

Flag:

Power and Identity in the Israeli Space: Problematizing Symbols

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Shared Homeland Paradigm project.

*Author's note on terminology: In a previous version of this essay, I used the name "Jaffa" throughout. This version uses "Yaffa," the Arabic name for the city, restored deliberately as a political and linguistic choice. Naming is, itself, one of the essay's central concerns –the argument below devotes an entire section to the practice of naming as an act of resistance to erasure. Using "Yaffa" rather than "Jaffa" enacts, in miniature, the same argument the essay makes about flags: that the terms we inherit are not neutral, and that choosing among them is already a political act.

The Flag as a Word I Could Not Escape

There is a word I have circled for years without the courage to take apart: flag. It is everywhere – stitched into fabric, raised on poles, painted on walls, planted on rooftops, carried through streets with a fervour that feels, to me, less like celebration than inscription. I grew up in a landscape saturated with flags. In Yaffa, where I spent much of my childhood, the flag was not a backdrop. It was a statement addressed to us, to Palestinian families, to Arab residents, to those whose presence the flag was implicitly contesting. Long before I had the vocabulary of Foucault or Said, I understood that this symbol was doing something to space: claiming it, marking it, drawing a line around who belonged and who did not. This paper treats the flag not as a given but as a lexical and political problem. What does this word currently mean and do? What power does it carry? And, more speculatively, what might it mean if released from the frameworks of separation, ownership, and national supremacy that currently define it? These are personal questions as much as theoretical ones, and I think that is exactly why they belong here.

The Flag in the Separation Paradigm

Within the 'separation paradigm,' the flag operates as one of the primary technologies of national identity. It does not simply represent a nation – it produces it. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) taught us that national traditions, including symbols, are inventions, constructed and deployed in service of political projects. Anderson's (1983) concept of the imagined community is illuminating: the flag asks us to feel belonging toward millions we will never meet, and distinction from millions we live alongside daily. In the Israeli context this distinction is enforced in law, planning policy, housing allocation, and the architecture of the city itself.

Said (1979) described colonial power as inscribing itself onto geography, producing a landscape that speaks the coloniser's language. When flags are raised on houses in Sheikh Jarrah: homes from which Palestinian families have been expelled through a legal apparatus widely condemned internationally – the flag is not marking a home. It is marking a conquest.

I am often asked whether my critique targets a particular political formation, the settler movement, the messianic right, rather than the symbol itself. But when I watched the secular, largely Ashkenazi 'Kaplanist' protesters marching under the Israeli flag in defence of the judiciary, I did not experience their flags as fundamentally different from the settler flags in Sheikh Jarrah. The ideological commitments differed; the operation performed by the sign did not. It asserted the primacy of Jewish national belonging in a space that contains, and has always contained, an Arab population whose belonging is rendered secondary.

Bhabha (1994) writes of the ambivalence at the heart of colonial discourse, whereby national symbols simultaneously demand and defer recognition. The Palestinian experience of the Israeli flag is saturated with this ambivalence: it does not say you are not here, it says you are here, but this is not yours. It acknowledges presence while denying belonging. Butler (2009), writing on the frames that determine whose lives are grievable, offers a related lens: flags determine what counts as legitimate habitation. In Yaffa's Ajami neighbourhood, buildings purchased by incoming investors are marked with Israeli flags framed as mere assertions of ownership, yet the frame that makes that ownership legible is precisely what the flag installs. Azoulay (2012) goes further, arguing Israeli civil society is constituted through the ongoing expropriation of Palestinian rights, such that the flag is not an innocent symbol captured by extremists, but an emblem of a regime premised from its inception on exclusion.

The Palestinian Flag: Identification Without Apology

I identify with the Palestinian flag, not ambivalently, not as one option among several. It has been carried through generations of dispossession, outlawed, confiscated, burned, and still reappears in clothing, on walls, in rubble. It is not primarily a symbol of nationalism in the abstract; it is the insistence of a people on existing when an entire apparatus has been devoted to their erasure.

I will not manufacture a symmetrical discomfort with the Palestinian flag to appear more objective. The Israeli flag carries the backing of a state, a military, an internationally recognised legal apparatus, and seventy-five years of facts on the ground. The Palestinian flag has been the emblem of a people living under occupation, siege, and displacement. Treating these as symmetrical objects of critique is not rigour; it is a false neutrality that serves the powerful.

I take seriously the observation that the Israeli flag carried genuine emancipatory meaning for many Jews after the Holocaust, the capacity to mark a place as safe after generations when that was denied. The history of Jewish persecution in Europe is real. But it does not dissolve the structure of settler colonialism in Palestine, nor does the terror experienced by Jews in Europe confer legitimacy on the

dispossession of Palestinians in their homeland. Holding both histories –without relativising – is the task, not a contradiction to resolve.

It is also true that the Palestinian flag has not been immune to its own contaminations, through its association with the Palestinian Authority's record of collaboration with the occupation and suppression of dissent. I accept this. But contamination through the failures of those who claim to represent a symbol is not the same as a symbol's constitutive, structural binding to dispossession. The Palestinian flag can be reclaimed and transformed from within; its function is not inherently one of conquest. My argument is not that the Palestinian flag is pure while the Israeli flag is polluted, but that the Israeli flag, in this specific settler-colonial context, performs a structural function that cannot be reformed away.

Berlant's (1997) work on the contradictory affect of national belonging is instructive: a symbol can move you when you would rather it did not. This is the experience of many Palestinians carrying the flag not as triumphalism but as grief, defiance, and attachment exceeding any clean political accounting, and I suspect, the experience of some Israelis pulled toward an identification they do not fully endorse. Affect is not evidence of legitimacy.

And yet my identification with the Palestinian flag does not prevent a harder question, directed not at the Palestinian flag specifically but at the flag as a political form. Fanon (1961) understood that the form of the colonial state; its bureaucracies, borders, symbols – can survive decolonisation if the liberated do not build genuinely new institutions. The question is not whether the Palestinian flag is justified. It is. The question is whether the flag, as a form, can build the kind of future a shared homeland requires, one premised not on replacing one flag with another, but on political life that does not require territorial symbols to assert the right to exist. Mbembe (2019) argues for political forms not premised on the enclosure of belonging, but on habitation as layered and shared. This is not a call to abandon the Palestinian flag. It is a call to think beyond the flag as a form.

Against the Shared Flag

The idea of a shared or confederal flag, on the model of the EU, or the post-apartheid South African flag, is generous in spirit but has real limits. The EU flag functions among sovereign states in voluntary federation, none constituted through the elimination of another's presence. In Palestine-Israel, the Israeli flag does not represent one community among partners; it represents a state constituted through, and still engaged in, the elimination of Palestinian presence. A shared confederal flag placed beside it does not transform that structure, it aestheticises it, producing the appearance of parity where the reality is profound asymmetry.

The South African case is more instructive: the post-apartheid flag did not sit alongside the apartheid-era flag—it replaced it, designed to rupture the old symbolic order. Even so, its symbolic work has remained contested and incomplete. The lesson is not that a shared flag can do the work of justice, but that symbolic work is never finished even when political structures change.

The Confederate flag analogy is apt and troubling: decades after desegregation it continued circulating as an instrument of racial domination. If both the Israeli and Palestinian flags continue flying alongside some new confederal symbol, the Israeli flag will not suddenly become neutral. It will continue carrying the weight of what it has meant and done. The structure must change, and structural change must include not follow, symbolic change.

I am therefore not proposing a better flag, or a shared flag, or a flag placed alongside another. I am proposing the displacement of the flag form itself, at least in this specific context: a different kind of symbol constituted by time rather than territory, by practice rather than possession, by the ongoing choice of people to show up rather than the unilateral act of planting.

Beyond the Flag: A Temporal Instrument

The flag, in the Israeli context, is not a neutral symbol misused by some and used well by others. It is a constitutive instrument of settler colonialism – a structure, as Wolfe (2006) argues, organised around eliminating the indigenous population and replacing their presence with a permanent settler society. The flag inscribes the settler claim onto space and renders Palestinian presence legible only as an obstacle. This is not a function redesign can fix; it is the function the flag was built to perform. Its meaning is inseparable from its location: a flag planted on a house in Ajami means this was taken, and the taking is legitimate. Even the most progressive redesign cannot remove the assertion encoded in the act of planting it on someone else's ground.

What I propose instead is a temporal instrument: political and communal expression constituted not by occupying space but by occurring in time. A ritual, a recurring act, a practice of gathering that marks shared presence without claiming ground. It cannot be performed alone. You cannot plant a ritual on a rooftop at midnight to assert dominion. It requires co-presence, consent, and relation. It exists only when people choose, together, to enact it, and when they stop it leaves no mark on the land, no residue of claim.

Walter Benjamin's (1940) *Jetztzeit*, the 'now-time' rupturing history's continuum, offers one frame: a symbol that irrupts and recedes, leaving behind memory rather than a mark. Soja (1996), developing Lefebvre's (1991) spatial theory, distinguishes lived space from conceived space; the flag operates in the latter, a tool of administrative

claim, while a temporal instrument migrates into the former, the register of experience rather than ownership.

There are precedents. The Jewish practice of sitting shiva marks not territory but loss, requiring communal presence to exist. The Palestinian tradition of Sumud – steadfastness is a practice renewed daily rather than a symbol displayed. Anzaldúa's (1987) borderland consciousness is likewise something inhabited, not raised. A shared date of remembrance acknowledging both the Nakba and the Holocaust not as equivalent but as both real, both deserving witnesses requires people to show up together, year after year, holding both histories without collapsing them into one. This cannot be confiscated. It exists only in the doing.

Gilmore (2022) argues that building new institutions requires first grieving the old order. A temporal instrument adequate to this moment would hold mourning at its centre, not weaponised toward revenge, but creating what Butler (2009) calls conditions of grievability: recognition that every life lost, every family displaced, every olive grove uprooted, deserves witness. This is not a substitute for structural transformation recognition of the Nakba, accountability for ongoing dispossession, the realisation of the right of return remains preconditions. It is an account of what the symbolic vocabulary of a transformed political reality might look like.

Three Propositions

Time. Nakba Day, the 15th of May commemorating the 1948 expulsion of over 700,000 Palestinians, is suppressed by law from public commemoration in Israeli state institutions because the state requires its founding violence to remain unwitnessed. A temporal instrument cannot place Palestinian mourning alongside Israeli celebration as though symmetrical. What is required is the unconditional public witnessing of the Nakba as the date from which any honest reckoning with this land must begin. This is not a calendar; it is a precondition.

Naming. In Yaffa, Hebrew Street names cover Arabic names that cover the memory of houses, orchards, and families — layers buried, not destroyed. A temporal instrument might be the recurring collective act of naming aloud, in public: the villages destroyed in 1948, the families expelled, the orange groves and wells and cemeteries. Drawing on Palestinian oral preservation, this does not resolve ownership. It refuses the amnesia that makes ongoing dispossession possible.

Silence. Silence may be the most radical temporal instrument, because it cannot be co-opted into declaration. I imagine a recurring, citywide silence in Yaffa, Jerusalem, Haifa, and the villages whose Arabic names persist even where their stones have been removed — a suspension of the constant assertion the flag represents. Mbembe (2019)

writes of the right to breathe as a political demand; silence is the acoustic form of that right.

None of these three can be planted, raised, or confiscated, or used to mark a stolen house. They are vulnerable, they can be ignored, co-opted, abandoned, but they cannot be weaponised as the flag can, because their existence depends on people's voluntary, repeated participation. That necessity is not their weakness. It is their politics.

Conclusion: The Unfurling

The flag currently functions as an instrument of ownership, exclusion, and the inscription of national hierarchy into space. Within the separation paradigm it is a technology of enclosure, drawing a line around belonging and enforcing it through law, force, and historical violence.

A shared or confederal flag does not resolve this, at least not in the context analysed here. The problem with the shared flag is not that it is too imaginative but that it is not imaginative enough: it assumes the flag form —territorial, spatial, plantable— can be rehabilitated by adding a layer to it. The form itself is the problem.

What I propose, within a shared homeland paradigm, is a different kind of political instrument altogether, constituted by time, by practice, by the recurring choice of people to gather, witness, name, and fall silent together. It cannot replace the Palestinian flag in its current function as a symbol of survival under occupation, nor is it meant to. But it offers what the flag cannot offer in a post-occupation, shared-homeland future: a way of marking collective presence that requires no territorial sovereignty, that cannot become an instrument of dispossession, that exists only in the doing.

Justice comes first. Recognition of the Nakba, accountability for ongoing dispossession, the right of return cannot be bypassed by inventing new symbols. But what political life looks like after justice, in a land two peoples share without one dominating the other, is a question requiring new forms as well as new policies. We do not yet have the symbolic vocabulary for a politics of shared habitation. This is an invitation to begin building it.

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