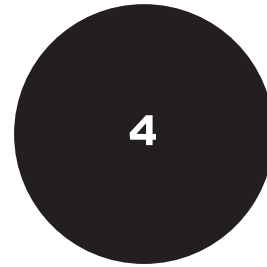




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Civil Alliances—Palestine, 1947-48

In Yael Bartana's 2007 film *Mary Koszmary (Nightmares, [link](#))*, a Polish intellectual addresses the Jews, calling to them: "Come. Let us live together, let us be different but not harm each other." In his speech, Slawomir Sierakowski emphasized the nightmares that have haunted Poles ever since their land was ethnically cleansed of Jews. The possible return of Jews to Poland is not merely the renewed possibility of Jewish life in Poland but rather the renewed possibility of life together revived out of the ruins of ethnic cleansing as a basis for new partnership. Although this work focuses on the Jewish/Polish context, its scope is wider by far.

Ever since I heard it, this speech has haunted me relentlessly through its repercussions in other political contexts, most particularly the local context of Palestine. It kept resounding in my head until, one day, it emerged in my language, in civil language, as an address to Palestinians:

Only with you, Palestinian women and men – by the force of our common demand to be governed equally – can the state embody its proper, favorable dimensions: a neutral framework upheld by the governed, and for their sake. Neither negotiations nor conditions, neither "peace" treaties nor transition phases, but a basic demand – by both the governed and by those who have been expelled from the sphere of governance – to be counted and to be a part, to become citizens, to participate in ruling their country, shaping the regime, reinstating political partnership.

"Palestinian women and men," I repeated in my imagination, until one day it was no longer a matter of imagining a future, but of reconstructing it from a past that had to be imagined anew. This happened when, to my huge surprise, in an archive trying to locate a single civil contract between Jews and Palestinians mentioned once in one line of a book published in 1989, I found hundreds of documents recording such contracts, signed in Palestine in the years 1947-1948.¹

I realized that intense civil activity had taken place throughout the country at that time, and was completely ignored by historians.² Its removal from historical

narratives enabled the retroactive depiction of the 1948 war as the culmination of a long-standing national conflict. This civil activity, whose amplitude I had just begun to reconstruct, included urgent encounters, some short and spontaneous, others planned in advance and carefully designed in detail – whose Palestinian and Jewish participants raised demands, sought compromises, set rules, formulated agreements, made promises, asked for forgiveness, made efforts to reconcile and compensate – and did everything possible not to let violence take over their lives. They did their utmost to halt the violence that national and military forces were intent on igniting and negotiated with each other in order to create mutual civil alliances. This tremendous civil effort continued during the constituent violence that was practiced in Palestine until the State of Israel was declared, rendering obsolete the efforts of citizens to imagine their future outside the dictates of the nation-state. In the global order that began to be consolidated and implemented in the final months of the Second World War, such civil activity was doomed, outcast and replaced by a nation-state, a member of the United Nations.

The pairing of citizenship and national self-determination with forced migration and the creation of non-citizens and impaired citizens, was presented as a necessary means to reduce the prospect of new national conflicts, and was part of the new international order that emerged from the Second World War. Unsurprisingly, as these "solutions" were conceived and achieved by international organizations, resolutions and state powers,³ and not by the relevant body politic of the governed population, in almost any geographical territory where such a 'solution' was implemented in the mid 20th century – India/Pakistan, South Africa, Germany – the conflict that it was supposed to pacify was either generated, or enhanced and exacerbated, by its very implementation.⁴

For most Israeli citizens, especially those born after 1948, Palestinians are exactly this – stateless persons, while they themselves are full citizens. The persistent status of Palestinians as refugees for over six decades has never appeared as an injustice that would lead Israelis to question their own citizenship.⁵ The only link most Israeli Jews can see between their citizenship and Palestinians' statelessness – when they see such a link at all – is that of a threat to their sovereignty. Jewish sovereignty is conceived as a stable entity



Still from *Civil Alliance* 2012

that precedes any alteration of the body politic and that should be kept untouched by it.⁶ However, the constitution of this sovereignty and hundreds of thousands of "stateless persons" was not achieved without violence and resistance.⁷ The omission of this constitutive violence is part of the intentional falsification of history by political regimes based on a differential body politic.⁸ For most Israeli citizens, especially those born after the State was declared in 1948, this is what Palestinians are – stateless persons, refugees, or intruders who threaten to undermine Jewish sovereignty.⁹ Thus Palestinians, targeted directly by this violence, became the main bearers of this denied memory.¹⁰ The memory of the violence exercised in order to force minority rule by expelling the majority of the population who threatened its constitution was sublimated into a founding myth of independence, self-determination and equality. The maintenance of this myth as history among the majority of Israeli Jews required the constant and intentional work of erasing the past and distorting history. Citizenship was the tool used by the State to make new citizens see as historical facts what would otherwise appear to be state propaganda. Paradoxically, Palestinians, deprived of citizenship and thus free of this founding myth, became not only the main bearers of the past, but also those who for years kept exercising what seems to be the most important skill of citizens – keeping the past incomplete and refusing to acknowledge violence as law.

The pile of documents I found in the Haganah Archive, relating to the period between November 1947 (the Partition Plan by the UN) and May 1948 (the creation of the state of Israel), emerged slowly, not only as a missing chapter of local history, but also as its missing geography. I started to cover the map of Mandatory Palestine (issued in 1947) with points where Jews and Arabs got together, in either urgent encounters or others planned in detail and in advance. Though until 1948, Jews and Palestinians shared Palestine and knew to find their ways between their mutual localities, such a map couldn't be found and I decided to reconstruct for the film the propinquity of their localities from scattered information found here and there.¹¹ I invited twenty five Arabs and Jews of varying age groups, each of them speaking both Arabic and Hebrew, to gather around the reconstructed map and recite these encounters, agreements and promises made by our ancestors in hundreds of localities in Palestine during this period. Each event is briefly narrated either in Hebrew or in Arabic, with all the speakers alternating between both languages.

During the numerous encounters and negotiations between them that took place between 1947 and 1948 the participants raised demands, sought compromises, set rules, formulated agreements, made promises, sought forgiveness, and made efforts to compensate and reconcile. Their shared purpose was to keep violence from taking over their lives. They sought to protect the common world of their life in Palestine and salvage it from those who wished to destroy it. In over one-hundred documented encounters – and probably many more whose records have yet to be found – they promised themselves and each other the continuation of their shared lives.

The archival materials foregrounded by the film have been kept dormant in State archives. The film frames these documents as an important chapter in local history and geography that has been erased from history books in order to enable the hegemonic historical narrative of an enduring Jewish-Arab conflict. Gathered together,



Still from *Civil Alliance 2012*

these stories are presented for the first time as the significant common civil efforts of Jews and Palestinians. Two cameramen mingle with the speakers and film them. Their presence, captured by a third camera fixed in the ceiling above the table, embodies the fact that these were exciting pieces of news developing and continuing day after day for half a year, and that their outcome was not known in advance. After each narrated episode the participants place white dots on the map near the name of the locality to which they refer. When the film ends the map is covered by hundreds of white dots, embodying the extent of the agreements spread over all of Palestine.

Today, when the prospect of a one state solution seems like the only viable one, the film reconstructs a historical moment where Palestinians and Jews sought, together, as equal partners, ways to maintain and protect their shared life in the same territory. When local conflicts eventually emerged, they found ways to solve them. The film reconstructs this historical past as a valuable potential for the future.

To Edward Said's formulation of imperialism as theory and colonialism as practice,¹² "sovereign citizenship" should be added as both a historiography and vantage point. Much has been written about the theory and the practice, about

colonialism being a lever for the acquisition of more and more land, money and manpower. Too little, however, has been written about the differential citizenship that dictated colonial historiography and to a large measure also shaped the horizon of the anti-colonialist position.



Still from *Civil Alliance* 2012

This historiography is based on the national-sovereign delineation that dictated the boundaries of narrated history as national history, often demarcated from the geo-political context in which it unfolded. Thus, for example, the French and American Revolutions were studied as national events for about two hundred years, isolated from the Atlantic context in which they took place, while the history of the State of Israel was written as detached from Palestinian history, as though the Nakba – the Palestinian catastrophe – happened by itself and was an internal Palestinian affair. As though the declaration of the State of Israel and the violence that became law actually created a distinct time-space unit whose Jewish Israeli rulers can also rule the history that will be told of and about it. Out of such historiography, peoples – and their supporters – wishing to be liberated from the bonds of colonialism could not imagine a liberation that did not entail national self-determination and the reproduction of the sovereign citizenship model. Sovereign citizenship was nothing but a tool serving the world order of sovereignty, which continues to maintain colonialism as practice and imperialism as theory, and sanctifies the distinction between citizens and all the rest crowding at the borders, drowning at sea, shot or roasted upon electric fences. It is sovereign citizenship that has shaped the vantage point from which citizens look upon the disaster of others. It is this citizenship that turns them into perpetrators without having to raise their hands in violence, perpetrator-citizens who, merely by being governed alongside non-citizens, are in effect exerting violence.

The vehement joint efforts of Jews and Arabs to preserve their shared life, find peaceful solutions to conflicts and disputes, reach compromises, be mutually attentive to needs, make agreements and promises – all of these did not cease once violence erupted. These efforts persisted even after some of the agreements were not observed. In most cases, promises were broken not by the inhabitants

themselves, but rather by members of national militias who tried to impose a new political reality upon the land. In May 1948, the founding of the State of Israel put an end to the mutual recognition by Jews and Arabs of their responsibility for their shared life. The new sovereign rule replaced the old civil rules of the game with new – national – ones.

Under the new rule, this civil chapter of history was erased. The little that was known of efforts to promote civil treaties was presented in a negative light, from the ruling perspective through which civil partnership appears as "collaboration," namely, as an act of national treason. A civil reading of documents collected in the Haganah Archive recording these mutual efforts yields a complex, vital picture full of hope and faith in the power of shared life. This picture cannot be reduced to the national sovereign narrative that began to be constructed from May 1948 and projected hopeless polarity and hostility onto the past.

I was not the first one to read these documents in the archive, but I was the first to understand that what is recorded in them is not a footnote within the existing narratives of this period, but the iceberg of a completely different narrative that cannot be grasped within the partitioning of history into Zionism/Nakba. This other narrative was not given and its recovery was conditioned by the suspension of the automatic and wholesale identification of the participants with the respective national groups. Thus for example, a work of foregrounding was required in order to make clear that the civil agreement between the inhabitants of Deir Yassin and Giv'at Shaul was violated not by local Jewish residents who were party to the civil contract achieved with their neighbours, but rather by Jewish militiamen. On April 9, 1948 Jewish warriors from the Jewish militias – the Irgun Zevai Leumi and Lochamei Herut Israel – entered Deir Yassin and massacred the local population. A wooden box was looted from one of the houses in Deir Yassin and kept in the home of one of the Jewish assailants. For years its provenance was an open secret in the house where it was kept. It is now in my keeping. I regard it as a priceless deposit placed in my keeping until the story of this place is rewritten, until life as it was known here before the curse of partition took hold, until it can be retold, and the conditions transpire for founding a shared museum to tell how the national war machine ground to dust all civil hopes for shared life. In this box, borrowed time is stored.

Footnotes

1 In Benny Morris's book on the Palestinian Refugee Problem, published in 1989, he mentions the existence of a civil agreement between the inhabitants of the Palestinian village Deyr Yassin and the nearby Jewish village Givat Shaul. This line haunted me for years, as Deyr Yassin was the place where an atrocious massacre took place. Not surprisingly, no historian wrote about this or any other agreements achieved between the Jews and Palestinians. Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

2 In his books, Hillel Cohen relates to this material, but from the perspective of collaborators, which I reject completely. On the problematic figure of the "collaborator" see my *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Reli Mazali and Ruvik Danieli (New York: Zone Books, 2008). I thank Hillel Cohen for helping me locate some of these materials, and for participating in the film I made from of them.

3 "Thus all appeals on behalf of Zionism were international appeals perforce. The site of Zionist struggle was only partially in Palestine; most of the time until 1948 – and even after – and Weizman's own work is the best case in point – the struggle had to be waged, and fueled, and supplied, in the great capitals of the West". Edward W. Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York : Vintage Books, 1992), 23.

4 On the creation of the Palestinian–Jewish conflict by the constituent violence exercised following the partition plan see my *From Palestine to Israel: A Photographic Record of Destruction and State Formation, 1947-50*, trans. Charles S. Kamen (London: Pluto Press, 2011).

5 The organization Zochrot stands for an exception.

6 Israel's persistent refusal to allow Palestinians refugees to return to their homes illustrates this perfectly.

7 See Ariella Azoulay, *From Palestine to Israel...*

8 In his book *The Question of Palestine* Edward Said quotes Moshe Dayan saying

in 1969: "We came to this country which was already populated by Arabs, and we are establishing a Hebrew, that is a Jewish state here. In considerable areas of the country we bought lands from Arabs. Jewish villages were built in the place of Arab villages. You do not even know the names of these Arab villages, and I do not blame you, because these geography books no longer exist; not only the books do not exist, the Arab villages are not there either". (Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*, 14).

9 Except those Palestinians who were not expelled in 1948 and became Israeli citizens. They are conceived as conditional citizens, who are always somehow under scrutiny and are periodically expected to prove their loyalty to the state.

10 In 1967, when the West Bank and Gaza were conquered, Israeli rule deprived the Palestinians who were expelled to these territories in 1948 of their citizenship for the second time. They were kept out of a public space that became reserved solely for one ethnic group, the Jewish one, and Israeli Jews were taught to believe that this exclusion was a fact of nature, both given and justified.

11 I'm grateful to Umar Al-Ghubari from Zochrot who assisted me generously in this task, which seemed quiet impossible at first. A year later Zochrot edited such a map of this erased geography.

12 Said refers to one aspect of this historiography when he writes "the dispersion of the Palestinians was not the fact of nature but a result of specific force and strategies, The concealment by Zionism of its own history has by now therefore become institutionalized, and not only in Israel" (Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*, 58).