate both the historical presence of Jews in, and their contemporary right to, this land.

Also rooted in Israeli historical memory are past violent events. Older generations of Jewish Israelis can recount their experiences of historical wars and conflicts, such as the war of independence in 1948, the Six-Day War in 1963, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, and the Intifadas; even younger Israelis describe hearing about and witnessing violence during the Gaza wars of 2008–2009, 2012, and 2014. In 1929, well before the establishment of the State of Israel, riots ensued across mandate Palestine; this was because of a combination of increasing Jewish immigration (which many Palestinians supported, before understanding that many Zionists wanted to transform Palestine into a Jewish state) and the murders of several Jews and Palestinians (as a result of tension between the Jewish settlers and Arab inhabitants). In his account of the 1929 riots, Hillel Cohen notes that these violent events shaped Zionists' perspectives of Arabs as savage people who thirst for Jewish blood.[22] Such memories of violence have remained with Israelis, and for many, it is all they know of their Arab neighbors. Thus, many Israelis view

21 Matthew Engelke, "Material Religion."

22 Hillel Cohen, *Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1929*, The Schusterman Series in Israel Studies (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2015), xii.

Arabs as enemies who want to kill them, and the idea that Israel is under constant threat of attack is a leitmotif of Israeli national consciousness.

In remembering the histories of war and violence, many Israelis possess patriotic objects that signify their loyalty to the state and their power and control over Israel/Palestine. The Israeli flag, which is present everywhere in Jerusalem, is one such material signifier. The Israeli flags that line the street from the Damascus Gate to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, for instance, serve as provocative visual assertions that this is Israeli territory. Additionally, many Israelis retain objects from their time in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), in which all Israelis are required to serve. Asher, a left-leaning Israeli who opposes the Israeli occupation, shared that he keeps the pin from the IDF brigade in which we served even though his ideas and opinions of the Israeli government and military have shifted measurably over time. Echoing the work of Appadurai, such objects become charged by their association with warfare and plunder, containing a certain intensity and hostility.[23] These charged mementos from past military experiences, like Asher's pin, serve as reminders of the violence endured during military service and may be transformed into the desire to defend and protect the state of Israel. Nationalistic objects like the Israeli flag and mementos from military service contribute to the loyalty to and pride in the Israeli state and may be invoked to display individual intentions to remain there and protect the state at all costs.

Similar to how Israelis employ historic claims to the land to justify their existence in Israel/Palestine, at the heart of the Palestinian experience are memories of centuries of habitation and successive expulsions by Israelis that generate feelings of dehumanization, threat, and trauma. Many Palestinians predicate their right to live in Israel/Palestine on the fact that their families have resided there for centuries. Omar, a Palestinian Bedouin living in East Jerusalem, emphasized that many of the present-day Israelis were not born in Israel/Palestine and instead trace their lineages to Europe, the United States, and elsewhere. However, Palestinians can trace generations of descendants to historic Palestine. Their connection to this ancestral homeland is a hallmark of the Palestinian experience, as one of Pearlman's interlocutors expresses in *Occupied Voices*: "There's not a single Palestinian that doesn't know where he's from."[24]

Intertwined with genealogical histories is the memory of the *Nakba*, or catastrophe. The Nakba refers to the displacement and death of hundreds

23 Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value."

24 Pearlman, *Occupied Voices: Stories of Everyday Life from the Second Intifada*, 88.

of thousands of Palestinians from historic Palestine in 1948 when the state of Israel was established. In *Voices of the Nakba*, Allan describes the Nakba as a continuing tragedy rather than a discrete historical event.[25] Rather than simply occurring once in 1948, many Palestinians view the Nakba as a violent reality that continues to unfold and shape everyday life. This idea of the Nakba as a sustained reality resonated with many of my Palestinian participants, who linked displacement and violence with the realities of the daily harassment and dehumanization they experience via checkpoints, interactions with the police, employment constraints, and so on. Considering these realities, many concur with Allan that the Nakba never truly ended. Indeed, the Nakba's ongoing legacy is manifested in Palestinians' continued displacement, the complex restrictions they face, and the prevailing culture of dehumanization.

Like Israelis, many Palestinians possess objects and images from their previous residence in and subsequent exile from Israel/Palestine. Of the material memories I encountered, some of the most powerful were the keys of Palestinians' former homes. During the Nakba in 1948, many Palestinians took their keys with them when they were evicted from their homes, never imagining they would not be able to return. These keys have been passed down through generations of Palestinian families even though their former dwellings are now either destroyed or inhabited by Israelis. My guide in Bethlehem explained that the key represents the right to return, *ḥaqq al-ʿauda*, and Palestinians throughout Israel/Palestine and the diaspora continue to cling to the image of the key as a symbol of their hopeful return more than seventy years later. The key is a representation of how objects, especially those that are traces of past harms, "bridge time and space, connecting past to present, before to after" for Palestinians who continue to experience the Nakba as an everyday reality.[26] Many Palestinians also possess maps of historic Palestine, including what is now Israel proper, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. These maps testify to the existence of the Palestinian state and represent present desires to (re)inhabit the entire territory. Additionally, many Palestinians own coins from the British Mandate period that corroborate the existence of an organized Palestinian community and represent the Palestinian cause. These objects and images are material memories that allow Palestinians to both nostalgically engage their past and epitomize their desired future.

25 Allan, *Voices of the Nakba,* 3.

26 Levitt, *The Objects That Remain,* 15.

Both Israelis and Palestinians acknowledge the two sides' asymmetrical military capabilities. In addition, most Palestinians consider the conflict an occupation rather than a war. In fact, Mustafa, a Palestinian student from East Jerusalem, stated, "When you look at it, we can't even call it a war. One side has all the technology, and the other is a weak group that has nothing: This is a one-sided attack."[27] Although many Palestinians attempt to resist Israeli occupation and the violent, humiliating, and traumatic conditions to which they are subjected, their ability to do so is severely constrained, and even small-scale resistance gets them cast as violent extremists or terrorists. Therefore, the clash between Israel's advanced capabilities and systemic violence and Palestinians' resistance to occupation produces an atmosphere of constant tension and mutual distrust.

Constant Tension and Mutual Distrust

While the historical and material memories of Israelis and Palestinians are inharmonious, what they do share is the view of themselves as the rightful inhabitants of Israel/Palestine and the other as the violent occupiers. There is always a threat of increasing violence, and Israelis and Palestinians each act in relation to their perceptions of imminent danger. Following Johan Galtung, here I highlight two categories of violence: structural violence, which is "built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances," and physical violence, which is characterized by harm being done to a physical body, sometimes to the point of killing.[28] In the cases of Israelis and Palestinians, their exercise of structural and physical violence is by nature unequal and uneven, and this asymmetry contributes to tension and mutual distrust.

One way that Israel attempts to protect its citizens is through a strong and disciplined military and police force. One of my Israeli interlocutors explained that "a very specific narrative about the Holocaust that the world is trying to destroy us […] and we'd never fit in" is used to incite young men and women to enlist in the military. The goal is to persuade them to, in his

27 Mustafa, and many other of my Palestinian interlocutors, are referring to the Palestinian Authority's and civilians' lack of capacity when they discuss asymmetrical military capabilities. The military capacity of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other militant organizations were not discussed by my Palestinian interlocutors in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

28 Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 170–71.

words, "protect the country because the country's fragile, and it can happen again." The Israeli government also displays military authority in other ways, such as through the presence of the border police in the Old City. Although these heavily armed officers are supposed to protect all citizens, many understand the border police as only interested in protecting Israelis. Jamal, a Palestinian shopkeeper in the Christian quarter, explained that if he were attacked, the police would respond slowly, if at all, while if an Israeli were attacked, the police would swiftly wreak havoc on the entire street. Many Israelis are ultimately taught to see themselves as the victims and encouraged to serve in the IDF to proactively protect their country, and it is through the actions of the military and border police that Israelis display their distrust and fear of attack.

Borders and checkpoints surfaced frequently in narratives I recorded from Palestinians. Many described being consistently pulled aside for extra questioning and security at the Ben Gurion Airport when entering Israel, while others recounted facing scrutiny at the checkpoints between Israel proper and the West Bank. One older woman shared the terrifying experience of being repeatedly searched at the Qalandia checkpoint by Israeli soldiers who falsely accused her of carrying a knife. She vowed to never venture through that crossing again. Many Israelis perceive Palestinians as a threat and thus remain constantly apprehensive about the possibility of a "terrorist attack."[29] For instance, one Israeli couple I met in Jerusalem described looking around public buses to ensure no one was acting suspiciously, and the woman said that she would not ride Jerusalem's light rail for months because her father declared it a "hotbed for terrorists." Given that many Israelis are fearful of Palestinians, they enlist a variety of militaristic measures to neutralize the Palestinian "threat" so that they can achieve relative safety in what they believe is their promised homeland.

In her account of post-Intifada experiences in the Palestinian territories, Pearlman notes that beyond the literal checkpoints, Israel exercises "checkpoints" over every aspect of Palestinians' lives.[30] Many

29 It cannot be disputed that some Palestinians have committed violent acts against Israeli civilians, although many Palestinians view these acts as the only recourse to defend their country. The Israeli government has, of course, also committed many violent acts against Palestinian citizens, but those are not categorized as "terrorism" because Israel is a state and Palestine technically is not. Many Israelis consider Palestinian militants to be terrorists, but I place "terrorist attack" in quotes here to indicate that this is an Israeli perspective that is not universally shared, particularly by Palestinians.

30 Pearlman, *Occupied Voices*, 207.

of the Palestinians with whom I tried to engage refused to speak to me because they feared surveillance, harassment, and even arrest by the Israeli police. Similar to Michel Foucault's idea of panopticism, Israel's looming presence renders Palestinians anxious to speak and unable to move freely.[31] Economic supremacy and is another kind of checkpoint that Israel uses to assert and enforce control over Palestinians. My interlocutors shared that throughout the Intifadas and the ongoing night raids by Israeli soldiers, the Israeli government continuously denies Palestinians the opportunity to economically sustain themselves. Intentional economic embargoes targeting the historic quarters of both Hebron and Bethlehem mean that today empty alleys and closed shop doors are the norm in areas that used to bustle with activity, while it is only a few years since shops have reopened in the Old City of Nablus. Given the dearth of economic opportunities, many Palestinian women turn to selling vegetables and other goods on roadsides while other Palestinians work for Israelis both in Israel proper and the occupied territories. Ahmad, a Muslim man who considers himself fortunate to work in his family's shop, observed that Palestinians provide cheap labor to build Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Even those who are lucky enough to own their own shops depend on income from Israeli customers since many Palestinians cannot afford to visit their stores. While working for the very people who perceive them as dangerous and threatening is not ideal, most Palestinians rely on Israelis for their economic survival.

Like Pearlman's interlocutor, Ibrahim, who describes feeling like he is treated like a bird in a cage, many of my participants framed their experiences of the occupation in animalistic terms.[32] Jamal, for example, observed that Israelis tend to treat Palestinians like cockroaches. According to him, Israelis do not care when they kill a cockroach for it means nothing to them, and there is no value in even remarking on it. Even when they kill a "big cockroach," like Shireen Abu Akleh (the Palestinian-American journalist who was assassinated by Israeli gunfire in 2022 while covering

31 In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault discusses the Panopticon prison structure. A large watchtower stands at the center of a cylindrical arrangement of cells. It is understood that the guards in the watchtower can see the prisoners, but the prisoners can never see the guards, thus instilling fear and self-policing among the prisoners. Like the Panopticon, the power and influence of the Israeli government is omnipresent in Israel/Palestine, existing and operating even at the microlevels of social relations. An awareness of its power exists, and the fear of the repercussions of surveillance shapes the actions, beliefs, and emotions of many Palestinians and even some Israelis. Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195–230.

32 Pearlman, *Occupied Voices*, 13.

the news in Jenin), a news story will cover it, and Israelis will talk about it briefly; but then the story dies and so does the memory of that cockroach. While the cockroach metaphor was unique to Jamal, others described being treated like animals and shared how this dehumanization contributes to a climate of distrust and discontent. Thus, even when it is not a time of overt violence, there exists profound tension between Palestinians and their Israeli neighbors.

The trauma that many Palestinians face due to Israeli violence adds to the atmosphere of hostility and suspicion that prevails throughout Israel/Palestine. About a week before the eighth anniversary of Mohammed Abu Khdeir's murder, my research assistant and I visited his family in East Jerusalem.[33] Mohammad was sixteen years old when he was kidnapped and murdered by three Israeli nationalists at Deir Yasin, the site of a brutal massacre of Palestinians in 1948. When I asked about the aftermath of Mohammed's death, his mother replied tearfully, "I don't trust Jewish people. I don't trust any kids with them after everything that has happened. All of us suffered mentally, many of my kids suffered from trauma of being kidnapped, we still take medications." Although the brutality of her son's murder meant that her story was one that gained global media attention, similarly tragic events in many other Palestinian families do not. One Palestinian man in the Old City began recounting the death of his son before turning away to wipe his eyes, unable to continue. Another Afro-Palestinian man stopped midway through the story of his imprisonment and abruptly changed the topic. Despite their deep-rooted trauma, many Palestinians refuse to leave, choosing instead to resist Israeli occupation by throwing rocks and exhibiting nationalistic objects and images.

Palestinians are restricted in how they can resist Israeli occupation, so objects and images serve as a "quiet, whispered dialogue" that seek to include their narratives and realities in the conflict's discursive space.[34] According to several of my interlocutors and my research assistant, Palestinians are prohibited from displaying their flag or gathering in large groups for any sort of event or protest. While walking through the Old City, I noticed intriguing stencils on the walls in Muslim neighborhoods. While none of them overtly portrayed the Palestinian flag, many depicted significant sites in Jerusalem like the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock in Palestinian colors: green, red, white, and black. More explicitly, I saw a stenciled painting on a sculpture in West Jerusalem stating "Save

33 I do not use a pseudonym for Mohammed Abu Khdeir because he is a public figure whose story received worldwide attention following his murder in 2014.

34 Peled, "Things That Matter," 238.

Masafer Yatta," a reference to the collection of rural, West Bank villages facing Israeli settler occupation. According to Levitt, objects and images share stories, offering a form of doing justice and resisting cycles of ongoing violence.[35] I understand these stencils as a visual strategy employed by Palestinians who wish to circumvent Israeli restrictions, resist the occupation, and assert their presence in Israel/Palestine. Whether stencils, keys, or coins, Palestinians deploy objects and images as material representations of their struggle against Israeli occupation, serving as a medium for resistance within a community that gives them little opportunity to express themselves.

Conclusion

On my final day in Jerusalem, I met my Israeli research assistant at Mount Herzl, a national cemetery for notable Jewish leaders such as Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism. After walking through the cemetery and museum, we made our way to the National Hall for Israel's Fallen, a memorial for soldiers who died defending the state of Israel, and walked up and down the spiral staircase, gazing at the thousands of dead soldiers' names engraved on the bricks. These bricks attest to the history of past violence and injustices targeting Jews in Israel/Palestine, serving as material memories that highlight the need to protect Israel from its enemies at all costs. These historical memories, engrained in Israeli national consciousness, contribute to the pervasive sense of tension and mutual distrust by emphasizing the defense of the state of Israel, and therefore, Israel's military authority over the entire people in the land of Israel/Palestine.

After my visit to Mount Herzl, I took a bus to the Jaffa Gate to interview a Palestinian man at the New Imperial Hotel. As he described how his family founded the hotel to house Palestinian refugees in 1948 as they were expelled from their homes, my gaze became fixed on the key displayed among the objects and images covering his office walls. Much as it does for other Palestinians, this key holds the memory of a long-lost, yet deeply desired, Palestine he yearns to return to. Just as the New Imperial Hotel defies the advances of Israeli nationalists who are attempting to seize it, Palestinians clutch their material memories close, resisting occupation and asserting their presence in Israel/Palestine. Mount Herzl and the New Imperial Hotel

35 Laura Levitt, "Objects, Trauma, Violence, and Loss: Telling Stories, Doing Justice," The Imminent Frame: Secularism, religion, and the public sphere, *Ruinations: Violence in These Times* (blog), August 14, 2024, https://tif.ssrc.org/2024/08/14/objects-trauma-violence-and-loss-telling-stories-doing-justice/.

are striking embodiments of contrasting historical memories of the events of 1948 and the continuing struggles over Israel/Palestine. While Israelis believe that they fought justly to preserve the Jewish homeland that they argue has been constantly threatened for thousands of years, Palestinians understand their actions as defending their own right to their ancestral homeland from which they are experiencing successive and ongoing waves of expulsion. These divergent memories are exceedingly relevant today as we attempt to comprehend the contradictory perceptions and narratives swirling around the ongoing (as of the publication of this article) war in Gaza post-October 7. While I hardly anticipated that the pervasive tension and mutual distrust that characterized Israel/Palestine at the close of my fieldwork period would erupt into such catastrophic violence, my conclusions are perhaps even more pertinent and significant today. Amid Israelis' and Palestinians' discordant perceptions and claims prior to and in the wake of October 7, personal narratives and material memories help us recognize how the trauma and tension in Israel/Palestine exploded in the brutal war in Gaza and how they can potentially be harnessed to make sense of Israeli/Palestinian relations in a post-October 7 world.

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