



Al-Qassam Remembered/ في ذكرى القسام

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في ذكرى القسام

تيد سويدنيج

أصبح الشيخ عز الدين القسام بطلا قوميا بعد استشهاده على يد حكومة الحماية البريطانية في ٢١ نوفمبر سنة ١٩٣٥ . وسرعان ما اندلعت الثورة سنة ١٩٣٦ بعد معركة غابة يعبد بشهور قليلة .

وإذا كان الفلسطينيون يجمعون على أهمية القسام بوصفه رمزا وطنيا فإن ثمة اختلافات كبيرة بين تفسيراتهم لهذا الرمز . فالبعض يعتبرونه المحرك للكفاح المسلح ضد الصهيونية والاستعمار ، بينما ترى فيه الدوائر اليسارية الفلسطينية في نهاية الستينات وبداية السبعينات زعيماً ينظم الفلاحين والبروليتاريا في خلايا وهو بهذا يعد مقابلاً لثشيه جيفارا . ونجد أيضا بعض القراءات الأخرى لرمز القسام : القسام مثالا نموذجيا اشتراكيا ، القسام مناديا بالوحدة العربية ، القسام مجاهدا إسلاميا

أما في نطاق دائرة كتابة التاريخ الإسرائيلي ، فيصنف القسام نذيرا لحركة الإرهاب الفلسطينية المعاصرة . وتعمل « أجهزة كتابة التاريخ » الإسرائيلية دوما على طمس مزارات التراث القومي وتخريب المعالم التاريخية التي تساعد على الحفاظ على الذاكرة القومية التاريخية ، ولذا يصعب اليوم تحديد موقع قبر الشهيد القسام أو البقعة التي سقط فيها قتيلًا .

وفي مجال البحث الأكاديمي ظهرت دراستان — الأولى بقلم سميح حمودة ، والثانية بقلم عبد الستار قاسم — تقدمان صورتين للشيخ القسام ، وإذا كانت الصورتان تنطبقان في المناداة بالجهاد المسلح ضد الصهيونية ، فيؤكد سميح حمودة على المنحى الإسلامي في الجهاد ، بينما يرى عبد الستار قاسم أن أهمية القسام تأتي من أنه كان مثالا لتوحيد الزعامة النضالية .

ويقدم كاتب المقال في فقرة تالية صورة القسام كما تبلورت من خلال مقابلات أجراها مع معاصرين للشهيد ممن كانوا يعيشون في القرى المناخمة لحيفا ، وينتمي معظمهم إلى طبقة الفلاحين والعمال الموسمين . ويظهر القسام الزعيم الأوحيد لحركة النضال المسلح ، الذي ضحى بذاته في سبيل الوطن وقاسم الشعب حياته وتلاحم معه .

وإذا كانت هناك بعض التناقضات بين الوقائع التاريخية وصورة القسام كما تظهر في القصص المختلفة فإن رمزه يبقى ذا جاذبية قوية داخل الحركة الفلسطينية : فالقسام شخصية قومية عظيمة تحاول جميع الاتجاهات أن تستقطبها ، ويعود ذلك إلى عدد من الأسباب . ففي غياب دولة فلسطينية لم تُثبّت هوية القسام في إطار رواية رسمية واحدة ، ومن ثم ظلت مرنة إلى حد بعيد تسمح بعدد من القراءات تتلون وفق الاتجاهات السياسية المتنوعة . ومما لاشك فيه فإن غياب سيرة ذاتية معترف بها رسميا قد ساعد على إرساء القسام بوصفه رمزا قوميا حقيقيا .

Al-Qassām Remembered

Ted Swedenburg

On November 21, 1935, the British mandate government in Palestine issued a communiqué stating that its police forces had killed four members of a band of outlaws, including their leader Shaykh ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Qassām, and captured five others in an engagement at Ya‘bad forest. For Palestinian Arabs, these “outlaws” were national heroes. Their example inspired others to step up the struggle against the British mandate--the sponsor of the Zionist colonization movement in Palestine. Within a few months, the battle at Ya‘bad forest had helped ignite the 1936-39 revolt--the greatest anti-colonial rebellion in the Arab East between the world wars. Shaykh al-Qassām rapidly became a popular hero, the subject of legends and stories. His likeness was hung in Arab public buildings and carried at demonstrations; his tomb--like that of a modern-day saint--became a site of pilgrimage. Several of his surviving followers, known as Qassāmites, achieved high positions of leadership in the armed revolt. And in the course of the rebellion, Qassām was constantly invoked as an exemplary symbol of struggle.

But while Palestinians agreed on Qassām’s national significance, they differed on how to interpret him. Qassām’s meaning, as a symbol of struggle and as a guide for political action, was in no way fixed; instead it was the subject of controversy within the national movement. The two separate public meetings held in Haifa on January 5, 1936, to commemorate Qassām’s *arba‘in* (40 days after his death) illustrate this division. One gathering, organized by the Young Men’s Congress (*Mu’tamar al-Shabāb*) and supported by the political parties which represented the interests of the traditional Palestinian leadership, was attended by 500 persons who listened to the “moderate speeches” of political notables. The other, organized by the Young Men’s Muslim Association and supported by the radical nationalist Istiqlāl Party, was

attended by 1000 persons of the “lower classes.” Middle-class radicals delivered speeches which, British intelligence sources noted, were “strong in their tone.”¹ This split between those who evoked Qassām’s memory in “moderate” and in “strong” tones, was a significant dynamic in the revolt that broke out a few months later.²

The revitalization of the Palestinian national liberation movement in the late 1960s also involved a resuscitation of Qassām’s memory. Qassām is hailed as the originator of armed resistance to Zionism and imperialism, and as the forerunner to the contemporary fedayeen. And just as British authorities once designated Qassām an “outlaw,” Israeli authorities do their best to discredit his memory. But while Palestinian nationalists agree on his significance, the various Palestinian political currents within the movement assess it in different ways. As in the past, Qassām is not an historical symbol who carries a unified message but is a point at which a number of interpretations collide. The “open” historical status of Qassām is further enhanced by the absence of a Palestinian state and the “historical apparatuses” which could incorporate him into a coherent national historical narrative. Moreover, Qassām himself refashioned Islamic traditions for use in the struggle against Zionism and British imperialism in the 1930s. His own practice thereby authorizes reinterpretations of traditions of the past for use in the present.

All these factors make Shaykh al-Qassām a figure particularly available for a variety of interpretations and symbolic uses. The recent operation in which a bomb was placed on a TWA flight and four U.S. citizens killed was carried out by a group named after Shaykh ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Qassām.³ Still invoked to authorize terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, socialism, or nationalism, Qassām remains a powerful historical symbol. This article examines the importance of memories of Qassām today for Palestinians living under Israeli rule.

Historiography of the liberation movement

I will begin by discussing the varying interpretations of Qassām’s significance in Palestinian national historiography produced in the context of the national liberation struggle in the diaspora. For the sake of argument I have schematically distinguished various positions on Qassām which, in any particular historical work, might be combined.

1. Qassām as a Palestinian nationalist. This represents the mainstream PLO position. In this view his primary importance is as the initiator of armed struggle against Zionism and imperialism--a forerunner of the present-day fedayeen. Qassām is taken to embody key symbols of the Palestinian movement, such as sacrifice, martyrdom, struggle, and nationalism. Regarding him as a symbol of unified national struggle, this tendency sets out his biography in vague but hagiographic and heroic

terms. The aim is to reconcile differences, to smoothe over internal struggles. Any hint of the split nature of Qassām's figure is covered over as much as possible.

2. *Qassām as Che Guevara*. This interpretation was common in left-wing Palestinian circles in the late sixties and early seventies. Here Qassām is represented as the organizer of "cells" among the workers and lumpenproletariat of Haifa and the peasants of the Haifa, Jenin, and Nablus districts and the lower Galilee. In November 1935 he led a group of followers into the hills to start a "foco" and to raise the peasantry in revolt.

3. *Qassām as a proto-socialist*. This reading stresses that Qassām recruited his followers almost exclusively from among workers and peasants. It also asserts that he associated with the lower classes to the exclusion of the middle and upper classes because he felt the latter could not be revolutionary. Occasionally it claims, more extravagantly, that he wanted to establish a socialist state in Palestine.

4. *Qassām as a pan-Arab nationalist*. As evidence, this tendency recalls that Qassām was born in the town of Jabla, near Lataqia in present-day Syria, and that he led a guerilla band which fought against the French occupation of Syria from 1918-21. Sentenced to death in absentia by the French mandate authorities, he went into exile in Haifa and carried on the struggle for the liberation of the Arab nation in Palestine. It also claims that in Haifa he belonged to the Istiqlāl party, a radical middle-class pan-Arab grouping.

5. *Qassām as a Muslim mujāhid*. This interpretation emphasizes Qassām's descent from religious families on both his father's and mother's side, his education at al-Azhar Islamic university in Cairo (where he may have studied with the famous Islamic reformer Muḥammad 'Abduh), his work as a mosque preacher in Jabla and in Haifa, and his leadership role in the Haifa Young Men's Muslim Association. He preached political struggle which took the form of a strictly Islamic *jihād*, and read the Qur'ān and the Islamic tradition so as to give primacy to *jihād* over all else. This view generally incorporates or subsumes Qassām's (usually) acknowledged nationalism within the broader category of Islam.

Qassām in Israeli history

Edward Said's observation that "Zionism came fully into its own by actively destroying as many Arab traces as it could"⁴ accurately describes how the Israeli "historical apparatuses", including scholarly writing, function to efface and to marginalize Palestinian history. Israeli scholars, who perform the job of *discrediting* the traditions of the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine, posit Qassām as a forerunner of

today's Palestinian "terrorists".⁵ In this they follow the tradition of the earlier British counterinsurgency (and Orientalist) discourse which labelled Qassām and his followers "outlaws," "bandits", "bearded sheikhs," and "fanatics."

Outside the academic sphere, Israeli government policies work actively to obliterate the narrative of Palestinian-Arab history and to advance an Israeli-Jewish one. Israel's "historical apparatuses" do this most directly in the domain of historical sites. As the places where the nation's heritage is displayed for all its citizens to see and visit, historical sites are crucial for the construction and perpetuation of a national historical memory.⁶ In the settler-colonial scene, however, Israeli national heritage asserts itself not merely by erecting monuments to its own "dynamic" history but also through demolishing "native" historical sites or allowing them to fall into ruin. If traces of native sites remain at all, they stand as mute testimony--in the minds of the colonialists--to the "decayed" and "past" nature of native culture. The general tendency of Israeli policy, however, is to destroy without leaving a trace, for the colonizers recognize that even the barest trace is a mnemonic aid for the colonized, whose recollections pose a threat.

Such has been the fate of sites associated with 'Izz al-Dīn al-Qassām. Today one can only locate with difficulty his grave at Balad al-Shaykh, the object of pilgrimage during the '36-'39 revolt. Balad al-Shaykh has been turned into Yagur, an exclusively Jewish suburb of Haifa, and its former Arab residents made refugees. Its cemetery has fallen into disuse and disrepair; Qassām's tombstone has been knocked over. The spot where Qassām fell in Ya'bad forest, on the other hand, is not marked at all. Some but not all residents of nearby villages can lead you to the spot where--legend has it--the shaykh met his end.

Israeli official policy also restricts Palestinian efforts at learning and perpetuating their history. Palestinians who wish to acquire books about their history published in the diaspora face countless difficulties. Customs officials often seize books imported from abroad at the border, and the military authorities have banned hundreds of titles dealing with Palestinian history and culture in the Occupied Territories. The school curricula contain very little in the way of Palestinian history. Only at the university do Palestinians have an opportunity to study their history in any systematic way. But even there, books are hard to obtain, and inside the Occupied Territories students are often arrested when caught in possession of their assigned texts on Palestinian history. Books and historical knowledge circulate privately, unofficially, circumspectly.

Furthermore, to make symbolic use of Qassām in a literary work can be a punishable offense. Samī Kīlānī, a writer from the village of Ya‘bad, was put on trial for publishing a volume of poetry entitled *Wa‘d Jadīd li-‘Izz al-Dīn al-Qassām* (“A New Promise to al-Qassām”) in 1982.⁷ The formal charge brought against him by the military was that the use of Qassām’s name in poetry was a form of “incitement.” When they failed to convict him in court, the authorities put Kīlānī under town arrest (for which no charge or trial is needed) from December 1982 to October 1985, and then under administrative detention.

Histories of Qassām in the Occupied Territories

In the face of the occupation, and despite the absence of a state, “national” Palestinian institutions (universities, research institutes) in the Occupied Territories are sponsoring increasing numbers of studies of Palestinian history. Among these is a recent monograph on Qassām by Samīḥ Ḥammūda.⁸ Ḥammūda’s work makes an important scholarly contribution through its extensive use of secondary sources in Arabic not easily available in the occupied territories and an appendix which reproduces a number of significant documents. But while his style of presentation is academic, Ḥammūda reads the meaning of Qassām through the grid of a militantly Islamic position. Qassām’s struggle, Ḥammūda asserts, was an Islamic *jihād* against “the West” and its ongoing “Crusades” against the Islamic peoples. Therefore Qassām organized the Young Men’s Muslim Associations not just to fight against imperialism, but to struggle against the YMCA’s and Christian missionaries as well. Ḥammūda bemoans the fact that today, in contrast to the 1930’s when men like Qassām played a leading role in the movement, the “men of religion” have disappeared from the Palestinian leadership. The current leaders, he asserts, are Westernized and secularist. In his day, Qassām preached against such educated and cultured urban Palestinians who were unable to confront the West because they were contaminated by Western materialist values and had abandoned all spiritual ones. The lesson of Qassām, Ḥammūda argues, is that in order to defeat “the West” and Zionism, Palestinians must return to Islam and leadership by the men of religion. The “return” he advocates is not, however, to the quiescent Islam propagated by today’s mainstream religious leaders, but to the militant Islam of Qassām.

Another recent study of Qassām, by Najāḥ University professor ‘Abd al-Sattār Qāsim⁹, is less substantive than Ḥammūda’s but nonetheless of interest here because he too uses Qassām to advance political positions critical of the current Palestinian leadership. Qassām, argues Qāsim, was no “traditionalist,” for Islam is essentially a religion of

renewal and modernization. But he does not call either for a return to Islam or for the restoration of the “men of religion” to political leadership. Instead, Q̄asim employs a “political” interpretation of Qassām’s meaning to argue against a return to religion. Today’s Palestinian religious leaders, he argues, are by contrast with Qassām too fanatical and too engrossed in religious affairs to be able to speak clearly about current political conditions.

Professor Q̄asim emphasizes the radical difference between the militancy of Qassām in confronting Zionism and British imperialism and the cautious policies of the traditional leadership of that era. Q̄asim disparages by implication what he sees as a similar timidity and lack of combativeness among today’s Palestinian chiefs. Instead of following a strategy of negotiations with the imperialists, as Ḥājj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī did in the 1930’s, today’s leaders should imitate the practice of Qassām who favored armed confrontation. Finally, Q̄asim sees Qassām as significant in that he represented, potentially, what might have been a centralized leadership for the insurgent Palestinian movement. The tragedy of Qassām’s death was that it robbed the subsequent armed revolt of 1936-39 of a central leadership, he argues. Clearly, Q̄asim sees a unified and centralized command as essential to victory over imperialism. Both Q̄asim’s and Ḥammūda’s studies are significant for their deployment of the figure of Qassām to make implicit, but muted, criticisms of the policies of the PLO mainstream. They illustrate recent tendencies within the national movement on the West Bank both to reanimate Qassām’s memory and to use it to make political statements.¹⁰

Memories of Qassām

Both Ḥammūda and Q̄asim draw on oral interviews with contemporaries of Qassām to buttress their conclusions. Thus both make use of a form of historical consciousness that some historians have conceptualized as “popular memory”.¹¹ A people’s historical memory is not autonomous from dominant representations of the past. Rather, it is constituted in relation to dominant memory--the histories issuing from the institutions broadly controlled by the leading classes. In addition, popular memories are constantly reworked and revised in the light of more recent experiences. Among Palestinians living under Israeli rule, historical memory is constituted in relation to two kinds of dominant memory--that of the Palestinian national movement and that of the Israeli state apparatuses. The relation of popular historical consciousness to the Israeli historical apparatuses is overwhelmingly hostile. The chief impact of the Zionist historical narrative upon stories told about Qassām is to incite a nationalist gloss. The other source of dominant memory--the Palestinian national leadership-- has, as we have seen, difficulty in ad-

vancing its version of history among the people. In the absence of a Palestinian state, the national historical narrative is not well-developed in terms of specifics, and no hegemonic “national” interpretation of Qassām has been imprinted upon people’s minds. A general kind of mainstream interpretation of Palestinian history does have an effect on people’s memories, but nevertheless stories circulate about Qassām which are relatively autonomous from dominant national discourses. Although real substantive historical knowledges are *localized* in villages where Qassām visited or where he had followers, populist interpretations of Qassām’s political meaning are also elaborated within a wider political arena.

My discussion here does not pretend to be a statistical survey of popular opinions regarding Qassām. It is based on interviews with a number of participants in the 1936-39 revolt, some of whom knew Qassām personally, in Palestinian villages in the West Bank and Israel. I also base it upon informal discussions with Palestinian friends and acquaintances.

In Qassām’s time, migration from the countryside to cities like Haifa was in full swing. In the late 1920’s Haifa became the focal point of British economic and strategic interests. As the terminus of the IPC oil pipeline from Iraq (which fuelled the British navy in the Eastern Mediterranean) and the site of oil refineries and a modern harbor which was a base for the British navy, its economy was booming. Haifa was also a center of Jewish economic development; at the same time, the Arab population and Arab commercial-industrial sector grew there at a somewhat slower pace.

Nationalist histories (Ḥammūda for instance) assign the blame for rural-to-urban migration solely to the Zionist purchases of land from big Arab landowners, which resulted in thousands of peasants being forced off their traditional lands. Villagers, however, tell of being both pushed and pulled to Haifa. They adduce general economic problems, usually defined in individual terms, as causes for moving to Haifa. Official sources speak of rising and more efficient collection of taxes, a decline in the price of agricultural exports, and the general pressures on the land caused by population growth and Zionist purchases, all combining to force a number of peasants into debt, default, and migration. At the same time, the promise of wage labor attracted both destitute and ambitious villagers to move to urban centers.

Men (often without their families) migrated to Haifa mainly from villages in the Haifa, Jenin and Nablus districts and from the lower Galilee.¹² My co-interviewer and I spoke to a number of men from such villages who worked in Haifa in the thirties, all of them as unskilled, casual, and seasonal laborers--at quarries or the railroad, in portage

or small workshops. In this they are representative of the marginalized position that Arab workers occupied in Haifa. Jewish labor by contrast organized--under the slogan *'avodah 'ivrit* (Hebrew labor)--to take for itself most of the skilled positions and to fill as many places as possible in Jewish-owned enterprises. The Palestinian villagers recall living alongside thousands of other workers and casual laborers in shanty-towns of tin huts (*barrakiyāt*) on the outskirts of Haifa. They assert that trade-union activity among Arab laborers was very limited at that time. And by-and-large, they do not recall even the names of the political parties which were organized in the cities in the 1930's.

They do, however, vividly recall Qassām, whose preaching and organizing in al-Istiqlāl Mosque and in the Young Men's Muslim Association seems to have been the most significant "political" activity for the lower classes of Haifa. In the absence of effective trade-union, socialist, or Communist movements, and given the relatively limited influence of the radical middle-class Istiqlāl party, a number of workers, lumpen-proletariat, and "shuffling petit bourgeoisie" of Haifa were recruited by Qassām's reformist, orthodox version of Islam.¹³ In addition, those who still resided in their villages tell of hearing Qassām preach when they travelled to Haifa on Friday to attend services at al-Istiqlāl Mosque. A substantial number of villagers seems to have made this trip on a weekly basis, attracted by Qassām's dynamism and the message of his sermons. Qassām also made use of his urban followers' links to their villages and his position of *ma'dhūn* (marriage registrar) to make contacts when he visited the villages of the Jenin, Nablus and lower Galilee districts. Several villagers told of meeting Qassām on such occasions.

By contrast with Qassām's era, rural-to-urban migration from Arab villages in historic Palestine is limited today by Israeli government policy. While 70,000 West-Bankers--one-half of all waged workers in the West Bank--commute to work inside Israel each day, they are prohibited from settling (or even staying overnight) in the urban areas where they work. Arab citizens of Israel, even more proletarianized than West Bankers, are actively inhibited from settling in the cities of Israel. Conrary to "normal" patterns, the bulk of this growing Palestinian working class resides in villages, not in the cities where they work. A surprising sixty percent of the population of the West Bank lives in villages. The migration that occurs from the West Bank, which is substantial, is destined abroad. But these emigrants' ties to the foreign countries in which they reside are weak. The village of origin is always "home": the site of emotional attachment and the destination of substantial remittances. The net effect of Israeli policies therefore is to "preserve" villages and their rural culture--albeit in somewhat artificial form. In like manner, memories of Qassām too are "preserved."

One way in which elderly male villagers “remember” Qassām which accords with mainstream nationalist interpretations is as the prototype for the fedayeen. Villagers recall seeing Qassām preaching *jihād* at al-Istiqlāl Mosque with a gun or a sword in his hand. One of Qassām’s followers recounts a sermon in which the shaykh urged the bootblack to exchange his shoebrush for a revolver and to shoot the Englishmen rather than polish their shoes. Similarly he called on the streetsweeper to trade in his broom for a rifle and kill the English, the enemies of his country. Obey God and the Prophet, Qassām preached, but not the British High Commissioner.

Also in accordance with mainstream nationalism, Qassām is remembered as one who sacrificed for the nation. Besides being a martyr, his whole life was devoted to that cause. Qassām sold his belongings, they say, to purchase a rifle, and his followers, despite their poverty, likewise purchased weapons out of their own pockets. In addition, Qassām lived “with the people” in the poor quarters of Haifa, not in middle-class districts.

Other stories of Qassām dovetail with a mainstream political culture which greatly values the leader and “leadership.” Most stories portray Qassām as sole leader of the movement, the one who took the initiative and whom others followed. Furthermore, by comparison with almost all the leaders of the 1936-39 revolt--who are often criticized for their mistakes by villagers--the person of Qassām is venerated to a remarkable degree.¹⁴ Qassām is well-nigh universally respected and praised for his good character and for noble deeds.¹⁵

Elements of a more “populist” interpretation of Qassām coexist with these mainstream ones. The men whom Qassām recruited, villagers stress, were all poor *fallahīn* and workers. We need to examine such assertions in conjunction with other statements that villagers repeat again and again: “The peasants--not the city-people, ‘made’ the 1936-39 revolt”; “If the rich had sacrificed one-tenth as much as the poor did for the revolt, it would have succeeded.” These are manifestations of a rudimentary class-based interpretation of Qassām’s movement and the revolt that circulates in villages. Moreover, not all accounts consider Qassām the sole leader of the movement, as one of his followers claims that group decisions were made in the course of discussions, not by Qassām alone.¹⁶

The nature of Qassām’s relationship to Ḥājj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī, the Mufti of Jerusalem, President of the Supreme Muslim Council, and the leader of the Palestinian nationalist movement is also a matter of dispute. In general, elderly villagers have a continuist view of the political and armed struggle. They see it as a single narrative, in accordance with

how the mainstream leadership would like the revolt to be regarded. The usual story they tell is of how Qassām launched the revolt, and others, under the leadership of Ḥajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī, then took it up. But a different story also circulates: that Qassām requested aid to start an armed rebellion from Ḥajj Amīn, who refused, saying the time was not yet right. This version sees Qassām's movement as a challenge to the traditional leadership which preferred peaceful negotiations with the British to armed confrontation.

Villagers also recall Qassām as a very religious man, and they tell how he and his men prayed five times a day even though they were being hunted in the hills by the British. But no village elder remembered Qassām as an Islamic "fundamentalist" in the modern sense. Several men emphasized that Qassām's Islam should be distinguished from the "fanatical," dogmatic practices of many of those active today under the banner of religion. This stress on Qassām's religiosity can also be taken as a description of his good character as much as an expression of devotion to "religion" *per se*.¹⁷

Outside of the villages where Qassām was known personally, such details and stories are less well-known. But we do find, among the Palestinian "general public," knowledges which reflect a similar mixture of populist and mainstream interpretations of Qassām. What is most significant is the extent to which Palestinians in the West Bank spontaneously associate the name Qassām with the 1936-39 revolt--despite the fact that while Qassām sparked the revolt he did not actually fight in it. By contrast with Qassām, the actual commanders of the revolt (such as 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Ḥajj Muḥammad, Abū Durra, 'Arif 'Abd al-Rāziq, Abū Ibrāhīm al-Kabīr) are nowhere near as important figures in popular memory as Qassām, nor are they popular subjects for historical study or artistic representation.¹⁸ Qassām's identification with the revolt is so powerful that many Palestinians--including some ex-fighters--reconstruct the chronology of the 1936-39 period so that Qassām goes into the hills, as the first armed fighter in the revolt, after the strike of 1936. (Whereas the "real" chronology is: 1) Qassām dies, November 1935; 2) the strike begins, April 1936; 3) armed bands appear, mid-May 1936).

Not only is the name Qassām inextricably tied, in the minds of Palestinians, to the 1936-39 revolt, but unlike any other figure associated with the revolt, his reputation as a political leader is virtually untarnished. In part this is because, unlike the others, Qassām was never an actual commander responsible for a particular region. In contrast to the commanders who implemented policies affecting people's lives, Qassām is remembered chiefly as a martyr.¹⁹ Another factor identifying Qassām

with the revolt is that he is regarded as the originator of Palestinian armed struggle. Qassām marks a beginning for both the fighters of 1936-39 and the fedayeen of today. Furthermore, Qassām is often designated (by Ḥammūda, for instance) as the first person in Palestine to engage in armed struggle against Zionism and imperialism. In fact, others picked up the gun before Qassām--for instance, the Abū Kishk tribe which attacked Petach Tikva in 1920 and Aḥmad Ṭāfīsh's Green Hand Gang in the Safad area in 1929--but probably due to the organized nature of his movement, Qassām is regarded as an origin.

The act of associating Qassām with the revolt can also be seen, in the current context, as a nationalist move. For as the symbol of the 1936-39 revolt, Qassām represents it as an unblemished story of militant struggle, sacrifice, and heroism. When they choose Qassām as a symbol for their "Great Revolt," Palestinians invest its memory with only the best and most nationalist characteristics. If popular memory is constituted in relation to dominant memory, then Palestinian memories of Qassām as the symbol of revolt are a response to Zionist efforts to denigrate and efface the history of their struggles. As a riposte to Israeli historiography, Palestinians propose Qassām as a "pure" and honorable symbol of revolt. Against official Israeli narratives, Palestinians remember the revolt in its finest trappings. To recall the revolt through the agency of Qassām entails at the same time an active "forgetting" that is nationalist as well. For it allows the negative aspects of the revolt--the stories that people tell privately, of betrayal, of individuals using the revolt for personal gain, of robbery and assassination--to be, for the moment, in the face of enemy defamations, forgotten.

It is in this dialogue of conflict with the enemy that Qassām is presented, univocally, as the primary symbol of both the revolt of 1936-39 and of the Palestinian spirit of revolt in general. As the originary source of the armed resistance, as an unsullied symbol of pure rebellion, virtually all Palestinians can agree on his national importance. At the level of the ideological conflict between the colonizer and the colonized, the figure whom the oppressor characterizes as a fanatical terrorist, the oppressed regard as a hero with saintly virtues. At the same time, within the ranks of the colonized, there is considerable discussion and controversy over the meaning of this historical personage. Qassām is a symbol who on the one level is the source or focus of remarkable agreement--as both the popular classes and the national movement have substantial investments in defending him against vilification and throwing him up as a symbol of resistance. At another level, he is the locus of political arguments.

Within the Palestinian movement, then, the symbol “Qassām” possesses broad appeal. He is a truly national figure whom all political tendencies wish to claim as their own.²⁰ In part this is because, in the absence of a Palestinian state, Qassām’s historical identity has not been fixed within a single hegemonic narrative. Since they are not pinned down in a cohesive, state-sponsored narrative, the elements of his career are susceptible to a variety of readings which could authorize any number of political positions. As he has been represented, Qassām is a symbol who provides rich opportunities for the construction of narratives. The power he possesses for mobilization lies in part in the fact that the inability to fix him makes him available to a number of interpretations. Since there is no one authorized version of Qassām, everyone can participate in constructing meanings out of him. This absence of a sanctioned biography, this lack of a hegemonic version, contributes to making of Qassām a truly national symbol.

In addition, it is only with a measure of selectivity that any particular Palestinian political camp can fit Qassām into its political discourse. Qassām’s independence from the traditional Palestinian leadership and his roots among workers and peasants make him difficult to assimilate to the narrative of today’s mainstream leadership. The fact that he organized among the lower classes makes it difficult for today’s Islamic groups, who are removed from these milieus, to fully assimilate him as an authorizing figure. Even in his own time his activity was innovative for an Islamic revivalist: his efforts to mobilize the lower classes distinguish him from an Islamic reformer like Ḥassan al-Banna, the famous leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, who in the same era made the lower middle class the focus of his organizing. For the left, the strictly religious form taken by Qassām’s discourse makes problematic the claim that he was a proto-socialist. Yet he cannot easily be dismissed, from the standpoint of a more secular present, simply as a traditionalist. For Qassām practiced an active rereading and reinterpretation of the Islamic tradition, which he used to understand and to confront colonialism and Zionism, in that present. There seems to be no single, available “truth” about him.

Popular historical memory and interpretation of Qassām is similarly contradictory. Within popular memory, and often within the recollections of a single person, we find elements of both official nationalist interpretations of Qassām which assimilate him to a narrative of a unified national struggle, and more “populist” versions stressing the initiative of peasants and urban workers in bringing about the revolt and Qassām’s identification with them. In the absence of a state, the

dominant narrative is not “hegemonic”: it is not a coherent interpretation that has taken a strong hold on popular consciousness. The mainstream interpretations do have considerable influence, but populist interpretations of Qassām proliferate and are not actively suppressed by the dominant ones. As an historical symbol, as the authorizer of political action in the present, Qassām’s significance remains indeterminate. At the same time, this very indeterminacy makes him a popular and powerful figure whom all can claim for use in the struggle against the Zionist occupier.

Site of struggle, symbol of struggle

I conclude with two anecdotes to illustrate both the continued symbolic importance of Qassām and the difficulties Palestinians encounter when they try to uphold his importance.

The fiftieth anniversary of Qassām’s martyrdom was marked at Birzeit University by a panel discussion in which Samīḥ Hammūda and ‘Abd al-Sattar Qāsīm, among others, participated. It should be noted that in the absence of a Palestinian state, Birzeit University and other such institutions function as de facto “national” institutions, and so events such as this one have a national significance.

As it turned out, however, November 21, 1985 was also the first anniversary of the death of a Birzeit student shot down by Israeli soldiers in the course of demonstrations on campus. Birzeit University students called a strike on that same day, and the vast majority of students attended the meeting held in memory of the martyred student rather than that commemorating the martyrdom of Qassām. Faculty members composed the bulk of the rather small audience that attended the Qassām panel, which took place at the same time as the student assembly. The program was lively and worthwhile—but completely overshadowed by more immediate political concern.

The second anecdote was recounted by residents of Nazlat Shaykh Zayd, a hamlet close to the site of the battle in which Qassām died. A couple of years ago, some Israelis went to Nazlat Shaykh Zayd and asked some men there, “Can you tell us where was Qassām killed?” They replied, “He died over there, on top of the ridge.” A few weeks or months later, work began on a Jewish settlement, on the spot at which the Palestinian villagers had pointed. Fortunately, I was told, the villagers lied to the Israelis, for everyone knows that Qassām was martyred in a valley below Nazlat Shaykh Zayd, between it and the hilltop on which the new Jewish settlement of Shoqayd now stands. But the settlement is expanding, and construction moves closer and closer to the site of the historic battle.

This story illustrates how deeply Palestinians feel the threat that Israeli policies pose both to their historical heritage and to their continued survival on the land of Palestine. The villagers tell it to show how, even in an instance in which a piece of land was lost to a settlement, they were able to outwit the Israelis and preserve Qassām's memory. It is a tale, then, of a small victory. But, as I mentioned earlier, no plaque or monument marks the spot where Qassām fell. People from Ya'bad and Nazlat Shakh Zayd spontaneously state the desirability of having a commemorative marker, but at the same time are certain that the Israeli authorities would destroy it. The left-leaning Union of Construction and General Workers at Ya'bad started a campaign to erect a monument, but it is very short on funds and is constantly harrassed by the military authorities who have seized its records and imprisoned its leaders on numerous occasions. The union hoped to get support for building a memorial from the Center for the Revival of Arab Heritage at al-Ṭayibeh (an Arab village inside Israel) headed by Ṣāleh Baransī. But the Center also faces repression: the Israeli government obstructed the Center's efforts to hold its annual folk festival in September 1985, and Ṣālih Baransī himself was placed under town arrest for six months in December. As far as I know, the site of Qassām's martyrdom remains unmarked.

These stories illustrate some of the problems Palestinians face in trying to preserve and revive their historical memory. Their history is so full of martyrs that memories of even the most significant ones of the past tend to recede in the face of more recent victims. New and significant memories are constantly being written over the text of older ones. The stories also highlight the very real oppression which threatens those who attempt to reanimate Qassām's symbolic importance. Palestinians who live under Israeli rule are caught in the same dilemma as the survivors of the 1982 Israeli siege of Beirut, urged by Edward Said to write up their memoirs and to begin building an historical archive of this significant event. Most of them, Said recalls, were so caught up in the continuing every-day problems of survival in war-torn Beirut that they were unable to write.²¹ Likewise, those who are actively seeking to preserve Qassām's memory in the face of Zionist policies and are attempting to reanimate his memory to progressive political ends, face tremendous obstacles. Qassām, however, remains a powerful symbol of struggle that circulates within the population even in the absence of a Palestinian state. This is why Israeli colonizers keep trying to efface him from history. But as we have seen the memory of Qassām is already inscribed and continues to be reinscribed into the land of Palestine.

Notes:

[Part of the field research upon which this article is based was conducted in collaboration with Sonia Nimr, Department of History, University of Exeter. The conclusions advanced here, however, are strictly my own.]

1. India Office Library, L/P&S/12/3343 Coll 26/2.
2. Swedenburg, Ted. "The Role of the Palestinian Peasantry in the Great Revolt (1936-39)." In Edmund Burke III and Ira Lapidus, eds., *Islam, Politics, and Social Movements*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).
3. *Washington Post*, April 4, 1986.
4. *The Question of Palestine*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 103.
5. For instance, Shai Lachman, "Arab Rebellion and Terrorism in Palestine 1929-39: The Case of Sheikh Izz al-Din al-Qassām and his Movement." In Elie Kedourie and Sylvia Haim, eds., *Zionism and Arabism in Palestine and Israel* (London: Frank Cass, 1982), pp. 52-99.
6. Michael Bommers and Patrick Wright, "'Charms of Residence': The Public and the Past." In Richard Johnson et al, eds., *Making Histories*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 253-302.
7. Jerusalem: Manshūrāt al-ruwwād.
8. *Al-wā'ī wa-al-thawra* [Consciousness and Revolt], (Jerusalem: Jām'ia al-dirāsāt al-'arabiyya, 1985).
9. *Al-shaykh al-mujāhid 'Izz al-Dīn al-Qassām* (Beirut: Dār al'umma li-al-nashr, 1984). [Despite the Beirut publisher, this book appears to have been printed in the West Bank.]
10. The fact that Ḥammūda's work is published by the Arab Studies Society, however, an institution whose position is generally mainstream, shows that its implicit criticisms are perhaps recoverable.
11. Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method." In Richard Johnson et al, *Op cit*, pp. 205-52.
12. They even came from as far away as the Hawran and Egypt. In 1933 *Davar* (November 30) reported that there were between 2000 and 2500 Arab workers in Haifa from the Jenin-Nablus district, thousands from villages in the Haifa area, 1000 from the Hawran, several hundred from Syria, and 80 to 100 from Egypt. (Cited in Central Zionist Archives S25/10. 499.)
13. Large numbers of stone masons, for instance, reportedly were followers of Qassām (Ḥammūda, p. 52). When "Hawrani" (the generic name given to Arabs of rural origin who migrated to work in cities) wood transporters at Haifa port went out on strike against low wages and long hours in January 1935, they turned to the "Moslem Youth Organization" (the YMMA, of which Qassām was president) for help, and it "interested itself in the affair" (*Davar*, January 22, 1935, cited in Central Zionist Archive, *ibid*). Workers were also involved in activities organized by Qassāmites to commemorate the Prophet's birthday. Thousands of workers, raising slogans invoking the early Islamic conquest, marched in processions led by Qassām's organization on this occasion (Ḥammūda, p. 63). In 1934 British intelligence reported that "young agitators" (undoubtedly Qassāmites) at Haifa were expanding the scope of the *mawlid al-nabī* festivities by politicizing them and inviting villagers to participate in them. These "agitators" attempted to create disturbances by guiding the processions--which were punctuated by political speeches and in which flags and swords were much in evidence--through Jewish sections of the city. (India Office Library, *op cit*).
14. The major exception--'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Ḥājj Muḥammad--is much less well-remembered than Qassām.
15. One informant asserts that Qassām was descended from a saint.

16. There is archival evidence that the Qassāmite movement was a much more collective than official Palestinian historiography would suggest (for instance, Tegart Papers, Box 1 File 3C, Middle East Centre, St. Antony's, Oxford).
17. Abdullah Schleiffer ("The Life and Thought of 'Izz-id-Din al-Qassām," *Islamic Quarterly* 23 (2), 1979, pp. 69-71), argues that for Qassām, good character and moral reform were more important in *jihād* than bravery in battle. In fact the "greater *jihād*" was the *jihād al-nafs* (the struggle against the self): striving to be honest and truthful, and depriving oneself of *ḥarām* or forbidden pleasures.
18. A biography of 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Ḥājj Muḥammad, however, was published in Amman in 1984.
19. Two revolt commanders who enjoy good reputations (although not as unblemished as Qassām's), 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Ḥājj Muḥammad and 'Abd al-Qādir al-Ḥusaynī, were also battlefield martyrs--the former in 1939, the latter in 1948. But neither one has been taken up as a symbol for the revolt the way that Qassām is.
20. Qassām's nationalist status is purchased, however, with a certain amount of distortion. Palestinian historiography is silent about Qassām's activities during World War I, which do not accord with what is expected of an Arab national hero's career. Schleiffer (pp. 64-65) reports that not only was Qassām probably not involved in the anti-Ottoman Arab national movement during the war, but he requested a military assignment and was posted as a chaplain to the Ottoman garrison at Damascus.
21. "Permission to Narrate," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 51, (1984). p. 38.