

Hiroshima, al-Nakba: Markers of New Hegemonies

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I would like to begin on a personal note that explains why I was eager to take the opportunity to speak about Hiroshima and Al-Nakba together, in Hiroshima (December 2008). In August 1945 when the A-bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki occurred, I had just left school and was about to enter university. The suffering and destruction caused by this first use of thermo-nuclear bombing horrified me. I was at an age when feelings are deep, and when lasting political dispositions are often taken. The memory of the bombings stayed with me both as permanent horror, and as a prod towards political action. The reactions of the British public to the bombings were also alienating: they expressed either indifference to, or satisfaction in the destruction caused by the A-bomb. The name given to the Hiroshima bomb——‘Little Boy’——also struck me as particularly obscene, and as signifier of a culture that I did not want to belong to. Surely this moment of shock drew my life away from my home country, Britain, towards the Arab region, and later into research work among Palestinian refugees, for whom Al-Nakba (the Catastrophe) was the beginning of a life of exclusion and suffering. I tell this anecdote because it offers an illustration of the linking of trauma and memory, the personal and the political, and the self to others.

At first sight it appears impossible to connect Hiroshima/Nagasaki to Al-Nakba in any common-sense or analytical way, whether by region, or common aggressor, or political framework. The differences are obvious: in a single blinding moment in Hiroshima 70,000 people were killed, and 90% of all buildings were destroyed or irreparably damaged; another 70,000 died within five years.¹ Al-Nakba on the other hand is a long process of eviction that began before 1948, continues up to the present day, and threatens to continue into the future. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan remained a nation-state in an internationally-recognized territory, even though under military occupation. In contrast, through Al-Nakba, Palestinian independence and sovereignty promised by the British Mandate was aborted, the name Palestine was erased from the map, and the Palestinian people were made to disappear under labels such as ‘the Arab refugees,’ or ‘the Arab minority’ in Israel. Indeed, misrepresentation has been a primordial feature of Al-Nakba from the beginning. The intervention of the Arab states in Palestine after British evacuation made them appear as the aggressors, and the Palestinians as mere victims of ‘collateral damage’; the extent to which the expulsions were

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¹ For details see the Hiroshima Peace Memorial website http://www.pcf.city.hiroshima.jp/top_e.html also http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki.

planned by the Zionist leadership remained hidden until recently.

The atom bomb drew instant media attention because of its unprecedented nature and intrinsic horror. Journalists managed to report the devastation and after-effects of radio-activity in spite of US censorship.² The Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombings have, moreover, given rise to an enormous and extremely varied local international literature——journalistic, political, historical, medical, moral, poetic, fictional, cinematic, socio-cultural, popular——a literature that has not stopped growing. Each annual commemoration renews controversy over whether the A-bombings were ‘necessary’ to end the war. A Google search under the heading ‘Hiroshima’ brings up nearly 14 million hits. With Al-Nakba on the other hand, research and publication hardly began until the mid-1970s, and the subject has remained little studied outside the circle of Middle East scholars. It is only recently that books about Al-Nakba have begun to be published in Western countries, indicating a slight lifting of the international black-out that has suppressed this topic for so long.³ Other obstacles to research and writing about Palestinian history have been the loss of national archives in 1948; Israeli attacks on Palestinian research and administrative centres (Beirut 1982; Ramallah 2002); the dispersion of scholars, host state surveillance; and the ‘on-going Nakba’ as Palestinian term their continuing crisis.

In terms of symbolic role, Hiroshima rapidly became a focus of anti-war and anti-nuclear campaigning, a place of pilgrimage for Japanese and international peace activists. The first public rally was held a year after the bombing, on August 5, 1946, and the first official Peace Memorial Ceremony in 1947. By 1955 the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and Park were ready to be inaugurated. Hiroshima has become a world educational centre that receives 1.4 million visitors a year. While some scholars have criticized the Hiroshima commemoration as a nationalist veil to cover imperial Japanese aggression in China and Korea,⁴ the speed of its initiation means that it can also be viewed as a ‘localist’ protest against the central government’s war policies.

Whereas Hiroshima/Nagasaki as sites evoke an historic war crime, ‘Al-Nakba’ meant the loss of any site that could be taken as representing the national collectivity, or the uprooting from Palestine, though the refugee camps constitute a physical memorial to Al-Nakba, symbolizing the absence of Palestine. Palestinian loss of a single centre to focus and organize collective memory has had an effect on the way Al-Nakba was and is commemorated. Up to now its commemorations have always been variable in place, message, form, participation, and even date. This absence of centralization has delayed the formulation of a single coherent, international message; the marches, rallies, exhibitions and symposia commemorating

² See [Goodman, A. and D. Goodman 2005]. On <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0805-20.htm>.

³ Eg. [Masalha 2005; Sa’di and Abu-Lughod 2007].

⁴ Eg. [Giamo 2003].

Al-Nakba are rarely attended by any but Palestinian participants. The Palestinian national movement has yet fully to link the specific injustice suffered by the Palestinians to a world order that produces injustice. They thus tend to emphasize the specificity of Al-Nakba rather than link it to other cases of settler colonialism, or develop its resonance for other peoples.⁵

The differences between Hiroshima and Al-Nakba that I have listed here could easily be dismissed as the difference between a ‘big’ and a ‘small’ historical event. But this would be mistaken on at least three grounds: it would assume that war crimes and tragedies are comparable on a scale of magnitude; it would assume that the effects for the victims do not matter in the same way as the events themselves; and it would overlook the long term results of the establishment of Israel for regional and world politics. These assumptions are surely an error introduced into history-writing by Eurocentrism. I intend therefore in the main section of my paper to highlight the commonalities between Hiroshima and Al-Nakba, which I locate in the exercise of ‘exceptionalism’ on the part of both the United States and the Zionist movement/Israeli state. I first define exceptionalism, point to its origins and characteristics, and show how these are manifested by the two nation-states in question. I then re-view Hiroshima/Nagasaki and Al-Nakba as demonstrating exceptionalism in action. Finally, in conclusion, I discuss the politics of commemorating disasters.

Origins and Manifestations of Exceptionalism

Use of the term exceptionalism to describe nation-state politics has so far been confined to the United States, where the idea of an essential national ‘difference’ was first planted by Protestant settlers in the 16th century, and developed by historians and politicians to the point of becoming a deeply held idea, or ‘para-ideology’.⁶ A lively debate among American historians has centered around the question whether American exceptionalism is real or imaginary;⁷ yet within the perspective of international politics this point matters less than the fact that belief in American exceptionalism on the part of politicians and publics has sustained US expansionist and aggressive actions up to today. Taking the United States as a nation-state that believes in its own exceptionalism we find a set of characteristics that form an ‘ideal-type’ in international politics. No single one of these characteristics is unique to

⁵ Palestinian scholar Elie Sanbar describes the reaction of Palestinians to expulsion in a way that explains their introversion: “to rescue their land [...] the refugees would gamble everything on taking it with them, gradually becoming the temporary replacement of their homeland [...] they would live as if they were everything —Palestine and Palestinians, a people and its land” [Sanbar 2001: 90].

⁶ “Like ideologies and religions [...] ‘para-ideologies’ have a stabilizing function in society and normally operate to the benefit of the dominant class or group.” “The theme of American exceptionalism is ‘para-ideological’ because it is a crystallization of a set of related ideas which explain the world and the US role therein” [McEvoy-Levy 2001: 20, 23].

⁷ See [Rodgers 1998] for a useful discussion of ‘exceptionalism’ in American historiography, and a robust critique of its reality.

the USA but their combination marks a special case. First among these is a collective self-concept as intrinsically righteous, as ‘chosen’ (whether by God or history) to be leader among nations, and therefore unaccountable to other peoples.⁸ A second and central characteristic of exceptionalism is racism, based in the formation of the national self-image against others conceived as sub-human, primitive, outside the pale of ‘civilization’, from which develops a racism that changes its object over time but not its potential for generating violence. Third, bellicosity, expansionism, and a militarism that places a premium on science, planning, and ‘advance’ in terms of technologies of destruction. A fourth characteristic of exceptionalism is evasion or denial of international law and custom. Fifth, exceptionalism as ‘para-ideology’ forms a consensus between ruling elites and publics supporting an expansionist foreign policy, propagated through political discourse, national ceremonies, and media.

Finally, through leading to a neglect of alternatives to aggressive action——‘the path not taken’——exceptionalism has highly negative consequences for international order. Violence is chosen over negotiation because it fits the military mind set of ruling elites, and because an exceptionalist state possesses the military power (weaponry, trained forces), the popular support, and the diplomatic alliances needed to achieve success. It thus enjoys a degree of impunity that allows it to carry out aggression with minimal fear of being called to account.

American exceptionalism had its original basis in the Protestant settlers’ sense of divine mission.⁹ Two sets of others formed the original basis of the American self-image: the decadent Europe that the settlers were escaping from, and the indigenous people of the ‘New World’, ‘savages’, whom the incoming settlers drove out and massacred, appropriating their land in the name of progress. From its settler beginnings the American self-concept developed as model to a series of ‘inferiors’: from America’s indigenous peoples to African slaves imported for plantation labour, to white immigrants from the poorer European countries, to the rest of the ‘non-white’ world, whether inside or outside the US. All territories that America has attacked or occupied since its foundation have been Third World countries.

⁸ McEvoy-Levy explains the world leadership idea as developing out of America’s expansion and growing power in the mid-19th century. Quoting from a senate speech in 1900, he writes, “Taken to its extreme, the ‘manifest destiny’ belief became a mystical statement of racial destiny idea of ‘manifest destiny.’ The United States’ place was at the ‘head of the constructing and redeeming nations of the earth; otherwise the world would disintegrate into barbarism and night” [McEvoy-Levy 2001: 25]. The world leadership theme is often evoked by American politicians.

⁹ “That the United States is a chosen nation is an old and foundational idea of American nationalism and a commonplace of American religious historiography. [The] phrase for the place of the United States among nations——“a city on a hill”——comes from Governor John Winthrop’s sermon, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” delivered in 1630 on board the *Arabella* to the small band of English Puritans en route across the North Atlantic towards the coast of New England. Winthrop was explaining the terms of the special covenant the Puritans had entered into with God and God with them. They had chosen to remove themselves from corrupt old England and its popish church in order to live more fully and freely as Christians, as they saw fit [...]. A particular notion of time and place thus became central to American national self-consciousness: this new godly polis existed outside of and free from the corruptions of history, in a place and time apart” [Orsi 2007].

Zinn quotes Senator Henry Cabot Lodge writing at the end of the 19th century, “The great nations are rapidly absorbing for their future expansion and their present defense all the waste places of the earth [...]. As one of the great nations the United States must not fall out of the march.”¹⁰ Again, anxieties about internal pollution were projected into a global campaign of domination. Racism is even more explicit in this quotation from Josiah Strong, a 19th century evangelist writer: “If I read not amiss, this powerful race [the Anglo-Saxon] will move down upon Mexico, down upon Central and South America, out upon the islands of the sea, over Africa and beyond [...] this race is destined to dispossess many weaker races, assimilate others, and mold the remainder, until [...] it has Anglo-Saxonized mankind” [Orsi 2007].

US expansionism was encoded in the original settler expeditions and their search for territory. “Expanding into another territory, occupying that territory, and dealing harshly with the people who resist occupation, has been a persistent fact of American history from the first settlements to the present day” [Zinn 2005]. After establishment of its original in 1783, America expanded to the west and south, expelling Indians and buying or annexing territories held by European imperialist states. With the acquisition of the West, American expansion proceeded southwards to annex or control Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and the Panama Canal. In the same period, the US expanded its control to the Philippines, Samoa, the Virgin Islands, and other footholds in East Asia. Since World War Two military bases have become the primary manifestation of American expansion. Officially, in 2005, the US possessed 737 military bases around the world, but if nuclear and eavesdropping bases are included the figure is more like 1,000 [Vine 2009 (Mar.)]. Interventions in the politics of other states, for example arranged coups d’état (Chile), the funding of pro-American Third World politicians (the Contras, Pinochet), or ‘regime change’ (Iraq), are also forms of expansion.

Justifying territorial expansion on the grounds of massive immigration from Europe is one of the many ways in which the US and Israel resemble each other. The Democrat journalist John O’Sullivan wrote in 1845, in defense of annexing Oregon from Britain, that it was “the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.” Among 19th century theories supporting expansion was scientific and religious racism: Ernst Haeckel’s ‘biogenic law’; John Fiske’s theory of the racial superiority of Anglo-Saxons; Josiah Strong’s call to “civilize and Christianize”.¹¹ The historian William Weeks noted three key themes implicit in the ‘manifest destiny’ slogan: i) the virtue of the American people and institutions; ii) the mission to spread these institutions so as to remake the world in the image of the US; iii) their destiny under God to carry out this mission [Weeks 1996]. Thus manifest destiny became a

¹⁰ Quoted in [Zinn 2005].

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_United_States_overseas_expansion.

‘higher law’ of the American nation that superseded the laws of other peoples.

Whatever its claims to moral superiority and righteousness, a state characterized by exceptionalism is bound to undertake militarist action and the development of war technology. Though every aggression is justified as self-defense against a dangerous enemy, an exceptionalist regime is aggressive for reasons that go beyond specific conflicts to include desire for control over space, peoples and resources, a national consensus based in “preserving our values and interests,” and the insecurity that is bred by expansion. As a ‘para-ideology’ shared by political elite and population, exceptionalism opens scope for aggressions that would otherwise be hampered by internal opposition. Construction of a capacity for military action calls into play a military-industrial complex that forms a powerful lobby for war. If one source of threat is defeated, another rapidly replaces it, as happened with the end of the ‘Cold War’ when America replaced the USSR with Islam as paramount source of danger.

Militarism is an essential element in the formation of the exceptionalist nation-state, with maximum resources devoted to developing weaponry and military technology. The A-bomb was a horrendous marker of ‘advance’ in war technology, but it was by no means the last. The United States continued to develop and test thermo-nuclear weapons such as the much more powerful H-bomb (in March 1946), emptying islands in the East Pacific of their inhabitants to use them as testing sites; possession of these weapons has been central to the United States’ status as a ‘super-power’ [Gerson 1999: 37].¹² Under the neo-conservative Bush administration, US militarism has been manifested in attacks against Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan, and expanded through the establishment of extra-territorial prisons such as Guantanamo Bay, the practice of extraordinary rendition; and new definitions of torture. Actions in such contradiction with human rights and democracy are defended through “the claim that the United States possesses an exceptional status among nations that confers upon it special international responsibilities and exceptional privileges in meeting those responsibilities” [Pfaff 2007: 1].

Though the Bush administration has been particularly noted for evasion of international laws and agreements, we see the origins of this policy in early American self-conceptions which linked expansion to ‘Providence,’ particularly in the ‘manifest destiny’ idea. Bent upon aggression against the ‘axes of evil,’ the American administration under G.W.Bush made every effort to elevate national over international law.¹³ Attacks against Afghanistan and Iraq were undertaken in defiance of UN resolutions regarding ‘just war;’ and without UN Security Council consensus. The Bush administration justified these attacks in terms of the right to

¹² In 2000 two Hiroshima survivors charged an American official in charge of radiation studies with having used the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as guinea pigs. The official replied, “Oh no. We’ve used these studies for everything, including the design of new nuclear weapons” [Gerson 2008: 36].

¹³ On the Bush doctrine of ‘preventive war,’ see Duncan Currie at: http://www.globelaw.com/Iraq/Preventive_war_after-iraq.htm#_Toc41379598.

pre-emptive strikes.¹⁴ Fearing war crimes charges against its military personnel, the Bush administration applied to the Security Council to have American personnel exempted. The United States' record in regard to support for international law initiatives to control warfare has not been exemplary: it has not signed up to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, to the agreements to ban land mines, napalm, and cluster bombs, or to strengthen conventions against biological weapons [Zinn 2005: 5–6]. The United States was one of the initiators of the Nuremburg trials, the United Nations, the Universal Human Rights resolution, and the Geneva Conventions, and yet when its foreign policies have come up against the constraints of international law, it has leaned heavily on exceptionalism to escape them.

The self-image of Israelis has been formed in more complex ways than that of Americans but with many similarities. Whatever the relevance of Bible history to contemporary Israelis, the history of wars waged with the diverse peoples of ancient Palestine, such as the Canaanites, Jebusites, and Philistines, has been a central element in the re-formation of identity undertaken by Zionism.¹⁵ Later came the victimhood inflicted on the Jews by European racism, an experience that Zionism both exploited and excluded from the making of the 'New Jew' and from Jewish history [Piterberg 2008]. Zionism's re-invention of the Israeli Jew as negation both of the 'victim' Jew and the 'primitive' Arab has been the major influence in modern time, transmitted through the Israeli educational system, the pro-state political parties, and most political and imaginative writing [Piterberg 2008]. Negation of the 'victim-Jew' has led to a generic militarism in the Israeli self-image, as well as a strong vein of machoism [Boyarin 1997]. While it might be argued that the Israeli self-image is not as coloured by a sense of mission to lead the world as is that of the United States, the notion of singularity is comparable, for example in Israel's appropriation of the Nazi genocide (which claimed other victims besides Jews, such as Poles, gypsies, and homosexuals), and its insistence on the uniqueness of the holocaust in relation to other crimes against humanity.¹⁶

When the early Zionist movement defined Palestine as a "land without a people for a people without a land," they carried out an ideological erasure of Palestine's indigenous inhabitants. The Zionists knew that there were people there, but they categorized them in ways that separated them from the land, inferiorized them, and disqualified them from 'peoplehood.' Palestinian connection to the land was portrayed by Zionists as recent and unrooted. As people they were described as 'violent,' 'lawless,' and 'indolent'; their society as 'feudal' and 'backward'; their system of agricultural and commodity production as 'primitive' and

¹⁴ [Pfaff 2007: 1].

¹⁵ In his public lectures after 1948, Ben-Gurion leaned heavily on biblical descriptions of ancient Israelite battles. Piterberg comments that this was a Protestant perspective not a Jewish or Zionist one [Piterberg 2008, Ch.6].

¹⁶ See [Stern 2009 (Apr. 23)] "Vad Vashem fires employee who compared Holocaust to Nakba" (Vad Vashem is Israel's holocaust museum.).

‘unproductive.’ The image of Palestinian unproductiveness, and of themselves as modernizers and regenerators, was as central to Zionism’s claims to the land as those based in religion. The ideological violence contained in these images would later be translated into political and military violence as the Zionist leadership prepared to establish their state. This development of an initially religious exceptionalism into nation-state exceptionalism is one best studied through the framework of other colonial settler states, where ‘whiteness’ and monopolization of violence become the markers of a right to rule.

Zionist anti-Arab racism has been so well established by scholars such as Piterberg, Massad, Shohat [Piterberg 2006; Massad 2006; Shohat 1986], that it hardly needs repetition here, except to note that it is implicit in the ideology and programmes of Zionism itself, and that it grew more explicit and violent as, under the Mandate, Palestinians resisted the National Home project. It was fully demonstrated in Zionist expulsion plans, and in acts of brutality during the expulsions of 1947/1948 [Pappe 2006]; in military rule in Israel after 1948 [Jiryis 1969]; in Israel’s discriminatory laws and administrative system [Davis 2003]; in school books [Meehan 1999]; in laws imposed on the Occupied Territories [Shehadeh 1988]; and in daily attacks by settlers on West Bank villagers. All current signs show that anti-Arabism is increasing: the rise of Avigdor Lieberman;¹⁷ public support for the war against Gaza and individual soldier brutality [Hallinan 2009 (Feb. 14); Harel 2009 (Mar. 19)]; public opinion polls. The remark made by the pilot who dropped a 1-ton bomb on a densely crowded neighbourhood in Gaza (in 2002), that he felt only “a slight ping in the aircraft, the result of releasing the bomb,” attests to the degree to which the expression of racism has become legitimate in Israel, compared with the early stages of the Zionist movement. Anti-Arabism forms a ‘community of understanding’ between Zionism/Israel and the United States political elite.

Zionist militarization began as early as 1920, when the clandestine Jewish Defense organization was established by Jabotinsky, eventually to become legal as the Hagana. It received British training during the Great Revolt of 1936–38, when Jewish units fought with British ones under the leadership of Orde Wingate, a British officer who, besides being a Christian Zionist, was brutally anti-Arab. In World War II a Jewish Brigade was formed which fought in Europe against the Axis forces, during a period when a Palestinian could be hung for carrying a knife longer than five centimeters.

By 1948 Zionist militants were already inventing and producing their own weapons, e.g. a flame-thrower used to set homes and fields alight [Pappe 2006: 73]. A unit had been formed to develop biological weapons [Pappe 2006: 73], and there is evidence that these were used during 1948 to poison the water supplies of Akka and Gaza with typhoid bacteria [Pappe

¹⁷ Lieberman is currently Foreign Minister in Netanyahu’s February 2009 cabinet. For his background see: <http://electronicintifada.net/bytopic/people/658.shtml>.

2006: 100–101].¹⁸ Israeli militarism since 1948 has run a gamut from cross-border commando raids, air raids, long-distance bombardment, massacre by proxy, assassinations, and fully-fledged invasions. Nerve gas has been used against demonstrators [Brooks 2004]; napalm (the Six Day War in 1967); hydrogen cyanide, nerve gas, phosphorus, implosion and cluster bombs (the invasion of Lebanon in 1982); chemical defoliants (Negev 2002); bunker-buster bombs, cluster-bombs, and land-mines (the 2006 war against Lebanon). A foremost developer of the drone plane, Israel has used them against Gaza since 2000. Refugee camps in Gaza, Lebanon and the West Bank have been frequent targets of aerial and IDF attack. It should be noted too that strangling the economies of the West Bank and Gaza through cantonment and siege respectively are not less deadly forms of aggression than outright military attack.

Israel is the largest military power in the Middle East, and fourth largest in the world. It is still the only possessor of an atomic weapon in the region and has not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty, or the Biological Weapons Convention, or ratified the Convention Against Chemical Weapons.¹⁹ Though Syria and some other Arab countries are also not signatories, Israel's capacity for producing weapons of mass destruction is thought to be considerably in advance of theirs.²⁰ As reports circulate of the production of military robots, it is not accidental that the only countries with the capacity to produce such weapons are the United States, Israel and China. Israel invented the Uzzi machine gun, and ranks high among world producers of innovative weaponry.

Israel's borders have never been clearly or finally fixed. In 1967, it doubled its size when it occupied the West Bank, Gaza, and the Gholan Heights.²¹ After 1967 Israeli settlements rapidly expanded into the Occupied Territories in contravention of the Geneva Conventions; and since then settlements have not ceased to expand in the West Bank and Jerusalem, in spite of frequent international condemnations and critiques.²² It should be noted that ultra-religious/nationalist Israelis, who form an important sector of the population, believe that these and further areas were given them by divine decree. Though the majority of Israel's politicians do not call for further territorial expansion, all the main parties aim to control the resources, capabilities, and markets of Israel's neighbours, as evident in the appropriation of water from the West Bank and South Lebanon, plans for border industrial zones, and penetration of the Jordanian economy. The existence of a religious/nationalist political bloc combined with formidable military power means that territorial expansion is likely whenever international and regional conditions permit.

¹⁸ See also [Salman Abu Sitta 2005].

¹⁹ http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel_and_weapons_of_mass_destruction.

²⁰ For a history of Israel's military technology capacities, see [Cohen 2001].

²¹ For maps see: http://www.passia.org/Palestine_facts/MAPS/O_palestine_facts_MAPS.htm.

²² See the bi-monthly *Report on Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Territories* edited by Geoffrey Aronson, and the website: <http://www.fmep.org/settlements-info>.

Israel habitually ignores all UN resolutions and international condemnations that try to restrain it.²³ Though its admission to membership of the United Nations in May 1949 was part of an agreement whereby Israel accepted to negotiate the issues of the refugees and Jerusalem, it subsequently reneged on this commitment.²⁴ After the war of 1967, it refused to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza though enjoined to do so by UN Resolution 242. Another aspect of Israeli exceptionalism is found in its own laws, through which it has appropriated Palestinian-owned land and discriminated against Palestinian citizens. Its record both in Israel and the Occupied Territories for violence in crowd control, arbitrary arrests, home demolitions, the use of torture, and prison conditions have constantly been criticized by Amnesty and Human Rights Watch. It was one of the first regimes to establish an extra-territorial prison, in Khiam, South Lebanon, which it prevented the International Red Cross from accessing. It has continually ignored the decision of the International Court of Justice that the fortified wall it is building around the West Bank is illegal.²⁵

Having, like other colonial settler states, chosen violence and displacement of the indigenous people of Palestine rather than negotiation and peaceful co-existence, Israel's history is full of instances of the 'path not chosen.' As a primary example, one can point to refusal of the return of the refugees, from 1948 onwards. Another major instance has been rejection of all Arab settlement overtures, most notably the Saudi peace initiative of April 2002.²⁶ A third outstanding case was Israel's refusal to fulfill the Oslo entente (1994), widely viewed at the time as a breakthrough to settlement.

In all key characteristics of exceptionalism, Israel closely parallels the United States, from a national self-image as singular, to militarism, expansionism, and denial or evasion of international law. In Israel, too, an image of self-singularity is the basis of a consensus between ruling elite and electorate that supports aggression. True, Israel's exceptionalism, especially its defiance of UN resolutions, is only possible because of United States support, yet this 'special relationship' raises the question of its underlying rationale. It is most often analyzed in terms of US need for a strategic ally in the Middle East, or in terms of the power of the Jewish lobby. But we should consider the possibility that what has prevented a radical reassessment up to now is a fraternal similarity between the two polities as exceptionalist. This has created a common mentality and language between the political elites and publics of both regimes, a shared 'para-ideology' that is unlikely to be changed by cosmetic shifts in America's Middle East policy.

²³ For a complete listing of UN and international resolutions that Israel has not complied with see: <http://geocities.com/savepalestinenow/unresolutions/studyguide/sgunres1e.html>.

²⁴ On Resolution 194 see [Pappe 1992: Ch.6]; also <http://www.badil.org/Publications/Bulletins/Bulletin-11.htm>.

²⁵ See: <http://www.stopthewall.org/>.

²⁶ For the text, see: <http://al-bab.com/arab/docs/league/peace02.htm>.

Reviewing Hiroshima/Nagasaki

The Truman Administration's justification for using thermonuclear bombing against Hiroshima and Nagasaki was that it brought about a rapid end to the war, and avoided massive casualties that would have resulted from a land invasion of Japan. American as well as Japanese historians have discredited this justification, arguing that the real reasons for the bombings were as a deterrent to the Soviet Union in the newly emerging context of the Cold War [Hasegawa 2005; Alperovitz 2005; Gerson 2008]. The US government's argument that the Japanese government was refusing to surrender is weakened by war-time archives showing that the Truman Administration deliberately disregarded Japanese peace overtures during the months between the Potsdam Declaration (July 26, 1945) and the dropping of the bombs (August 6 and 9, 1945), time when the A-bomb was being readied for use [Gerson 2008: 54–57]. The Target Committee of the 'Manhattan project' (the secret body that planned the attack), recorded that the decision to unleash A-bomb strikes against large urban centers was guided by two aims: i) terrorizing the Japanese people and ii) "making the initial use sufficiently spectacular for the importance of the weapon to be internationally recognized" (Wikipedia). Peace activists have long argued that the "shock and awe" effect of the A-bomb could have been produced as effectively by dropping it at sea. The careful timing of the bomb to deter a Soviet attack while ignoring openings towards a negotiated Japanese surrender point to a choice of a live target to test nuclear weapons. Arguments that saturation bombing against civilian targets in World War II had already established a new 'norm' of warfare miss the point that the A-bombs were used at a moment when Japan's air-force was destroyed, its resources exhausted, and its government was putting out peace feelers. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were chosen within a perspective of the 'advance' in US military technology to be an experimental war laboratory in which the effects of the new weapon could be tested.

The racist basis of the A-bomb decision was of course not stated by the officials involved in planning its deployment, and has only become explicit through the exploration of personal documents left by key actors. In their public pronouncements the deciders adopted a carefully neutral, even moralistic tone. Home Secretary Henry Stimson, for example, expressed his repugnance over the bombing, even while terming it "the least abhorrent choice" [Stimson 1947]. The racism underlying the decision to drop the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki emerges clearly in reports of less inhibited, private discussions in President Truman's war cabinet. In his personal papers Stimson recounts a discussion he had with Truman when he raised two 'pragmatic concerns' about the A-bomb: "I was a little fearful that before we could get ready the Air Force we might have Japan so thoroughly bombed out that the new weapon would not have a fair background to show its strength. He (Truman) laughed and said he

understood.”²⁷ Kay reports on Truman’s reactions to the news of the bombings while crossing the Atlantic, when he declared, ‘This is greatest thing in history’ [Kay 2005:7].²⁸ Truman’s racism shows up even more clearly in a letter written two days after the bombings, “When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast” [Gerson 2008: 41].

The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were surely a test of war technology rather than the only way to end the war without invasion. Reconnaissance planes accompanied both A-bomb missions, and returned after the bombings to photograph the bomb sites. The use of a second, stronger thermonuclear device over Nagasaki three days later, without waiting for the first to yield its political results, reinforces the idea that the bombings were a test. Closing the devastated sites off to the public gave the US military time to measure and analyze the effects of the bombs on buildings and population. Further trials of thermo-nuclear devices were held within months of Japanese surrender. If the A-bombs were used against Hiroshima and Nagasaki for scientific testing, as much evidence suggests, they can justifiably be called war crimes, and a classic example of a ‘path not taken.’

Reframing Al-Nakba

First, it is important that we view Al-Nakba not as a one-time event but as an on-going process that began long before 1948, continues today, and looks set to continue into the future. Second, we have to remove it from the context of ‘war’ in which historians have conventionally placed it. Third, that though it is often said that the expulsions of 1948 displaced 70% of the Palestinian population, this overlooks the fact that Al-Nakba meant for all Palestinians a total change of political environment, juridical status, possibilities, and future. Loss of the national rights supposedly protected by the terms of the Mandate meant that even those Palestinians not physically transferred from their homes moved into a grey zone of marginality.

Al-Nakba and the beginning of the ‘Palestinian problem’ have conventionally been attached to a single year, 1948, when the major expulsions from Palestine were carried out. But this dating is deceptive since it overlooks how displacement was prepared long before 1948, as well as the displacement that continued after Israel’s establishment.²⁹ Separation of Palestinians from their land began even earlier than 1878 when Zionist settlement began,

²⁷ Henry Stimson papers, Sterling Library, Yale University. Available at the National Security Archive: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsachiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB126/15.pdf>.

²⁸ “When (Truman) heard the news about Hiroshima...he declared ‘This is greatest thing in history’ and raced about the ship to spread the news, insisting that he had never made a happier announcement ‘We have won the gamble’ he told the assembled and cheering crew” [Kay 2005: 7]. Kay adds, “Truman famously declared that he did not lose a single night’s sleep over the decision” [Kay 2005: 7].

²⁹ A scholar of refugee studies, Nevzat Soguk, suggests that refugees are actually produced before the conflicts that precipitate their cross-border movement, a theory supported by the modern history of the Palestinians [Soguk 1986].

in ‘Christian Zionism’ and Protestant ambitions to regain the ‘Holy Land,’ and it continued with the growth of the Zionist movement after its formal beginning in 1897, and European/Protestant support for it [Sharif 1983]. Under the British Mandate (1922–1948), the politics of Al-Nakba were reinforced by government policies such as hampering the formation of Palestinian national institutions, and fiscal and taxation policies that created rural poverty [Asad 1976]. Britain’s failure to protect the Palestinian population as pledged at Versailles, especially in the final months before its withdrawal on May 15, 1948, made Al-Nakba inevitable [Pappe 1988; Esber 2008]. Though the major expulsions of the Palestinians occurred in 1948, they did not end there. After the final truce of December 1948, many hundreds of Palestinians were expelled from, or shot in, border zones between Israel and neighbouring states in a campaign to ‘cleanse’ Israel’s borders. In the early 1950s, Israel engaged in a series cross-border attacks against West Bank villages. In 1953 a large group of bedouin were expelled from the Negev. Israel’s invasion of the West Bank and Gaza during the Six Day War of 1967 forced an estimated 350,000 Palestinians to flee to neighbouring areas, many of them second-time refugees. Deportations from the Occupied Territories started then and have persisted; Palestinian migrants from the West Bank are routinely refused permission to return; the number of Jerusalemite Palestinians with rights to live in their home city is constantly being whittled down. Threats of expulsion of the Palestinian community in Israel also persist, and have grown stronger with the rise of Avigdor Lieberman.

The framing of Al-Nakba in a context of war has distorted its reality. As part of a war, the expulsion of three quarters of the Palestinians from their homes and lands in 1948 passed as an accidental side-effect, ‘collateral damage.’ Such a perspective hides the intentionality and planning of the Zionist movement leadership in producing Al-Nakba, and puts a false *causus belli* into the historical record. Within the terms of a classic war, Israel’s claim that it was the ‘invasion’ of Palestine by the Arab armies after May 15 that was the cause of the ‘war’ became part of the accepted historiography of 1948. Under the label of ‘war’ the real character of Al-Nakba as planned ethnic cleansing was hidden, as were its real initiators, the Zionist movement.

Dispersion and loss of essential archives prevented Palestinian scholars from fully researching the sequence of events leading up to Al-Nakba, especially those aspects only revealed in Zionist/Israeli archives——military, intelligence, diplomatic, personal. The ‘new’ Israeli historians were better positioned in this regard, and it is not surprising that much of what we know today comes from them. Their work began to appear in the late-1980s.³⁰ In relation to Al-Nakba, the most revealing study is Ilan Pappé’s *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, published in 2006. An earlier study by Palestinian scholar Nur Masalha on the

³⁰ The best known are [Segev 1984; Morris 1987; Flapan 1987; Schlaim 1988; Pappé 1988; 1992; 2006].

‘transfer’ concept is also important in showing that this idea existed from early on in Zionism, and was institutionalized as early as 1937, when a Transfer Committee was set up within the Jewish Agency [Masalha 1992: 93]. The importance of Pappé’s study is his documentation of the operationalization of ‘transfer’ plans. Based on previously unexamined documents, he shows that planning the expulsions began in February 1947, far earlier than previously thought. Where Benny Morris in his study of the causes of Palestinian flight exempted the Zionist leadership from ordering the expulsions, Pappé gives evidence that Ben-Gurion formed a secret ‘war cabinet’ in February 1947, as soon as Britain announced its intention of giving up the mandate and leaving Palestine [Pappé 2006: 5]. Its meetings were held in the headquarters of the local workers union in Tel Aviv, or in Ben-Gurion’s home. Minutes were not kept.³¹ By December 1947, night attacks against Arab villages had already begun [Pappé 2006: 55–60]. In January 1948 Ben-Gurion ordered ‘lethal attacks’ against villages and urban areas, adding “every attack has to end [...] with occupation, destruction and expulsion” [Pappé 2006: 64]. By March 1948, when the final touches were put to Plan Dalet (the first of a series of regional attack plans), thirty villages had been emptied of their inhabitants. Pappé also documents the war crimes that accompanied ‘ethnic cleansing.’ These were not planned in the same way that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was planned. But they were similarly carried out to create ‘shock and awe’ and, as intended, they precipitated flight. Ben-Gurion aimed to expel one million Palestinians from the 78% of Palestine that the Zionist movement intended to appropriate for their state once the British had evacuated. It is important to note that one of the members of Ben-Gurion’s ‘Consultancy’ was Ezra Danin, a Zionist militant who, as early as 1943, was put in charge of a special unit inside the Jewish National Fund, whose task was to penetrate Palestinian villages to report on political, social and cultural aspects of village life, as well as to carry out military mapping and recruit collaborators. Such knowledge greatly facilitated attacks against villages during 1947–48.

Planning ahead for the hostilities that would inevitably break out once the British left, meant that the Zionist movement had time to acquire and produce modern war materiel superior to any possessed by the Palestinians, as well as to train new recruits, however briefly.³² More sophisticated weaponry—such as aircraft—was imported from Europe during truces. Though Palestinians had suffered repression under the British, they had no experience of modern warfare. Militants mainly armed themselves with out-of-date, single shot rifles. Units of self-defense were formed by villages but they had little or no real training. Benny Morris tells an anecdote that nicely illustrates Palestinian ignorance of modern weaponry, and their awareness of world events. During the attack on Safad (10th May 1948), when the Zionist militias used Davidka mortar bomb, “(s)ome of the inhabitants apparently

³¹ For a list of members see [Pappé 2006: 5–6].

³² On Zionist military preparedness, see [Pappé 2006: 44–46].

believed that the Davidka bombs were atom bombs, both because of their noise and their great flash on explosion” [Morris 1987: 104]. In attacks against Haifa, barrels containing explosive materials were rolled down the steep incline into the Arab quarters near the port, causing panic. Neither the British nor, later, the Arab armies offered any defensive help to Palestinians under attack.

A central aspect of Al-Nakba, and the one that has prevented any solution up to now, is Israel’s steadfast refusal to allow the victims of expulsion to return. In September 1948, towards the end of formal conflict, Count Bernadotte, the UN Mediator for Palestine, proposed that the refugees should return to their homes as part of an overall peace settlement. His proposal was subsequently formalized in UNGA Resolution 194 (December 11, 1948).³³ Resolution 194 has consistently been invoked by Palestinian negotiators, and as consistently rejected by Israelis. Yet Israel was admitted to membership of the UN on the basis of agreeing to cooperate with the UN on the issues of Jerusalem and the refugees, an agreement forged when the UN formed the Conciliation Commission for Palestine in December 1948 to work on a peace settlement. At that time President Truman put pressure on Israel to allow back at least a token 100,000 refugees. Israel refused. It also rejected two other proposals made by the Conciliation Commission: the delimitation of Israel’s boundaries, and the internationalization of Jerusalem.³⁴ These early settlement negotiations show how a pattern was set of Israeli non-compliance with UN resolutions. Like the United States in its ‘war on terrorism,’ Israel does not observe the Geneva Conventions, and has disregarded the rulings of the International Court of the Hague on the illegality of the Separation Wall.

Conclusion: The Commemoration of Disasters

Scholars have raised criticisms of commemoration practices, for example that they politicize memory, make ‘official’ memories hegemonic, and are overly nationalistic. Hiroshima has been particularly subjected to such critique: historians such as Giamo have accused it of veiling war crimes committed by Imperial Japan, and as a move towards a post-war rehabilitation of the Japanese nation-state under a cover of internationalism. More nuanced critiques have come from scholars such as Lisa Yoneyama, who notes that memorialization also creates amnesia, and ‘naturalizes’ official messages about the past, repressing alternative versions. She also points to the way that public memory is, in most cases, closely connected to nationalism, and points out that “the production of knowledge about the past [...] is always enmeshed in the exercise of power, and is always accompanied by elements of repression”

³³ Resolution 194 recommended “that those refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest possible date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return.”

³⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel,_Palestinians,_and_the_United_Nations#the_early_years. Also [Gabbay 1959].

[Yoneyama 1991: 27]. Her question “How can memories, once recuperated, remain self-critically unsettling?” is one that memorialists should keep in mind [Yoneyama 1999: 5].

At an obvious level, again, Hiroshima/Nagasaki and Al-Nakba diverge. The sites of the A-bombing remained as *lieux de memoire*, physical reminders of disaster, whereas Al-Nakba has deprived the Palestinian people of a place of national commemoration. Hiroshima survivors and municipality acted speedily both to commemorate and internationalize their disaster. In contrast, Al-Nakba commemorations did not begin until long after 1948, and have remained siteless, de-centered, and highly variable in form, from popular marches and rallies, to exhibitions, academic workshops, and publications, respondent to context, and susceptible to repression. Hiroshima became a focus of an international anti-nuclear, anti-war movement, drawing in a mass of participants from outside Japan, whereas participation in Al-Nakba commemorations is mostly confined to Palestinians.

However, unlike the majority of commemorations, Hiroshima/Nagasaki and Al-Nakba are not about victories but about disasters. In this respect, they share with the Nazi death camps, Holocaust museums, Armenian genocide day, and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (Pol Pot). While each is a manifestation of a defeated or unachieved nation-state, neither is only that. Characteristics they share are resistance to forgetting and being forgotten; a will to build presence out of absence; and will towards a world in which disasters like Hiroshima and Al-Nakba will not recur. Both are oriented towards external audiences rather than internal ones, while sharing aims of collective cohesion and historical transmission. Both contain strong elements of political didacticism, and the didactic elements that each contains are developmental in the sense of continually incorporating new formats, new audiences, and new world political conjunctures. In this way they both subvert the conventional, rationalist phrase ‘empty ritual,’ with its connotations of repetition and attrition of vitality. In both cases, a growing sense of world and regional crisis swells the ranks of participants.

While critiques of commemorations put forward by scholars such as Yoneyama merit serious reflection, it can be said of them that they do not respond to the ubiquity of racism and violence in our world today. As we contemplate, people are dying horribly, suffering military attack, incarceration, torture, loss of loved ones, rape, famine, disease, fear. Violence also takes the shape of poverty produced by resource extraction, unjust trade policies, and debt. Racism is increasing rather than declining. Within this perspective, I suggest that there is a real need for special spaces and times to gather international activists together to remember, to learn, and to mobilize resistance. Memory is important as a basis for resistance to oppression, and commemorations produce new supra-national solidarities, as well as platforms for working for ‘another world.’ They form part of a global struggle against racism, social injustice, and over-developed technologies of violence.

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