



Commemoration in conflict

*Comparing the generation of solidarity at the 1916 Easter Rising
Commemorations in Belfast Northern Ireland and the 1948 ‘Nakba’
Commemorations in Ramallah, Palestine¹*

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Abstract

This article takes as its focus the generation of solidarity through the commemoration of key and defining moments in modern Irish and Palestinian history, namely; the 1916 Easter Rising and the 1948 Palestinian Nakba. The paper explores the means by which annual commemorative rituals that take place in areas experiencing conflict, or a period of transition away from conflict, are constructed in such a way as to strengthen social cohesion between groups for whom the past is relevant. Reflecting on data gathered through semi-structured interviews with key respondents and ethnographic observations made over a three year period, (2010- 2013), the article reveals a more cohesive approach to commemoration in areas where the level of on-going conflict remains particularly high (Palestine) and more fragmented and disjointed ritual activity when the commemoration takes place against the backdrop of relative peace and stability (Northern Ireland). In accounting for the difference in approach to constructing commemorative events against a conflicted or transitional background, the conclusion is reached whereby it is suggested that the relatively peaceful political climate, characterised through a reduction in violence with a once hostile ‘other’, permits for the emergence of heterogeneity, with rival factions permitted space to promote alternative interpretations of the past and different visions for the future through the highly public median of the commemorative ritual. Far from being events that generate a sense of social cohesion between groups for whom the past is relevant, commemorative rituals which take place in a hostile environment can be arenas of dissent; opportunities for marginalised factions to challenge the often state-sponsored hegemonic narrative, thus revealing the limits to the solidarity thesis.

Keywords

Commemoration, Conflict, Irish Republicans, Palestinian Factions, Solidarity

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Introduction

The study of rituals has been the focal point of much anthropological and sociological research ever since Durkheim's (1912) pioneering study in the often-cited text, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The purpose of the comparative work presented in this paper is not on ritual *per se*, rather it focuses on the presentation of solidarity through a special form of ritual performance, namely that of the public commemoration. For the past four years my research interests have centred upon the construction of the commemorative event as a means of expressing solidarity within participating groups for whom the remembered past is relevant. Situated in the context of two cities at different stages on the spectrum of violent conflict, Belfast in Northern Ireland and Ramallah in the West Bank, Palestine, this paper compares the socio-political context in which the two chosen commemorations (the 1916 Easter Rising, and the 1948 Palestinian *Nakba*) take place and reveals the manner in which the events are constructed in such a way as to strengthen solidarity between groups involved in the commemorative act. Such solidarity, it is argued, is particularly important to groups that are in situations of ongoing conflict, or transition from conflict. It is therefore important to note – and this is the point I ultimately arrive at – that what is actually displayed in these commemorative events (sometimes in highly pressurised political and military circumstances) is the *limits* of solidarity.

Commemoration, we find, can be as much about managing (or even displaying) factionalism and dissent as generating solidarity and social cohesion. Availing of qualitative methods deriving from the ethnographic tradition, interviews with key informants and event observation, the research analyses a range of data gathered from two highly significant commemorative events. Those selected – the 1916 Easter Rising commemorations in Belfast and the 1948 Palestinian *Nakba* commemorations in Ramallah – are the most important annual commemorative events for the communities concerned. Data gathered has been analysed thematically and compared so as to provide points of similarity and differentiation in terms of the generation of solidarity at the commemorations in an effort to gauge the level of social cohesion or fragmentation that exists in both settings. This research is situated firmly within socio-anthropological literature on commemoration and seeks to add to the debate on commemoration that takes place in societies experiencing conflict or a period of transition from conflict.

Theoretical framework

Previous research has suggested that studying the presentation of solidarity through important annual commemorative events is one means of analysing the levels of social cohesion that exists in any given society (Etzioni, 2000). Commemorations are considered highly evocative and symbolically resonant rituals that involve the recollection of a seminal or defining moment in the shared history of a chosen group. Like many sociological terms with interdisciplinary appeal, commemoration has been

subject to the widest possible interpretation (Schwartz, 1982; Wagner-Pacifi, 1991; Zelizer, 1995; Connerton, 1989; McBride, 2001; McDowell, 2007; Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002; 2009; Khalili, 2007; Bryan, 2000; Jarman, 1997). Interest in commemorations and their role in society has been a mainstay of much socio-anthropological research which takes as its focus the generation of collective identities through the use of public rituals, with Durkheim's (1912) later work on ritual retaining a prominent position in modern day academic discourse.

Commonly referred to as his 'solidarity thesis' (Bell, 1992), this paper reveals the means by which commemorative rituals in Belfast and Ramallah are constructed in such a way as to strengthen bonds between those taking part in the commemorative activity. Participation in commemorative rituals can help to generate and strengthen bonds between groups for whom the remembered past is relevant, thus satisfying the Durkheimian goal of social cohesion (Kertzer, 1988; Etzioni, 2000). However, when the same event is subject to interpretation and thus commemorated differently, the ritual performance becomes a visible representation of internal dissent and disagreement. For Kertzer (1988), rituals of this nature are an inherently political act wrapped in symbolism, that deliver a specific message to those for whom the remembered past resonates. Whereas this can aid in the generation of group homogeneity and solidarity, it also allows for interpretation; often generating disagreement, dissent and the airing of oppositional identities. Such a conclusion has led some to suggest that rituals of this nature are important tools of the down-trodden (Pfaff and Yang, 2001), those considered marginalised within society, or on the periphery of the group as a whole. As a unique form of ritualised behaviour, commemorations are about memory recall. They are events which invoke certain aspects of the past to, 'communicate shared values within a group... to reduce internal dissension' (Connerton, 1989: 49). Yet when the past, or indeed the present and future direction of the group is disputed; when the shared values within the group as a whole are challenged, the events become useful windows into the fragmented nature of the society under investigation (Etzioni, 2000).

Such a theoretical standpoint has been applied by others, including anthropologists and political scientists conducting research in Northern Ireland. Important studies have analysed the role of other ritual practices that take place across the region, including; Orange Orderⁱⁱ parading rituals and the generation of homogeneity between an economically, politically and socially diverse amalgamation of Ulster Protestants (Lukes, 1975; Jarman, 1997; Bryan, 2000). For the purpose of the following analysis, commemorative events are to be considered a unique form of ritual behaviour, involving groups recalling seminal moments in their shared past history and which, in turn, are re-enacted in the present day to serve a designated purpose. The commemorative event, with the associated public gathering being the particular object of study in this paper, can draw large crowds together in symbolic spaces and at common times with the overall impression being the reinforcement of group solidarity through common action and expression of identity (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002; 2009). However, key to this study is the recognition that their importance for group solidarity means that such commemorative events can also become arenas for rival factions within the collective

grouping to air their grievances, to voice their opposition, or to promote a separate message to that of the dominant narrative. Ross (2009: 16) argues that, 'while there can be significant variation in the specifics of how celebrations are recounted and marked, a common feature is that they are occasions for retelling and enacting a group's narrative'. When this group narrative is subject to interpretation by rival factions, the commemoration can become fragmented and divisive and serve as a means of differentiation between seemingly homogenous groups. As such, the commemoration of seminal moments in a group's shared past becomes an important means of analysing the levels of fragmentation or solidarity that exist within the commemorating society.

Methodological considerations

Through the benefit of a comparative study of two important commemorative events, the observations made in this article highlight the efforts taken to present an image of solidarity in a more violently conflictual setting (Ramallah) whilst providing evidence to suggest a more fragmented (and thus solidarity-limiting) event occurring when the commemoration takes place in a less contested environment (Belfast). The focus of comparison is of two significant annual commemorations in areas said to be experiencing ongoing conflict or emerging from conflict. The differences in both settings in terms of the presentation of solidarity between Irish republicans in Belfast and Palestinians in Ramallah permits generalisable comments on the impact that the political climate of the day (i.e. the socio-political backdrop against which the events take place) has upon the commemoration. The data shared was collected over a three year period, (2009- 2012), encompassing a period of 9 months ethnographic fieldwork based in East Jerusalem, and Ramallah, Palestine and a 12 month period spent researching the organisation of the 1916 Easter Rising commemorations in West Belfast. The qualitative data gathered over the course of the three year period included semi-structured interviews with key informants (those involved in organising the commemorative activity in both settings), and observations of the events as they unfold on the day itself. The data was analysed thematically in order to provide points of similarity or differentiation, with the focus being on generating the required 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) and gaining a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the fragmented or cohesive format of the commemorations in both settings.

Appreciating that comparative studies are not without their critics, many of whom note that they are time consuming, arduous, lacking in generalisable scientific credibility, and therefore best avoided; the reassurances given by leading scholars such as Della-Porta (2002) are noted in which she highlights that the comparative method should not be relied upon to provide definitive results, rather it should be viewed as a thought-provoking method, one that asks more questions than it seeks to answer. Rather than being an impossible task to undertake, with a clear and well-planned research design, comparative research projects are achievable and have the potential to provide results which have a broader appeal, particularly when the comparison is international in scope. Comparative studies have been popular amongst those working

along the boundaries of sociology and similar disciplines including anthropology, politics and history, and despite the criticisms levied against the comparative method, Øyen (1990: 3-4), has suggested that ‘the very nature of sociological research is comparative, and thinking in comparative terms is inherent in sociology’. Or to quote Durkheim (1938: 139) himself, ‘comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology, it is sociology itself’.

Lloyd (1996) has suggested that the only real way to discover the true relationship between various factors is to compare similar cases but in different contexts. As such the study is to be considered comparative, according to Hantrais and Hangen’s categorisation (1996: 1), because one or more units of analysis, ‘are being compared in respect of the same concepts and concerning the systematic analysis of phenomena’ across two similar, yet distinct fields of enquiry. The selected commemorations in Belfast and Ramallah share similarities in terms of their construction, format, and substance. The hostile relationship between the various factions and the ensuing struggle over ownership of the commemorative events in question is apparent in both settings. However, the backdrop against which the commemorations take place provides an interesting point of differentiation, one that allows for greater exploration of the significance of the socio-political climate of the day in which the events take place.

Comparing the Easter 1916 commemorations in Belfast and the *Nakba* in Ramallah

There is no shortage of sample commemorative events that take place in areas experiencing ongoing conflict or a period of transition which could have been the focus of this research. In selecting two such events in Belfast and Ramallah, I demonstrate that commemorations can provide interesting insights into how such social phenomena are the product of intense negotiation between rival factions. Both events compared are the most widely attended and revered annual commemorations amongst the groups selected for the study and are events that remember a defining moment in the collective history of the various factions involved. In Ireland, the Easter Rising of 1916 remains one of the most important and defining moments in modern Irish history. Set against the backdrop of a growing period of European uncertainty characterised by the advent of the First World War; severe political discord about the achievement of Irish Home Rule, coupled with the Irish general public’s vehement opposition to conscription, Irish revolutionary leaders sensed an opportunity to finally gain their independence from Britain. However, the insurrection that took place on Easter Monday 1916 barely resonated beyond the city of Dublin, with the outcome being that the uprising was easily quashed by a combination of British military dominance and the Dublin public’s apathy. In the wake of the failed uprising, the British government took the misguided decision to execute a number of those revolutionary figures involved in planning the uprising, some of whom were among Ireland’s political and literary elite. This seemingly draconian response served to galvanise Irish public opinion against Britain’s ongoing involvement in Irish affairs. It is therefore considered that the 1916 Easter Rising acted as the catalyst for the Irish war of Independence, the outcome of which led to (partial) British withdrawal

from Ireland and the subsequent formation of the Irish Republic in 1921. As a result, Graff-McRae (2010: 15) states that 'the Easter Rising of 1916 has been the key site of memory in twentieth-century Ireland, rivalled only perhaps by the border... There is endless fascination with its history, its ephemera, its traces and residues'. The event is referred to as a watershed in Irish history (Graff-McRae 2010; McBride 2001) and is widely commemorated by republicans across both the north and south of Ireland, not to mention further afield.

Similarly, the 1948 Palestinian *Nakba*, or 'immense catastrophe' as it literally translates from Arabic, remains the seminal moment in Palestinian collective history (Sa'di and Abu- Lughod, 2007). The day, 15th May 1948, recalls the dispossession and displacement of 750-900,000 Palestinians (BADIL), violently usurped from their land to facilitate the creation of what is now, the modern-day state of Israel. Sanbar (2001: 87) notes, 'the contemporary history of the Palestinians turns on a key date: 1948. That year, a country and its people disappeared from maps and dictionaries'. The day is observed by Palestinians across the world as the defining moment in their turbulent past and continues to be an issue that lies at the heart of the modern day Israeli-Palestine conflict. Commemoration of the *Nakba* is the most widely attended event in the crowded Palestinian commemorative calendar, with remembrance marches, parades and similar practices taking place on the same day across the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the greater Levant and elsewhere in the world where Palestinian Diaspora are living.

The vast array of commemorative events that take place in both Belfast and Ramallah suggests the importance with which annual commemorations are viewed by Irish republicans and Palestinians alike. Both have a congested commemorative calendar with a range of annual memorial events designated to recount important moments in the collective groups past. Therefore, perhaps a more pertinent question in terms of the comparison concerns deciding upon the comparability of the selected commemorative events that form the substance of the study. In choosing the 1916 Easter Rising commemorations in Belfast and the *Nakba* commemorations in Ramallah I selected the largest commemorative events in both areas. No other republican commemoration generates as much interest in Belfast as the 1916 Easter Rising events. Similarly, despite the existence of a range of traumatic events that are remembered publically, the *Nakba* is the largest Palestinian commemoration by some margin.

In addition, the prominence of factions and rival groups emanating from the same ideological tradition in both settings makes such a comparison possible. Republicans in Northern Ireland have a long history of being internally divided and factionalised (McBride, 2001). Irish history is chequered with incidents of intra-group split and division (Graff-McRae, 2010). So too is the case in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Internal divisions have resulted in the proliferation of a wide range of diverse political and militant Palestinian groups, with different emphases and ideological positions. In both settings these rival factions take part in the commemorative events under investigation. Although deeply divided along ideological lines, all factions in both sites make use of the same commemorative events. Therefore, in assessing the existence of factions at the commemorative events selected and what this suggests in terms of the solidarity

generated, the cases of Palestinians and the *Nakba* and Irish republicans and the Easter Rising provide an interesting comparison. Moreover, the similarities and differences that are observed in both settings in terms of the events structure, how symbolic space is shared or divided by groups at the commemorations, and the level of inter-factional negotiation that takes place in the lead-up to the events, can be readily compared so as to garner evidence of social cohesion between rival groups or factions as displayed through public commemoration. I suggest that the differences in approach centre upon the socio-political context of the commemoration and the conflictual nature of the commemorating society. Whereas one case study alone could possibly allow for such conclusions to be reached, when compared against a similar event in terms of structure and societal make-up, the strength of the assumptions is exponentially increased.

Commemorating the 1916 Easter Rising in Belfast: segregation and the limits of solidarity

A wide range of interdisciplinary studies have taken as the focus of their analysis the commemoration of this defining moment in modern Irish history (Graff-McRae, 2010; Daly and O’Callaghan, 2007; Fitzpatrick, 2001; McBride, 2001; Conway, 2008; Githens-Mazer, 2006). Whereas the main scholarly focus has been on the appropriation of the memory of the Easter Rising by successive Irish governments, or the manner in which the memory of the Rising has been invoked at defining or formative moments in the nation’s past (50th anniversary, 75th anniversary, etc.); relatively few studies have focussed on the contested nature of the commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising by rival republican groups in Belfast, with observations made by Jarman (1999) and Conway (2008) noted as important earlier contributions. As discussed above, a study of commemorative rituals of this nature can offer a useful insight into the society in which the events take place; they provide the ‘sharp focus for factional and political conflict’ (Fitzpatrick, 2001: 185), none more so is this evident than in the north of the island, more specifically in the city of Belfast. Despite Northern Ireland’s peaceful transition into a “post conflict” environment, the political climate in which these commemorative events take place remains one characterised by inter-community sectarian division. The north of Ireland remains a deeply divided society, both in terms of religious identity, spatial segregation (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006) and political allegiance. However, for the purposes of the following analysis it is the intra-community factionalism as evidenced through public commemorations that is of interest, which serve to act as a means of internal community differentiation. Whereas in the past, commemorations of famous events in Irish history have acted as a means of galvanising groups in conflict with one another, or served the ‘more ambitious intention of reconciling hostile factions through identification of some episode of common inspiration or shared suffering in the past’ (Fitzpatrick, 2001: 186), the contests and battle over the memory and legacy of the 1916 Easter Rising, as presented in the highly fragmented commemorations that take place annually in West Belfast, suggests that memorial rituals of this nature also serve the purpose of drawing lines of distinction between rival groups.

In the north of Ireland, 'since all political factions drew their legitimacy from competing interpretations of the Irish past', (Fitzpatrick, 2001: 203), the Easter commemorations in the city have come to represent 'battlegrounds rather than sites of veneration' (2001: 203). Since the start of the modern day conflict in the north of Irelandⁱⁱⁱ Irish republicans have endured a number of, at times bloody internal feuds and splits, many of which have come as the result of disagreements over the future direction of the group as a whole, or decisions taken to adopt different political strategies at different moments in time. By virtue of the manner in which they have been constructed over time, Easter commemorative activity in West Belfast provides an opportunity for rival republican factions to highlight these divisions and differences that exist within the republican movement rather than serving the predicted Durkheimian goal of strengthening social cohesion. Organisers of commemorative activity in Belfast invoke the memories of the 'martyrs' of the Rising in an attempt to legitimise their existence, to justify their aims, and to discredit the actions of other rival groups in more recent times. In the past, particularly during periods of increased military action, commemorative rituals helped galvanise public support; they became a call to arms for volunteers to join the common cause and to demonstrate, in public, their commitment to the aims of the collective as a whole. However, with the decision taken to embrace a more peaceful transition away from conflict through political means, the ritual performances (Ross, 2007; 2009) have become arenas of dissent with rival republican factions, particularly those disillusioned by decisions taken by the dominant republican group, Sinn Féin, publically voicing derision at separate events organised over the same Easter weekend. Rather than strengthening bonds across the various shades of Irish republicanism, these separate commemorative rituals serve to further harden the lines of differentiation (Ross, 2007) between groups who differ both politically and ideologically.

In Belfast, the 1916 Easter Rising commemorations generate as much intra-group division as they do solidarity. At the time of writing,^{iv} 6 separate 'faction specific' memorial events take place over the course of this two day commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising, including separate events organised by; Republican Sinn Féin, the Irish Republican Socialist Party, the National Graves Association/Sinn Féin, The Workers Party, the Official Republican Movement Commemoration Committee, and Éirígí. Beginning at 10:30am on the Sunday and ending at 2:30pm, Easter Monday, these six separate groups parade to the shared space for Irish republican commemoration in the city, Milltown cemetery at designated timeslots allocated in advance of the day itself. The events are organised and choreographed in such a way as to ensure no two rival factions interact. The reasons for ensuring segregation and division on the day are historically embedded, with a number of respondents referring to violent confrontations in the past when two separate commemorations came into contact:

I remember in the '70s when the Provisional march was coming down the road there, at the same time as the Officials and there was always blood and tears, always. And it was absolute chaos. People have been shot before at these things you know.^v

The links between commemoration and symbolic space are noted in the literature, with Vinitzky-Seroussi (2009) suggesting that the location for the commemorative act itself can be as important as the meaning behind the commemoration itself and can ultimately aid in the generation of group solidarity. Despite the fact that the space in which the various groups gather over the course of the Easter weekend is shared, (with Milltown cemetery, located in the heart of republican West Belfast, the primary republican site of commemoration), demarcation and segregation within the cemetery itself, manifest in the designation of faction specific plots, memorials, and the use of separate parade routes on the day, aids in highlighting the sense of division and fragmentation that exists between republican groups. So too does the allocation of separate assembly points on the day further emphasise the sense of fragmentation. The existence of these separate spaces mirrors the fragmented and fractured nature of Irish republicanism. Even in death, Irish republicans are divided and buried according to their factional allegiances.

The importance attached to performance and the role of symbols at commemorative events is reaffirmed in the literature (Turner, 1967; Bryan, 2000). Kertzer (1988: 12) notes: ‘we communicate through symbols, and one of the more important ways in which such symbolic understandings are communicated is through ritual’. At the events over the course of the Easter weekend in Belfast, a wide range of republican symbolism is used to demarcate the boundaries of group membership. Many symbols are shared across factions, including the Easter Lily (the traditional flower associated with death in Ireland), national flags, and imagery associated with socialist republican leader James Connolly. However, the manner in which these shared symbols are used during the commemoration (including how the Easter Lily is worn, with location of the Lily on the wearer indicating political persuasion, and the positioning of certain flags within the ‘colour party’ of each of the republican parades) acting as a further means of differentiation between groups, as a senior member of the Irish Republican Socialist Party discussed:

When I was in the Fianna,^{vi} away at the start of the troubles... we had to wear it (the Lily) on the left side, and I would still to this day. If you wear it on the left, it is saying that you are left wing, support working class politics and what have you, wearing it on the right was the opposite... A few socialists would not only wear it on the left but also turn theirs to the left.^{vii}

Therefore, one is able to conclude that a further means of presenting an image of fragmentation at the commemorations on the day is through the use of republican symbolism. This is also true in the role of political speeches made at the 1916 Easter Rising commemorations in Belfast. Analysis of the speeches given suggests that the events are seen by groups as opportunities to promote the political message of the commemorating group as one distinct from other factions involved on the day. The speeches made are important indicators of the political power held by each of the groups and the separate rhetoric spoken aids in further hardening the lines of differentiation

(Ross, 2009), as noted during speeches made in 2012 at the National Graves Association/Sinn Féin commemoration

Our party has never been stronger since 1916... There is no, nor has there ever been any other IRA, not in Belfast or anywhere else. There is no need for armed struggle any more... We in Sinn Féin are the proud inheritors of Tone, of Connolly and of those who died in the Easter 1916 Rising, and beforehand in the rebellions of the United Irishmen in 1798 (NGA/SF, Easter commemoration main oration, 8th April 2012).

When considered together, the spatial segregation within the shared space of Milltown cemetery, the designation of separate timeslots in which to commemorate, the appropriation and use of republican symbolism to show group affiliation, and the distinct political rhetoric spoken, all serves to highlight the fragmented nature of the 1916 Easter commemorations in Belfast.

Commemorating the 1948 Palestinian *Nakba* in Ramallah: promoting unity through shared trauma

According to a number of research participants, commemoration of the *Nakba* has been ongoing since the events took place in 1948. Villages, towns and cities were remembered long before any 'official' events were established, as a prominent Palestinian activist in the region outlined:

Nakba commemoration basically started after the *Nakba*, right? So they've always existed and they've always been something really important and special for the Palestinian people. Actual commemorations were always something that happened at the grassroots, and community level. In the refugee camps, people from a certain background, or those who came originally from a certain community, would organise an event to commemorate their own forced displacement.^{viii}

Since the birth of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in 1964, the right of return and the associated refugee issue has been seen as one of the mainstays of Palestinian nationalism. The right of return of refugees is listed as one of the founding principles of the movement. Indeed, for much of its existence, the PLO conducted operations from exiled bases in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Therefore, the events which Palestinians refer to as their *Nakba* have significantly shaped the political and nationalistic aspirations of the Palestinian leadership. As such, 'official' or state-sponsored commemorations were deemed unnecessary at the time given the fact that the entire Palestinian struggle for statehood and liberation was premised on a reversal of events that took place in 1948:

We didn't have these big events back then like we do now because we didn't have to! There was no need. Our whole resistance and movement was based on the need to reverse what had occurred during the Nakba and so the commemorations continued at a local, community level.^{ix}

However, the signing of the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords, and the move towards preparation for Palestinian statehood based on a list of principles agreed upon by the Israeli government and the PLO, pushed the issue of Palestinian refugees and their right of return further down on the list of priorities for the fledgling Palestinian leadership. For many Palestinians living within the Occupied Territories and in the wider Diaspora, it is the crucial issue of redressing the effects of the 1948 *Nakba*, and bringing an end to the ongoing exile of the refugee community that dominates their political thinking. In the absence of any feasible political solution to the refugee issue, the *Nakba* day commemoration has taken on new meaning. The annual commemoration has become a powerful tool of the downtrodden, an important vehicle for highlighting the ongoing plight of Palestinian refugees. Since 1998, the leading refugee rights group operating in the region, BADIL Resource Centre for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights has assumed a key organisation role in planning the annual *Nakba* events:

The decision was taken that we had to do something to keep the refugee issue alive and to make the politicians recognise that the rights of refugees remain as important now as they ever have been, no matter what agreements are made or whatever decisions are taken.^x

However, in 2007, a National Committee for the Commemoration of the Nakba was established under the auspices of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in an attempt to ensure a more coordinated and structured commemoration of the *Nakba*. The central aim of the committee was to bring a wide range of stakeholders together, including; Palestinian non-governmental organisations (PNGOs), refugee camp leaders, community based organisations (CBOs), and political representatives, to agree upon the format and substance of the commemorative activity. The reason for its creation was to ensure political involvement and support for the rights of refugees, a support that has been viewed by many as waning in recent years.^{xi} This perceived lack of political representation for Palestinian refugees has resulted in the growth of a dynamic non-governmental and grassroots led movement, campaigning and commemorating the status of the Palestinian refugees. As a result a complex situation has emerged whereby the commemoration of the *Nakba* now involves a broad spectrum of participants sitting on the national committee, those seemingly committed to the issue of refugees and their right to return, (NGOs, CBOs, and the activist community), and political representatives who appear to have negotiated away their right.

Commemorations such as the *Nakba* day event in Ramallah on the 15th May are thus important rituals at the disposal of marginalised groups, in this case the expanding refugee community, who wish to promote a specific political or ideological message. Importantly, they are ritual events which are viewed as opportunities to galvanise a

group of people, in this instance all Palestinians, through the collective remembering of a shared traumatic or defining event in their history. Unlike in Belfast, where the conflict has entered a new phase of peaceful transition, the political climate of the day in Ramallah, remains highly conflictual. Intra-group relationships between rival political factions in the region remain fraught, with an unusual political relationship existing in the form of two separate, faction specific administrations running the West Bank and Gaza Strip.^{xii} Similarly, levels of inter-group hostility remain highly significant with the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians far from peaceful resolution. Despite this fraught environment, and the seemingly fragmented and internally fractious nature of Palestinian society itself, the events organised under the auspices of the National High Committee for the Commemoration of the *Nakba* have a more multivocal than fragmented appearance and thus appear more socially cohesive, or solidarity generating.

In a similar vein to the Belfast case study, the space and time in which the *Nakba* commemorations take place is relevant. Despite the fact that commemorative activity for the *Nakba* takes place across the West Bank, Gaza Strip and wider Diaspora, and considering the restrictions placed upon freedom of movement within the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the decision to designate a main or central *Nakba* commemoration in Ramallah on the 15th May suggests that it is the express intention of the organising committee to bring as many people together at the same time and at the same place to commemorate together. Working under the auspices of the national committee, representatives from across Palestinian civil and political society, including members of the Palestinian refugee community, PNGOs, and political factions, come together in advance of the day to make decisions relating directly to the performance of the *Nakba* commemorations. Practical steps are taken to ensure that this is possible, with buses transporting Palestinians from across the West Bank arriving to the city early in the morning to take part in the shared event. Designating shared gathering spaces, including agreed parade routes, in advance of the event, is viewed as a means of further ensuring that people come together on the day.

The presentation of a unified Palestinian identity is viewed as equally important, and a crucial means of presenting an outward image of solidarity at the commemorative events. The decisions taken at the national committee meetings to restrict the use of faction specific flags, banners and other forms of separate group identifiers, is interpreted as a way of propagating Palestinian homogeneity and solidarity. Similarly, the invention of shared, iconic Palestinian symbols such as a giant key representing the keys to the homes which Palestinian refugees and their ancestors fled in 1948, suggests a willingness on behalf of the commemoration organisers to highlight the shared aspects of the commemoration as opposed to outwardly showcasing deep divisions that exist. Furthermore, political speeches made on the day are restricted, with rival Palestinian factions asked to substitute party politic for cultural stories from 1st generation *Nakba* survivors, many of whom share their experiences of upheaval in 1948 on a large stage erected in central Manara square.^{xiii}

When analysed collectively, the designation of a shared commemorative space and time in which to gather, the use of shared Palestinian symbols on the day including

the national flag, giant key and other traditional Palestinian clothing, and the restrictions placed on political speeches, the 1948 *Nakba* commemorations in Ramallah appear more multivocal than fragmented. Despite the highly conflictual climate in which the events take place, the commemoration is viewed as an opportunity for Palestinians, regardless of factional allegiance or group affiliation, to come together on the day in order to present a unified image to a wider audience. The commemoration therefore appears to be one that is more cohesive than fragmented, thus differing significantly from the 1916 Easter Rising commemorative events in Belfast.

Discussion

The crucial difference between these two cases that gives rise to such differently-natured events (in that the Easter commemoration is fragmented, and the *Nakba* commemoration appears much more cohesive) appears to centre on the socio-political context in which these commemorative events take place. In both sites of comparison, the events take place against a backdrop of hostility and violence against a perceived aggressor. In Northern Ireland the period of violence, often referred to as the modern day 'Troubles', seems to have reached a conclusion in the form of constitutional political agreement, with stringent efforts taking place to ensure a period of transition from conflict. Most republican factions, by and large, have renounced their involvement in armed struggle and chosen to pursue a more peaceful approach to achieving their stated aims of a unified Ireland. Nevertheless, there remain republican factions engaged in violent acts against the British state presence in Northern Ireland and who are committed to the destruction of the peace process. For them and their supporters, the Easter 1916 commemoration is an important platform to promote their violent message and to encourage support for a non-political approach to achieving their stated aims. Likewise, for what are now considered the moderate elements of republicanism, the Easter 1916 commemoration is an opportunity to promote a counter message that endorses the political approach to achieving their goals. Rather than being a call to arms, the event is an opportunity to remember those who have died over the duration of the conflict whilst simultaneously promoting a political message to the assembled group. Debate over the direction that the dominant group has taken in recent years has resulted in fragmentation of the day and has further brought about a proliferation of splinter commemorative events that take place over the course of the Easter weekend.

For Palestinians in Ramallah, and across the Occupied Territories, the threat of violence and acts of aggression against a hostile other remains high. There exists an ongoing low-level intensity conflict with the potential for acts of extraordinary violence to occur akin to the Israeli destruction of Gaza in 2008 during operation 'Cast Lead'. Whereas for Irish republicans involved in the organisation of the Easter Rising commemoration the events are an opportunity to promote a political message and provide space in which to remember those who have died during the Troubles in the pursuit of Irish independence, for Palestinians the commemoration of the 1948 *Nakba* carries much significance in terms of keeping the issue of statehood, and the rights of

Palestinian refugees to return to homes they fled in 1948, high on the political agenda. The event is as much about the ongoing conflict with Israel as it is the 1948 *Nakba* itself (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod, 2007). Therefore, one can argue that both societies under investigation have experienced, or continue to experience, sustained periods of conflict but at present the intensity of the conflict differs significantly and as a result the societies being compared can be considered to be at opposing ends of the conflict spectrum. Moreover, despite the rise of dissident Irish republican factions in recent years in Northern Ireland (Frampton, 2011), the potential for hostility and armed conflict between factions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories remains substantially more likely than between republicans in Northern Ireland.

During interviews held with a range of respondents, questions relating to the need to appear unified at the *Nakba* commemoration were asked. The responses shared below suggest that the need to present an image of Palestinian homogeneity and unity is greater than in Belfast. In the face of continued threats to a Palestinian identity, the *Nakba* commemorations were viewed as a crucial means of reaffirming their existence. Attendance at the *Nakba* was a way of confirming a Palestinian presence and thus coming together in a manner that appeared unified was viewed as important:

Palestinians are suffering from the threat of extinction. Every day we are worrying about what will happen to us and what will happen if we can not become a state in the eyes of the world. That is why we feel so strongly about this day. On this day you wake up and really feel different, you make sure that you are involved in the events in some way to show that you care and that we are never going anywhere, it really is very important for us. Divisions are so dangerous because when we are divided we are less strong, so that is why at the *Nakba* it is necessary to appear as one.^{xiv}

When questioned as to why the *Nakba* commemorations appear more unified than the Easter commemorations in Belfast, a leading Palestinian activist suggested:

Maybe the difference between the two commemorations is the fact that the Irish people don't really have to be afraid that they aren't considered a people, right? Palestinians always have to reaffirm or rebuild their presence and existence as a people ... that's maybe why people pay more attention to being seen as unified, being as one, and that's why the splits we have today between Fatah and Hamas are felt so much, and that's maybe the difference. Ireland exists, right? It's just a question as to what sort of Ireland. Maybe the disagreement is over what type of Ireland, Irish people have the luxury of disagreeing over these issues and being seen to be divided is not so damaging as they already have their status affirmed in internationally agreed settlements that protect their separate identity. ... So, maybe that's what makes people more, believe more, in the importance of the commemoration and have events where everyone leaves aside their differences and reaffirms their collective Palestinian will, and the will of the people. This is a very good question.^{xv}

The solidarity presented at the *Nakba* commemorations was therefore seen as crucial. Coming together at the commemorations was viewed as a necessary means of reaffirming the Palestinian presence in the region, one that is considered by each of those with whom I met to be constantly under threat. Despite not always taking place, many respondents, including representatives from the two main political factions, viewed coming together on the day and setting aside their deep divisions and disagreements in order to present a unified image to a wider audience as necessary. The need to be seen as united in the face of ongoing inter-group conflict adds a sense of urgency to the *Nakba* commemorations that is not as readily apparent in the Belfast case study. This urgency stems from nationalistic aspiration and a demand to be recognised as a legitimate Palestinian people by the on looking and omnipresent international community. In presenting a homogenous and unified front, the *Nakba* commemorations are seen as important tools at the disposal of a semi-Diasporic people whose ever expanding refugee population coupled with lack of official statehood threatens their very existence.

In Belfast it is argued that, despite the level of intra-group hostility and division that exists, the urgent need for recognition on a scale as is presented in Ramallah does not exist. The majority of Irish republicans have endorsed the peaceful arrangements in place with a once hostile 'other'^{xvi} and the demand for a change in the republican leadership has not reached a sufficient level as to be a direct threat to the dominance of the largest republican group in the north of Ireland, Sinn Féin. Unlike in the OPT, the divisions within Irish republicanism only really become apparent when publically displayed at important republican commemorations in the city. Despite the emergence of new radical dissident republican groupings in recent years, who have embarked on a violent campaign, the fragmented nature of Irish republicanism is no longer as apparent on a daily basis as it perhaps would have been in the past. The effect of being seen to be divided or fragmented is no longer as damaging as it would have been when the conflict was at its most intense, as a senior member of the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) commented:

I mean they [Sinn Féin] are so dominant now, that it doesn't really matter if we come across as united or not. Yes- in an ideal world we would like to be seen as one complete entity, and perhaps we would have achieved our goals ultimately a lot quicker if that was the case, but like I said, it's no longer that important.^{xvii}

It can therefore be argued that the fact that the aims of the republican movement have, to some extent, (albeit partially) been realised is a source of tension between groups which manifests itself in the form of a fragmented commemoration over the Easter weekend. However, the seemingly intractable situation in Palestine is more readily a source of unity for Palestinians which appears to be one of the primary reasons for the presentation of Palestinian solidarity at the *Nakba* events. The need to be seen to appear homogenous and united against a common enemy- in the Palestinian case study, the Israeli state- is one of the reasons why rival groups and factions attempt to set aside their deep divisions on this day.

In comparing these two commemorations it has been possible to argue that the political climate of the day in which the events take place, can have a significant bearing on the overall ability of the event to appear solidarity generating or not. Therefore, the social context in which both commemorations take place, being characterised as either in a period of conflict or emerging from a period of conflict, has made such a cross-societal comparison worthwhile. Yet, despite the seemingly comparable conflictual environment, the differences in terms of the levels of intractability in both settings permit interesting points of comparison between the two. The structure and format of the commemorative practice being compared is similar in both settings, the existence of rival factional groupings in both settings is noted, yet the conflictual environment in which the event takes place is one that differs significantly. In deference to Vinitzky-Seroussi, (2002) it is the social context of the commemorations, the environment in which they take place, that differs most and which makes the comparative method particularly suitable in the present study.

What has been revealed through this comparative analysis is that commemorative events can in fact reveal deep internal group divisions. Far from generating group solidarity or strengthening feelings of togetherness, commemorations often serve as a key battle-ground for rival groups or factions wishing to avail of this evocative form of ritual to highlight their separate group identity. As such, it is possible to conclude that commemorations can act as a means of presenting factionalism, particularly where there is a disagreement over the meaning of the commemoration, over the importance of the commemorated past in the present day, or the direction chosen by the current political leadership. However, whereas one would assume that these differences could be readily put to one side in a less conflictual setting, as is the case in Belfast, the evidence provided suggests that the commemorations in Belfast serve an important function in retaining and reaffirming smaller republican group identities. At Easter, rival republican factions, including groups who no longer share the same prominent position they may have once held in the past, use commemorative rituals to publically display their republican identity as being one that is distinct to other groups involved on the day. To outsiders, this display of republican factionalism can lead to conclusions that Belfast remains a hostile and conflictual environment in which there remains a need for such shows of military strength towards a hostile outsider. A deeper analysis of the situation, however, suggests that it is the relatively calm political climate that has allowed for the emergence of new republican groups, each promoting their own brand of republican identity. The ramifications of intra-group division are no longer as damaging as they would have been when the conflict was at its most intense. It is therefore possible to argue that the display of separate republican groupings at Easter is actually a reflection of a relatively consensual political climate. Despite this relatively calm political environment, the segregated Easter commemorations suggest deep intra-group division within the republican movement. Whereas these divisions in the past have often resulted in deadly in-group fighting, commemorative events such as those that take place over the Easter weekend and the political rhetoric orated at the graveside serves as the vehicle for attacking rival groups. An analysis of the Easter Rising commemoration in Belfast thus

reveals that the event is of crucial importance for republican factions to publically present their relative strength and popularity. Republican commemoration in the present day is no longer about presenting a show of strength towards a once hostile other (in the past the unionist/loyalist community and British state), it is about sending a political message to other republican groups, to bolster one's own political position, and to discredit the legitimacy of other rival factions involved on the day.

In contrast, in Ramallah, where the *Nakba* commemorations take place in an area that remains locked in a seemingly intractable conflict with a hostile outsider, the event assumes a more important role in terms of generating intra-group solidarity. The enduring conflict with Israel is a source of unity for Palestinians at the *Nakba* who, upon first analysis, appear capable of setting aside factional divides in order to present a unified front against a common enemy. However, further exploration of these events reveals a deep division within Palestinian society, one that transcends factional and political difference. It is a division between those who feel disenfranchised from the political structures that exist and those who benefit from holding senior positions in Palestinian political life. As one leading Palestinian academic suggested:

An exploration of *Nakba* commemoration becomes very interesting then as it says a lot about how those in positions of power view their history and more importantly their involvement in history.^{xviii}

The commemorations have therefore become important tools at the disposal of the downtrodden to reaffirm their position within Palestinian society and to attempt to ensure that the issue of Palestinian refugee rights remains high on the political agenda. The *Nakba* commemorations in Ramallah are also to be seen as useful indicators in assessing the ongoing level of hostility that exists between Israelis and Palestinians. The events more often than not lead to high levels of inter-group hostility and violence. The day itself is one that descends into chaos and eventually leads to intense bouts of inter-group violence. Palestinian protests and stone-throwing at Qalandia^{xix} checkpoint on the outskirts of the city are regularly met by a violent and militarily-dominant Israeli bombardment of tear gas and associated crowd dispersal methods including rubber-coated steel pellets, and on occasion, live ammunition. The commemoration of the *Nakba* therefore remains a live political issue and the impact of external political events on the day suggests that this form of ritual is one that Palestinians view as necessary in order to generate support for their cause.

All of this leads to an acknowledgement of the complexity of commemoration and the need for researchers to avoid a narrow interpretation of the role and function of the commemorative act. Yes- these important rituals can serve as a means of generating solidarity between deeply divided factions, particularly when the ramifications of being divided are severe; however, they are also important opportunities to promote separate intra-group identities and are useful tools at the disposal of marginalised groups. Commemorative events are therefore to be viewed as being as much about highlighting intra-group difference as they are about generating intra-group solidarity. It is only by moving beyond the role of curious onlooker, by asking questions and analysing over a

prolonged period of time, that researchers are able to gain a more nuanced understanding of the role of ritual and commemoration in the ongoing construction of collective identity and solidarity in societies, particularly those in conflict or emerging from it.

ⁱ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the British Academy sponsored, Council for British Research in the Levant, Kenyon Institute, East Jerusalem (14th May 2013). I am grateful to Dr Mandy Turner for the opportunity to present this paper as part of the Kenyon Institute's seminar series and for the useful discussion that followed afterwards.

ⁱⁱ The Orange Order is a solely Protestant organisation founded in 1796 deriving its heritage from the Dutch born King William, famous for his victory over King James I at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. The institution is closely aligned to Ulster Unionism and sees itself as a legitimate organisation defending the civil and religious liberties of Ulster Protestants. The group regularly makes use of parading rituals to make their presence felt in the public forum. The group is considered by many to be highly controversial for its role in organising Orange parades through predominantly Irish Nationalist areas in contested areas across the North of Ireland. In terms of the parades as a ritualised performance, Bryan (2000) has suggested that the rituals expose the internal conflicts and deep seeded divisions within Unionism, however, the Orange parades appear more homogenous than the commemorative activities of their Irish republican counterparts as the analysis of the 1916 Easter Rising commemorations in Belfast presented in this paper demonstrates.

ⁱⁱⁱ Also known as, 'the troubles' a term most commonly used to refer to the modern period of violence in Northern Ireland; starting in the late 1960's and generally considered to have ended with the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998.

^{iv} Given the recent proliferation of rival republican factions emerging, including (but not limited to) RAAD (Republican Action Against Drugs), and 32CSM (32 County Solidarity Movement) it would not be surprising to see the subsequent organisation of additional commemorative events in West Belfast at Easter. In recent times 32CSM have held a commemorative event in Derry to remember the 1916 Easter Rising.

^v Interview, senior member of the Official Republican Movement Commemoration Committee

^{vi} 'Warriors of Ireland', established as a youth movement for young Irish republicans. They are identifiable in a 'colour party' by an orange sunset set against a blue banner.

^{vii} Interview, senior member of the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP), 20/1/2011

^{viii} Interview with Palestinian activist, and former member of BADIL Resource Centre for Refugee and Residency Rights, 7/03/2011

^{ix} *Ibid*

^x Interview with member of BADIL Resource Centre for Refugee and Residency Rights, 8/3/2011

^{xi} The need to ensure continued political support for the right of return for refugees was particularly evident in 2011 with the revelations published in the *Guardian* newspaper. Known as the 'Palestine Papers' the secret documents leaked to *Al Jazeera* revealed willingness on behalf of the Palestinian negotiators during talks held with their Israeli counterparts, to sacrifice the core issue of the right of return, in favour of Palestinian statehood. Moreover, the papers revealed that a token gesture of 10,000 refugees returning was mooted as a possibility of satisfying the Palestinian public demand. The revelations appeared to suggest that the core issue of Palestinian refugees is no longer high on the political agenda of the Palestinian political representatives.

^{xii} Fatah holds power in the West Bank whereas the Islamist party, Hamas govern the Gaza Strip. Intra-group conflict has resulted in often bloody clashes between groups struggling to retain their hegemonic control over the region they seek to govern.

^{xiii} Al Manara Square, Ramallah, the central point of Ramallah and often the designated space in the city for large gatherings. During the course of the 3 years spent observing the *Nakba* events, Manara Square played a central role in the commemorative activity.

^{xiv} Interview with leading official in the Palestinian Liberation Organisation Department of Refugee Affairs, 26/05/2011

^{xv} Interview with Palestinian activist, and former member of BADIL Resource Centre for Refugee and Residency Rights, 7/03/2011

^{xvi} Including primarily Loyalist paramilitary organisations, and British state forces.

^{xvii} Interview with senior member of the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP), 20/1/2011

^{xviii} Interview with Palestinian independent researcher and academic, 23/2/2011

^{xix} Qalandia (also spelt Kalandia, Qalandiya), situated on the outskirts of Ramallah, is the central crossing point for Palestinians hoping to travel to Jerusalem (travel that is permissible only with approved Israeli documentation). It is usually the focal point of sporadic acts of violence, particularly amidst ongoing Israeli-Palestinian tensions or at designated commemorative events throughout the year.

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