

Absent Monuments and Appropriated Memory Places: Palestinian Commemorative Spaces in Lebanon

Laleh Khalili, Columbia University (lk180@columbia.edu)

In this essay, I explore absent monuments and appropriated memory places for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and discuss the transformation of the use and meaning of these places over time and in response to the social and historical exigencies of the time. I first examine those memory-places wherein monuments are conspicuous for their absence. Here, the perceived danger of memory leads to the silencing of Palestinian narratives. Next, I write about Palestinian commemorative sites whose appropriation by non-Palestinian actors reveals the competing agendas of different political actors reflected in the ‘guardianship’ of a commemorative site.

The absence of monuments in places one would expect, –for example, on massacre sites– reveals extant contentions which silence particular commemorative narratives in the context of the uneasy post-civil war power relations in Lebanon. Tal al-Za’tar massacre occurred when in the early stages of the civil war, in 1976, the Phalange militias attempted to purge East Beirut of its Muslim citizens. With the aid of Syrian secret service, the Phalange placed the camp under siege for more than two months, and once the camp surrendered, they slaughtered at least 4,280 Palestinian and Lebanese camp residents.¹

Today, the land upon which the ruins of Tal al-Za’tar rest is being slowly developed. On one corner of the site, a chemical factory has been erected, during the construction of which, “dead houses” were excavated from the debris and the ruins.² The rest of the site is a field, wherein the only sign of former habitation are forlorn (and out of place) olive trees once belonging to the Palestinian households, and rubbish-strewn entryways to burnt-out bomb shelters. There are immediately apparent reasons for the neglect of the site and absence of any monuments therein: the camp site remains in the majority-Maronite East Beirut and is owned by the Maronite Patriarchate, and as post-war

reconstruction drives up real estate prices, the owners are reluctant to cede any land for purposes which may not generate revenue. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the continuing military presence of Syria in Lebanon partially explains why commemorations of Tal al-Za‘tar massacre –in which the Syrian security services were complicit– are muted and confined within the Palestinian community. Finally, commemoration of the civil war has been a generally contentious issue in the whole of Lebanon, where in the interest of an uneasy reconciliation, most sectarian leaders and former warriors would prefer the civil war forgotten. Even political groups sympathetic to the Palestinians, such as the Hizbullah, have quietly refused to commemorate the massacre, not only because it implicates their colleagues in parliaments and political meetings, but because it adds a dissenting voice to the narrative of Lebanese unity and victimisation by ‘outsiders.’ The precariousness of the Palestinian condition in Lebanon is such that they, as the most intimate of these ‘outsiders,’ cannot challenge the deliberate silencing of their past. Additionally, the Tal al-Za‘tar tragedy was followed in the next two decades by the Israeli invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon, the Sabra and Shatila massacres, and the War of the Camps, all of which only layered atrocity upon atrocity, such that the resources of the defeated, exiled, and dispersed Palestinian parastatal institutions could not meet the commemorative demands of the “remorselessly accumulating cemeteries.”³ As such the narrative of Tal al-Za‘tar is only told by its survivors, and the only modest physical monument to it is a cenotaph in the Martyrs’ Cemetery of Shatila.

But absence is not the only way that commemorative practices can be silenced. Appropriation of certain sites by other actors can similarly drive the Palestinian refugees’ to the backstage. Such is the case of the memorials of sort on the sites of Karantina massacre on one hand and Sabra and Shatila on the other hand. Over the razed remains of the Karantina shantytown, the radical Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury has built a macabre night-club through which he comments deliberately not only on

the massacre, but on the predicament of post-civil war Lebanon.

On 18 January 1976, as part of the Phalangist drive to purge East Beirut of its Muslim and/or Palestinian residents, the Maronite militiamen “razed the shantytown, killing 150 [to 500] inhabitants... and expelled those of its original 30,000 inhabitants who had not already fled to west Beirut.”⁴ The razed site was then used as the headquarters for the Phalange militia throughout the civil war. In the aftermath of the war, the site lay unused and rubble-strewn, surrounded by dense urban neighbourhoods until 1998, when Khoury was asked to design a nightclub on that tract. Khoury himself says that the site was one “which I did not choose, but had to confront.”⁵ The nightclub, BO18,⁶ is situated three and a half metres underground “to make it invisible like Karantina shantytown was made invisible” to the rest of the city by a high wall, and the building itself is shaped like a bunker, or alternatively, a coffin.⁷ Inside, the entry vestibule is divided from the rest of the club by a wall which is punctuated with small “sniper windows” that allow a one-sided voyeurism by the club clientele. The tables in the seating area are tombstone-shaped, with pictures of jazz singers on them as if commemorating the dead,⁸ and all have a small vase with a wilted flower built into the table and in front of the photograph. The seats which surround the tables are arranged to evoke seating at a wake. Khoury himself admits that he has appropriated the memory place of Palestinians, in order to provoke a debate about the history that the amnesiac society of Lebanon has chosen to neglect. The BO18 design is intended as a conversation with the public, as a controversial argument about memory and war, because “there are no public institutions for materialising this debate in architecture, and so one has to resort to ‘vulgar’ buildings such as bars or restaurants to speak about things that are being silenced.”⁹ Khoury uses the Palestinian place of memory and mourning as the backdrop for his own critical commentary on the political amnesia that has beset Lebanon and which prevents the country from addressing the very social ills that lay at the roots of the civil war. The ambiguity of using

private architecture to deal with public issues of political and moral accountability, not to mention the incongruity of using a pleasure palace to memorialise a massacre, all complicate the meaning and role of commemoration on the Maslakh-Karantina massacre site.

The Sabra and Shatila massacre is the only other massacre of Palestinians in Lebanon commemorated with a physical memorial on its site.¹⁰ On 14 September 1982, the head of the Phalange party and the newly elected President of Lebanon, Bashir Gemayel, was assassinated by a Syrian agent. Immediately thereafter, Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), its Phalange allies, and its proxy militia, the South Lebanese Army (SLA), invaded West Beirut. With the approval of Ariel Sharon, then Israeli Defence Minister, the IDF transported the Phalange and SLA militiamen to the camps, blocked entry to the area, and illuminated the camps at night by lighting flares continuously, while the militiamen whomever they could find in the two adjacent camps.¹¹ As the International Commission of Enquiry headed by Seán MacBride reported, “the precise number of deaths is impossible to ascertain. Many bodies were removed from the scene; others were placed in huge mass graves.”¹² The number of the dead is estimated to be between 1200 and 3000. The continuation of the civil war, as well as deliberate Israeli attempts to wipe out Palestinian archives, records, and documents resulted in the destruction of the majority of recorded testimonies from the massacre.¹³ The site of the mass grave was also similarly disregarded and destroyed: the plot of land which contained mass graves and destroyed houses was turned into a rubbish dump by the multitudes of street vendors who had taken over that corner of the camp and who only knew dimly about the significance of the site. In 1999, the Hizbullah-controlled Ghubayri municipality, which neighbours the camp, took over the maintenance of the site by building a wall around the mass grave and planting white roses and trees on the edges.¹⁴ The key to the site was given to a groundskeeper, himself related to many of the massacre victims.¹⁵ On the desolate and empty lot itself a small white cubicle of cement-blocks about 50 cm in height

stands as the only memorial to the hundreds of bodies buried therein. Hizbullah has also festooned the place with banners bearing anti-Zionist and anti-American slogans in English. On the twentieth anniversary of the massacres on 17 September 2002, a memorial ceremony was held by Hizbullah (which had taken control of the commemorative events) on the site, and the ceremony –much like the massacre site itself– was used by Hizbullah to promote its own political agenda. Thousands of Palestinians, Lebanese, and European expatriates had joined the memorial march that ended at the site, but once the Palestinians discovered to their horror that Hizbullah had invited a parliamentarian from Amal –an implacable foe of the Palestinians in the 1980s– to speak, many of the Palestinians left the ceremonies. A Palestinian woman from Shatila asked rhetorically, “Why should I stay and listen to an Amal politician tell *me* about Sabra and Shatila, when his party was the one who massacred my family in the War of the Camps?” The appropriation of the Palestinian massacre site has transformed it into a transnational memorial that serves the political purpose of Hizbullah in reaching both a foreign audience (as evidenced by the English-language banner hung at the site) and in reconciling with its sometime-rival party, Amal, by joining it in commemorative ceremonies. This appropriation also occurs because of the overlaying and polysemic nature of collective identities and narratives which allow a Palestinian memorial to become a memorial of violence against *all Arabs* (as the Hizbullah banner on the site proclaims). The lack of specificity of commemoration, of names or nationalities of (or even complete knowledge about) the dead, allows for the event to become ‘public’ and generalised allowing many audiences and publics to assume the commemorated suffering as their own.

Here, I have discussed the way memorialisation or absence thereof reveals contentious social interactions that shift with differing contexts and power relations. Although monuments intend to freeze-frame life and death during wartime these deaths and lives are subjected to the constant political and interpretative contestations which continue precisely because the Palestinian national project is

incomplete, the fate of the refugees is uncertain, and in the state-building process, lines of fissure continue to appear. Palestinian *national* narrative has been contested, appropriated and silenced by non-Palestinian groups in Lebanon, where the absence of monuments in some massacre sites, and the appropriation of memory places in others, attest to the complex web of relations between Palestinians and other political groups in Lebanon. Who owns the histories and memories of the Palestinian dead buried in Lebanese soil? Any response to this question will continue to be contested and reinterpreted in the unfolding drama of Palestinian political contention.

¹ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 401. The best extended account of Tal al-Za'tar siege and massacre in English is still the semi-fictional novel by Liana Badr based on survivor testimonies. See Liana Badr, *The Eye of the Mirror*, trans. by Samira Kawar (Reading: Garnet Publishing Inc, 1991). For other accounts see Ali Husayn Khalaf, *Al-Nuhud Marra Ukhra: Shihadat Waqi'iyya min Tal al-Za'tar (Another Restoration: Eyewitness Testimonies from Tal al-Za'tar)* (Beirut: PLO Research Centre, 1977); Hani Mindis, "Al-Tariq ila Tal al-Za'tar" ("The Way to Tal al-Za'tar") *Shu'un al-Filistiniyya* 59 (1976), 6-30.

² Nasri Hajjaj, interview by author, Beirut, Lebanon, 5 May 2002.

³ Anderson, *Imagined Community*, 206.

⁴ Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, 376.

⁵ Bernard Khoury, "Urban or Artefact", talk given at American University of Beirut, 8 May 2002.

⁶ The name of the nightclub derives from the address a small studio in East Beirut had, where the club's owner, Naji Jibrán, resided during the civil war.

⁷ Khoury, "Urban or Artefact".

⁸ These photographs "echo [the photographs of the dead] found at monuments like Qana" where over 100 civilians were slaughtered in a clearly marked United Nations shelter during Israel's Grapes of Wrath operation in 1996. Jim Quilty and Tiare Rath, "Dueling architects debate reconstruction," *Daily Star*, 10 May 2002, 10.

⁹ Bernard Khoury, interview by author, Beirut, Lebanon, 13 May 2002.

¹⁰ Oral testimony and committee research about Sabra and Shatila massacres are more numerous than similar documents about other massacres perpetrated against Palestinians in Lebanon. See Ang Swee Chai, *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (London: Grafton, 1989); *The Beirut Massacre: Press Profile*, 2nd ed. (New York: Claremont Research and Publications, 1983); Jean Genet, "Four Hours in Shatila" in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 12 (1983), 3-22; Bayan Nuayhad Al-Hut, "Sabra wa Shatila 1982: Iqtiham Mustashfa 'Akka" ("Sabra and Shatila 1982: Storming Akka Hospital") in *Majalla Dirasat al-Filistiniyya* 52 (2002), 109-128; as well as her monumental collection of oral histories in *Sabra wa Shatila: Aylul 1982* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2003); Amnon Kapeliouk, *Sabra and Shatila: Inquiry Into a Massacre* (Belmont, MA: Association of Arab-American University Graduates Inc, 1983); Seán MacBride, et al eds., *Israel in Lebanon: The Report of the International Commission to enquire into reported violations of International Law by Israel during its invasion of the Lebanon* (London: The International Commission, 1983); Leila Shahid, "The Sabra and Shatila Massacres: Eye-Witness Reports" with an introduction by Linda Butler in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32 (2002): 36-58; Zakaria al-Shaikh, "Sabra and Shatila 1982: Resisting the Massacre" in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 14 (1984), 57-90;

Ellen Siegel, "Inside and Outside the Hospital, People Were Screaming: 'Haddad, *Kataeb*, Israel –Massacre," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 12 (1983), 61-71.

¹¹ Though the majority of those murdered were Palestinian, numerous Lebanese families and even nine elderly Jewish women married to Palestinians were among those slaughtered (Kapeliouk, *Sabra and Shatila*, 31-32).

¹² MacBride, *Israel in Lebanon*, 176.

¹³ "Twenty Lebanese and Palestinian women volunteers worked tirelessly for three months under clandestine conditions recording some 300 eyewitness accounts of the massacre. On February 5, 1983 a car bomb gutted six stories of the [PLO] Research Center building [in Beirut] killing 18 people and wounding 95.... [M]ost of the interviews were lost or destroyed" (Mark Garfield, "Recent Books" in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8 (1984), 102).

¹⁴ Hizbullah's backing for the Palestinian refugees and the camps results from a complex set of motives. Among these are genuine solidarity with the Palestinian cause, shared animosity towards Israeli militarism, a history of military training together with the Palestinians, as well as the internal politics of Lebanon which often pits Hizbullah in competition with Amal for Shi'a (and the poor in general) support and against the politically established leaders of other sectarian groups. Hizbullah support for the camps when they were besieged by Amal in mid-1980s and in the contemporary sectarian political skirmishes of Lebanon, as well as Hizbullah's successful resistance against Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon garner reciprocal respect and support from the Palestinians in the camps.

¹⁵ The groundskeeper is a southern Lebanese Shi'a who was displaced by the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. He belongs to the Miqdadi family, who lost 38 members in the Sabra and Shatila massacres. See Rabab Abdulhadi, "Where Is Home? Fragmented Lives, Border Crossings, and the Politics of Exile" in *Radical History* 86 (2003), 98.