

**Contesting the State: The history of a massacre memorial**  
**By Lucia Volk**  
**San Francisco State University**

**Presented at The New School of Social Research**  
**April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2004**

Theories about the transformation of state power in the age of globalization have been quite prominent in recent years. Anthropologists like Appadurai (1996), Ong (1999) and Tsing (2000), have pointed to porous borders and refugee flows, weakened state control over economic decision making, or the formation of supernational institutions that limit national sovereignties. At the same time, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, over 22 new states have been added to our maps (Aretxaga 2003: 394). The specters of ethnic nationalism have challenged existing political boundaries, however, only to replace them with newer and fiercer blood lines. What seems clear is that states of the old international relations theories have disappeared. But there is no consensus on what has taken their place. In the Middle East, states and their boundaries have been contested since colonial times, because it was French and British powers who, for the most part, determined the outlines of our existing maps. In the particular case of Lebanon and Syria, the Ottoman Empire created two “vilayets” or provinces of Syria and Beirut [comprised of coastal towns from Latakia (present day Syria) to Haifa (present day Israel)], which the French reshaped into distinct national entities after World War I. The Christian population of Lebanon, in particular the Maronites, favored the split, while the Muslim population, especially the Sunni notables of the cities, opposed their being severed from the Muslim hinterland (Beydoun 1993: 13).

Yet, while there are historical border contestations throughout the Middle East, it does not mean that borders are fluid, as anyone who has ever attempted to cross any borders in the region will be able to attest. Border crossings are protracted affairs that involve elaborate rituals between the travelers and the custom officials. If governments feel insecure in their borders, they will be extremely vigilant. It is trouble in the borderlands, in this case the Lebanese southern borderlands, that gives rise to “fictitious” or political “states of emergency” (Agamben n.d.). Lebanon has pointed to Israel as perpetual threat to its security, especially after Israel occupied 15% of Lebanon’s territory along the southern border after Operation Litani in 1978. [Prime Minister Barak decided to withdraw Israeli forces from Lebanon in May of 2000.] Mirroring this political discourse, Israel cited its own security concerns for its border towns and claimed a state of emergency to justify its military occupation.

In both cases, the states used the argument of “national [in]security” in the border regions to justify violent means of occupation and resistance, silencing dissent among their populations, and avoiding internal reforms. During a protracted 16-year long civil war (1975-1991) that led to the disintegration of the Lebanese army and the loss of credibility of its political institutions, Lebanon became twice occupied, by Syrians in the north and West and Israelis in the South.<sup>1</sup> The South became a zone of lawlessness, where Lebanese government control ceased to function, and Israeli military and local guerrilla fighters, grouped together under the name *al-muqawama al-lubnaniyah* (the Lebanese Resistance) fought for control. While mostly consisting of local, Muslim fighters, the Lebanese Resistance called their movement one of *national* liberation – they

---

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the history as well as the political and economic implications of the Israeli control of the South, consult the Spring 1998 issue of The Lebanon Report. There is no equivalent report on the effects of the Syrian occupation that I know of.

became an unofficial extension of the state. It was the first unified national project of the Lebanese after the civil war. It is the commemoration of a massacre site in the South to which I will now turn, in order to illustrate how a state of emergency can both support and subvert the state.

The village of Qana is situated in the South of Lebanon, about a two-hour's drive from Beirut [show slide- map of Lebanon]. In April of 1996, after months of escalating attacks along Lebanon's border with Israel, the Israeli army launched Operation "Grapes of Wrath" to rid the area of its "terrorist infrastructure" which it had been trying to do since 1978, when its soldiers began to occupy South Lebanon as a so-called "security zone". During the entire Operation "Grapes of Wrath", about 500,000 civilians were displaced from the south and moved north to the capital.<sup>2</sup> On April 18<sup>th</sup>, Israeli helicopter gunships fired repeatedly into a United Nations compound, staffed with Fijian soldiers, and housing over a hundred local refugees, mostly old people, women and children. 102 [or 106, depending on the source] people were killed during the attack. The Israeli army later launched an inquiry and found that the attack had been a mistake, but ultimately unavoidable in a conflict that pitted guerrilla fighters who sought shelter in civilian areas against their army. The Lebanese government argued that the Israeli military had precise intelligence of who was in the compound, and that they wanted to create terror and fear among them and incite civilians to leave the area.

---

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed information about the costs and effects of "Grapes of Wrath" on Lebanon, consult the Summer 1996 issue of The Lebanon Report.

Right after the attack, local residents and the Fijian UN soldiers on site created a relatively modest, but moving graveyard memorial [show slide – original memorial]. The memorial site is a square roughly 20 meters by 20 meters, filled with 14 rows of white and black marble grave markers. The back of the square was covered with make shift banners, the kind you would take to a street protest, heavily inscribed with political commentary. The two faces that smiled beatifically onto the visitors – somewhat out of place for such a grave site – were the Speaker of the Lebanese parliament, Nabih Berrih, a former militia leader and current leader of Amal, a Shiite political party, and Amal’s former spiritual guide, Imam Musa Sadr. This site was constructed with the financial support of the Council of the South, *al-Majlis-al-Janoub*, which was created in 1978 at the prodding of Imam Musa Sadr who accused the government in Beirut of forsaking its southern citizens who suffered from ongoing hostilities between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian liberation fighters. The Council of the South receives its funding from the government, but spending decisions are almost entirely made by Nabih Berri. In Qana, the victims were buried in a mass grave, yet the individuals were made visible by photos, notes or flowers in small glass shrines.

While the site was unmistakably authored by a Shiite political organization, and contained many Islamic references, it can be argued that Qana is a *national* site, representative of the state. Different texts around the graveyard carefully address Muslims *and* Christians in an attempt to transcend religious differences and to speak to and for all Lebanese. The banner on the top right of the memorial reads: *ard ruiat bidama’ a-shuhada ua taqadasat bimirur alinbi’a*, “This earth has been watered/drenched with the bloods (sic) of martyrs and it has been made sacred by the

passing of the prophets” – which is a reference to Qana’s role in the New Testament: Jesus is said to have changed water into wine at a wedding in Qana – this village lays claim to being that sacred site. Qana was made a holy by Jesus’ visit, and now it is made holy through the martyrs’ blood, most of whom were Muslim. Note also that *ard* has very nationalist connotations in Arabic. The second banner to the left reads: *Qana thalith al-haramayn*, Qana is the third of Islam’s holy sites (the first two being Mekka and Medina). Customarily, the third of the *haramayn* refers to Jerusalem, specifically the Dome of the Rock on the temple mount. If Amal claims the status of Jerusalem for Qana, that again blends Muslim and Christian geography. Thirdly, on a marble plate [show slide of poem] in front of the rows of graves, visitors can read a poem by Wahib ‘Ajami. Entitled “Qana”, the poem begins with the image of Jesus crying for Qana’s children, and calling for prayer (the “azan” call to prayer in mosque) – and in the second part, it mentions Mohammad who rings the church bells at dawn and declares that the time of liberation has arrived. In the middle, the poem contains graphic references to mutilated children [“father, our hands are have been eaten”] In the end, it reads “Martyrdom and my south have been wed, and the *god of the universe* [not any particular god] performed the ceremony – the lands are ours, Lebanon is ours”.

And of course, there is the Lebanese national symbol, the cedar tree [show slide of tree], uncharacteristically white, with red stains representing blood. The nation is injured, its innocent citizens are killed and neither the United Nations – representative of the world at large – nor the Lebanese government were able to protect them.

The next and last sign is more graphic. [slide of photos of corpses] Framed above by a banners that reads “From Karbala to Qana, it is a continuous revolution...” making

reference to the religious martyrdom of Ali's son Husayn in the Iraqi town of Karbala in 680AD] and a bottom banner that reads: ["Martyrs of the War Operation Grapes of Wrath – a site of the massacre of the nation of terrorism, Israel, with the support and the weapons of the United States], the visitor encounters a series of photos of victims on the day of the attack. The photos show mutilated and burnt bodies, blood stains on the ground, corpses lying in disarray. The photos are so graphic that one does not want to look closely. Presenting them publicly is an act of unburying the dead. It is these photographs that are widely circulated today, in pamphlets and brochures printed and handed out by the government (Lebanese Ministry of Information 2000) or sold to tourists at the Qana site (Al-Ansari n.d.). Lebanese can see these images on television and on video screens erected in schools and university campuses on Qana Memorial Day (March 18). TV stations in Lebanon are government owned and censored, in other words, media coverage corresponds to government views. Hayden has argued that commemorating massacres are one of the most powerful "weapons for building nationalism" (1994:172). Lebanon's post-civil war government used Qana imagery in this way in its reconstruction efforts.

Yet, the meanings that get created in the repeated viewing of the corpses that, discursively, are not allowed to die, are ambiguous. Commemorating injury at this massacre memorial re-inscribes discursively the power differential between Lebanon and its Southern neighbor. The Lebanese state has to concede its inability to protect its citizens from attack. And then, in the year 2000, the memorial landscape was fundamentally changed. In a grand ceremony on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2000, [show slide of Museum/Monument] Nabih Berrih, in company of the General Secretary of the Syrian

Baath Party, inaugurated a Syrian sponsored Memorial Plaza, Monument and Hospital in the village. The Memorial Plaza and Monument were adjacent to the original Memorial, which was now entirely black and white and devoid of signs, photos, flowers or any other personal markers of grief. The site had become monumental, reflection of state power – only it was Syria’s, not Lebanon’s power.

The Syrian government took the initiative to claim commemorative authority in Qana. When I went to see the mayor of Qana to ask why this was now a Syrian, and not a Lebanese site, I heard from locals in the mayor’s office that the government in Beirut does not really care about the South. They should have build something, but they didn’t. So when Syrian architects offered to do it, why should they refuse? (personal interviews, June 2003). Several houses had to be evacuated next to the old memorial to make room for the new construction, and I was told that the owners had been compensated. The Syrian architects decided to take down the individual photographs on the graves, as well as the cedar tree and the banners. However, the photo wall of injured bodies was preserved in an exhibit room in the Museum, which is otherwise filled with paintings that describe themes of oppression and war. The outside Plaza commemorates the names of each victim on a plaque, which resembles war memorials that list the names of soldiers. Private citizens were turned into subjects of “the state”, the heroic/monumental giving new meaning to the narrative of the events of 1996.

If, as Donnan and Wilson claim, borderlands are “the signs of the sovereignty and domain of the state,” the Lebanese state has been weakened by the Syrian intervention (2001: 14). I have yet to find official Lebanese commentary on the Syrian rebuilding of what one was a Lebanese site, imbued with markers of national, cross-sectarian resistance

against a common enemy. While Israel is certainly still the enemy, Syrian authorship at the site, and the eradication of the Lebanese commentary, turns the borderland into contested territory again. Israel did withdraw its troops and thereby ended its claim over the South of Lebanon, but the Lebanese state did not regain its sovereignty. The Syrian monument, and its symbolic power, is there to stay. In this way, the Qana massacre will continue to remind the Lebanese government of its limits and question its sovereignty, which is, I assume, precisely what the Syrian government had in mind.

## Bibliography

- Agamben, Giorgio  
n.d. The State of Emergency. Lecture given at Centre Roland-Barthes, Université Paris VII. Electronic Document. <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpagambenschmitt.htm>, accessed April 5, 2004.
- Al-Ansari, Hamid Majid  
n.d. Qana al-jalil wa akhuatuha fi al-madi wa al-hadr/ Qana and her sisters in the past and the present. Beirut: ?.
- Appadurai, Arjun  
1996 *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Aretxaga, Begoña  
Maddening States. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32: 393-410.
- Beydoun, Ahmad  
1993: L'identité des Libanais. In *Le Liban aujourd'hui*. F. Kiwan, ed. Pp. 13-30. Paris: CNRS Éditions.
- Hayden, Robert M.  
1994 *Recounting the Dead: The rediscovery and redefinition of wartime massacres in late- and post-communist Yugoslavia*. In *Memory, History and Opposition under State Socialism*. R. S. Watson, ed. Pp. 167-184. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Lavie, Smadar  
1992 *Blow-Ups in the Borderzones: Third World Israeli authors' gropings for home*. *New Foundations* 18: 84-106.
- Lebanese Ministry of Information  
2000 *Al-Irhab al-Israili fi sajl al-murasileen/Israeli Terrorism in the Correspondents' Record*. Beirut: Dar Bilal.
- Ong, Aihwa  
1999 *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Tsing, Anna  
2000 *The Global Situation*. *Cultural Anthropology* 15:327-360.