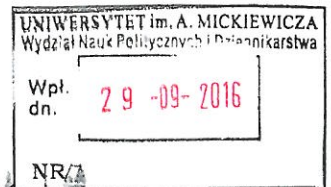




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**Review of the PhD dissertation entitled *Erosion of the collective memory on the example of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank* by Mr. Asad Taffal, Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań 2016, pp. 168, prepared under the supervision of Prof. AMU dr hab. Anna Potyrała**

## 1. General Thoughts

The subject of Mr. Asad Taffal's research, being a part of a broader framework of studies of the Middle East region and the collective memory in the case of long-term refugee crises, stands out as one of many 'grey areas' of contemporary international relations. Collective memory is undoubtedly one of the key determinants of a community and its members' identity. As such, it appears as an element of social bonds – an important factor in integrating communities in the spheres of values and ideas. For a number of social scientists, collective identity is of the utmost research importance. Collective identities appear alongside individual and societal ones. Individual identities consist of a set of attributes and meanings which a given actor attaches to himself. They mark him out as a participant of networked social interactions. In turn, the social identities express an attempt to locate 'others' or 'strangers' as unfamiliar actors in the social space. This is possible by defining a pool of various social roles. The term "collective identity" refers to the idea where a group of people recognize a

fundamental similarity that occurs between them as the cause of their sense of solidarity within a certain group. Given this notion as an ideational base, collective identity is a social construct, which means that it emerges as an intentional or accessory consequence of social interaction. It makes it possible to distinguish between 'us' and 'them,' as indicated by the fact that people identify themselves in the groups they are placed into, regardless of whether a criterion to assign is gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, social class or age. National identification should therefore be considered through the prism of collective identity. Benedict Anderson notes that a nation, from the anthropological perspective, can be seen as a kind of imagined political community which is inherently compact and sovereign. In his conceptualization, nations are merely projections or ideas, because people creating even the smallest nation know relatively little about their fellow nations. The intrinsic consistency of the nation results from the peculiar 'separating' of it by a government exercising sovereignty over defined territorial borders. Such a defined state sets out a package of rules about who may be a citizen, and who will be considered a foreigner. Thus, we return to the classic division between 'us' and 'them.'

The concepts of collective identity and collective memory, which for E. Durkheim and M. Halbwachs stand for the sum of all individual memories (called autobiographical or personal), built within the structures and institutions of social advantage, have been explored by Mr. Taffal in his research on the erosion of the collective memory of the Palestinian refugees living in refugee camps in the West Bank. He referred to the area concerned as that recognized by the community of Palestinians as vital for ensuring their existence. The starting point of Mr. Taffal's dissertation is 1947, when the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the division of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states.

## **2. Framework of the Methodology**

The dissertation of Mr. Taffal is entitled *Erosion of the collective memory on the example of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank of Jordan*. The reviewer regards the title selection as legitimate. In the introduction, the author draws the reader's attention to the subject of research, its purpose, the hypothesis, the main lines of inquiry as well as the basic methodological problems, among which comes to the fore the issue of filling the gaps in the research on the erosion of collective memory, showing its contents, transmission channels and carriers between three generations of Palestinian refugees (Fathers, Sons and Grandsons) living in 19 refugee camps located in the West Bank of Jordan.

As **the main purpose** of the dissertation (or the “aim of this study” in his own words, p. 11) Mr. Taffal has chosen the analysis of the collective memory phenomenon on the example of Palestinian refugees living in refugee camps located in the West Bank in order to present the erosion of the Palestinian collective memory, to define the content of the collective memory of different generations of Palestinians, in addition to the frameworks and channels through which this memory is transferred across generations, in order to revive and protect it against falling into oblivion. The purpose of the dissertation is formulated correctly. However, some doubts arise with respect to the **hypothesis** of the dissertation, which in the words of Mr. Taffal is “...to prove that the process of transferring collective memory among three generations of Fathers, Sons and Grandsons living in villages in the West Bank refugee camps has not been successful, and that the stock of the collective memory (stories, tales, implications and knowledge) that is related to life in the village and the experience of expulsion and removal of people in 1948 has also been subject to decay and erosion” (p. 13). This hypothesis is beyond any doubt formulated correctly by Mr. Taffal, but for incomprehensible reasons is incorrectly defined as “the aim of this study.” Given that the “aim” (purpose) is explicitly expressed before and after careful reading of the body of the dissertation, the reviewer considers this ‘double aiming’ in Mr. Taffal’s dissertation an unintentional mistake, which does not significantly affect the methodological value of the dissertation. It needs to be corrected though. The hypothesis ‘in disguise’ is formulated properly; however, the author in the fourth chapter somewhat struggles with its unambiguous confirmation or falsification. Hypothesis testing is accompanied by a set of **research questions**, devoted to the exodus of the Palestinians. They are intended to facilitate verifying the research hypothesis. Mr. Taffal asks four such questions. Seeking answers, he also uses the information gathered from Palestinian refugees in the framework of structured interviews based on a pre-rendered set of 13 questions. This procedure deserves recognition. The dissertation reviewed is slightly less impressive in terms of the **research methods** used. The author devotes much space to the genetic historical method, which is understandable given the nature of the work, covering the period from 1947 to the present. Mr. Taffal also indicates the use of such methods as legal, statistical and institutional research, supplemented by the research tools of eyewitness accounts and interviews. While the above-mentioned tools (or techniques) dynamize the analysis and inject quality into the research, the use of the methods other than the genetic historical approach is a bit disappointing. To give an example, the institutional method, as Mr. Taffal claims, is used to depict the contribution of institutions responsible for Palestinian refugees, such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency

(UNRWA) and for collective memory transfer (media, governmental institutions, universities, etc.). We can agree on that. But instead of exploring the institutional approach, Mr. Taffal uses it in a superficial way, usually replicating the information available on the official website of UNRWA. As a result, this interesting and good dissertation suffers from a shortage of proposals for new institutional arrangements that would allow a constructive approach to the issue of how to enhance the stock of Palestinian collective memory to be taken (despite tentative attempts to find solutions in chapter five). The correct application of a lot of up-to-date statistical data, some of which have not been published before, as well as successful use of qualitative methods (case study) is noteworthy. The **literature base** used is correct. In addition to numerous documents, legal acts, materials and internet sites, Mr. Taffal uses an extensive and thoroughly considered body of academic articles and monographs. The bulk of them is written by scholars from Anglo-Saxon circles, supplemented by the works of Arab and Israeli researchers. In the view of the reviewer, despite being endowed with good sources Mr. Taffal's dissertation could be further developed by using such ignored works as: (1) B. Morris, *Righteous Victims*, Vintage Books 1999; (2) I. Pappé, *The Tantura case In Israel: The Katz research and the trial*, "Journal of Palestine Studies", vol. XXX, no. 3, Spring 2001; (3) T. Segev, *1949: First Israelis*, New York 1986; (4) S. Hadawi, *Bitter Harvest: A Modern History of Palestine*, New York 1990; (5) C. S. Kamen, *The Arab Population in Palestine and Israel, 1946-1951*, "New Outlook" 1984, October and November; (6) E. Karsh, *Fabricating Israeli History: The "New Historians"*, Jerusalem 2000; (7) I. Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel's Control of a National Minority*, University of Texas Press 1980; (8) H. Dib Nakkara, *Israeli Seizure Land Under Various Defense and Regulations Emergency*, "Journal of Palestine Studies", vol. 14, no. 2, Winter 1985; (9) M. Palumbo, *The Palestinian Catastrophe: The 1948 Expulsion of a People from Their Homeland*, London 1987; (10) D. Peretz, *Problems of Arab Refugee Compensation*, "Middle East Journal", vol. 8, 1954; (11) E. Said, *The Question of Palestine*, London, Vintage 1980. In general, however, Mr. Taffal selected the sources diligently.

### **3. The Content of the Dissertation**

**In the first chapter** the author presents the research problem, the state of current research, the purpose, hypothesis and research questions, and finally the methodology. He also operationalizes the definitions and terms used in the dissertation. The chapter is concluded by a synthetic description of the subsequent parts of the work. Mr. Taffal focuses

on the phenomenon of Nakba (Al-Nakba), which means “catastrophe” in Arabic. It refers to the destruction of Palestinian society in 1948, when approximately 750,000 Palestinians fled or were forced into exile by Israeli troops. Because the Palestinians were not Jewish, their presence and predominant ownership of the land were obstacles to the creation of a Jewish state. Their exodus, or Nakba, was already nearly half-complete by May 1948, when Israel declared its independence and the Arab states entered the fray. Much attention in the first chapter is devoted to the different standpoints of Israeli and Palestinian historians in relation to the Nakba, including work undertaken in the 1980s by the group of Israeli historians (especially Simha Flapan, Benny Morris, Tom Segev and Avi Shlaim), not associated with the “Zionist historical school.” Their work in the mid-1980s led to changes in the traditional Israeli historiography which completely glorifies the history of Israel. Mr. Taffal clearly explains the terms of actors, channels and carriers of collective memory used further on as basic conceptual categories in his work. Despite many good aspects, this chapter has weaknesses. First of all, Mr. Taffal combines the first chapter with the introduction, which may be an original, but quite unusual and arguable approach, far beyond the framework of a doctoral dissertation. Other shortcomings of the chapter are the numerous repetitions and the use of underspecified phrases, such as “Collective memory **is something** therefore which merge members of a given society ...” (p. 3). There are also a few spelling errors and inaccuracies, including quotes (e.g. p. 4) which for unknown reasons are partly written in Polish and partly in English.

**In the second chapter** the author presents the historical discussion of the Palestinian refugee issue. He divides the chapter into two parts. In the first one, he traces the determinants of the refugee issue with reference to Arab-Israeli wars. In the second, Mr. Taffal depicts the role of the UNRWA – an international agency for Palestinian refugees. The first part uses the historical method. The author can ‘sense’ the intensity of events, however, much of his description is biased towards the Palestinian perception of events. Israeli accounts, even those reflecting the research of the “new historians” are marginal. Mr. Taffal strives to cover several decades on a few pages (pp. 25-52) which results in a less saturated but still sufficient analysis of events, such as the infamous massacre that occurred in April 1948 when Irgun troops and Stern Gang with the possible backup of some Hagana members murdered 254 Palestinian villagers in Dejr Jassin village. In general, the first part is well documented and solid. The second part of this chapter is devoted to the UNWRA. Mr. Taffal links the foundation of this organization with the 1948 Israeli-Arab war, and then traces its mission, mandate, work, status and challenges ahead. Despite presenting interesting data, in particular

that regarding donors to the UNRWA, Mr. Taffal should have avoided such mistakes as those on pages 47 and 48 (table 2), where he considers the European Commission the second biggest donor after the US. In fact, the European Union (EU) counts as a donor, while the European Commission, as a supranational executive EU institution, is accountable only for development policy.

**In the third chapter** Mr. Taffal investigates the realities of living in the 19 refugee camps located in the West Bank region. He makes the correct premise about the strong relationship between the poor socio-economic conditions in Palestinian settlements and the downward intensity of collective memory transfer. This chapter makes it possible to indicate and analyze such independent variables as education, gender, age, geographic location and their influence on collective memory. This interesting piece of the doctoral dissertation is embedded in the contemporary political and legal dispute about the consequences of Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territory. The negative consequences of Palestinian displacement as shown in this chapter are partly eased by the activity of the UNWRA, Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and non-governmental organizations (e.g. Project Hope established by individuals from Canada and Palestine). However, with overcrowded schools, limited access to facilities, lack of qualified staff and short funding, the needs of Palestinian refugees are not met, which has a negative impact on the stock of collective memory. This very intense and well crafted chapter could be slightly improved by investigating *in situ* refugee camps in the southern area of the West Bank; yet Mr. Taffal indicates that the living conditions in northern camps under research, located in the Tulkarm, Nablus and Tubas areas, resemble those of the central and southern areas governed by the Palestinian Authority.

**In the fourth chapter** Mr. Taffal uses previous findings and connects them with the results of qualitative research based on a study sample of 75 male and female individuals from three age groups. This allows him to draw conclusions with reference to the main contents and channels in the process of collective memory transfer among the three generations of Palestinian refugees. It is striking that Mr. Taffal employs an overwhelmingly masculine and imbalanced approach in his dissertation, as he describes the three generations as: fathers (sometimes inconsistently referred to as grandfathers), sons and grandsons. Fathers are presented as the originators of memory transfer to the second and third generations. Despite the fact that women have also experienced the drama of exodus from their villages in the 1940s and at present they are involved in collective memory transfer, the dissertation concerned devotes little attention to them. This is a shame, because the interviews conducted

by Mr. Taffal showcase that Palestinian women are keen on showing their adherence to their heritage by collecting traditional pottery and embroidery (also by wearing the embroidered, traditional dresses that were popular in Palestinian villages before the Nakba). This female adherence to tradition contrasts with the men's disinterest in preserving the material culture of the pre-NAKBA era. Despite a relatively small study sample, Mr. Taffal manages to marshal the channels of collective Palestinian memory with the greatest significance assigned to oral narration, the village visits (visiting original villages abandoned during the Nakba), collecting, sometimes using old items such as pottery, or wearing traditionally embroidered dresses, keeping old documents proving the ownership of abandoned households and land (known as Tabo), media broadcasting and TV series about the Nakba as "Palestinian Alienation," Internet sites and reading. In the conclusions, he departs from the explicit confirmation of the hypothesis about the unsuccessful attempts to transfer collective memory across three generations of Palestinians, claiming that "the unsuccessful attempts exceeded success" (p. 127). Among the factors influencing the gradual erosion of the stock of collective memory, Mr. Taffal points mainly at the Internet, social media and the destructive role of video games, which drag away the third generation (grandsons) from learning history. This is a simplification, given the massive stock of Internet sources regarding Nakba events, such as *On the side of a Road*, a documentary that explores Israeli attitudes toward the Palestinian Nakba, or *Al-Nakba*, a series on the Palestinian 'catastrophe' of 1948, a comprehensive documentary by Raman Dawen first run on Al Jazeera Arabic in 2008.

**In the fifth and concluding chapter** Mr. Taffal sums up his research and puts forward the proposals for advancing the transfer of collective memory, which center on investing in reading culture, higher education, empowering local initiatives and targeting the younger generation through the social media and TV series, as exemplified by the *Palestinian Alienation* – a TV series which is considered by Palestinians as a good representation of life in the Palestinian villages before the Nakba. The reviewer finds an interesting, but underexplored concept of the postulate of promoting collective memory among the Palestinian diaspora, located not only in the Middle East.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

In conclusion, in the doctoral dissertation titled *Erosion of collective memory on the example of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank* Mr. Asad Taffal undertakes the analysis of a problem that is of primary importance for the continued existence of the Palestinian

identity. The multitude of issues raised, views and opinions referenced, the complicated nature of the discussed issues does not allow him to fully realize the research goals declared in the introduction. Nevertheless, in the opinion of the reviewer, this doctoral dissertation provides an original insight to an important academic issue and exhibits the broad knowledge of the Ph.D. candidate in the field of political science.

Emphasizing the ingenuity, careful presentation of the research problem, the high culture of language and the undoubted merit of work, I consider that the dissertation corresponds to the requirements set out in **Paragraph 13, Item 1 of the Law of Academic degrees and titles of 14 March 2003 (Journal of Laws (Dz.U.) of 2003, no. 65, item 595 and of 2005, item 1852 and of 2015)** and move for the admission of Mr. Asad Taffal to the further stages of the doctoral degree procedure.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Jarek Remiszewski". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.