

## Introduction: Trees and War



**Figure 1.** An uprooted and replanted olive tree stands in the foreground; in the background is the Hizma crossing of the Separation Barrier at the northeastern entrance to Jerusalem. Photo by author, August 2006.

**N**ATIONAL WARS ARE TYPICALLY ASSOCIATED WITH SOLDIERS, with blood, and with large flags blowing in the wind. They are not associated with trees or with greening the landscape. This book tells an extraordinary story about the mundane

uses of law and landscape in the national war between Israelis and Palestinians. It is a story about the interchangeability between the green of the tree's foliage and the red of human blood. One aspect of this interchangeability is powerfully articulated by the late Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish: "The olive grove was always green. At least it used to be, my love. Fifty victims, at sundown, turned it into a red pool" (Bardenstein 1999: 153–54). Chief Inspector David Kishik of Israel's Civil Administration in the West Bank also talks about the interchangeability between green and red: "The [olive] trees look so naïve, as if they couldn't harm anyone. Just like children. But then, many years later, they turn into terrorists that actually kill people. . . . *The tree is the enemy soldier*" (emphasis added).

*Planted Flags* is structured around the two dominant tree landscapes in Israel/Palestine<sup>1</sup>: pine forests and olive groves. The pine tree, which

<sup>1</sup> I use the term "Israel/Palestine" in the book's title and throughout this work for a variety of reasons: First, *geography*: this term includes the two areas that, according to most international law interpretations, should be Israel and Palestine. It is, then, the most geographically precise term for describing the area under Israeli control (between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea). Second, *external borders*: there are no clear borders between these two entities, because the settlers bring "Israel" (Israeli law, Israel's Defense Forces, etc.) wherever they choose to settle, and thus in effect Israel is everywhere in Palestine. To some extent, the reverse happens when up to 70,000 Palestinians from the occupied Palestinian territories enter Israel daily and when Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem usually travel freely through Israel. Third, *internal borders*: Palestinians (or Arab Israelis, including East Jerusalemites) comprise about one-fifth of Israel's population. Fourth, *historicity*: under the British Mandate of pre-1948, the entire region was named "Palestine." Because most analyses, including this one, begin before 1948, Palestine should be included. Fifth, *land*: about half of the territory in Israel/Palestine is disputed in terms of ownership and allocation. Jewish land, some of which has been appropriated from Palestinians, is, in a sense, still "Palestinian." In contrast, many settlers see the entire *Eretz Yisrael* (land of Israel, including the West Bank) as Israeli territory. Sixth, *fluidity and dynamics*: the above relations change constantly, with immigration, development, walls, violence, and identity politics. Hence, for example, Israel's Bedouin citizens, previously perceived as loyal to the state, increasingly identify themselves with the national Palestinian cause. Seventh, *politics of knowledge*: like Kurdistan, Tibet, and other nations that have been denied their right for political self-determination, "Palestine" should be fully present in the analysis done by critical scholars, first and foremost by the act of naming it. I would like to express my thanks to Oren Yiftachel for a fruitful communication about the use of this term.

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is usually associated with the Zionist project of afforesting the Promised Land, is contrasted here with the olive tree (see, e.g., Figure 1), which Palestinians identify as a symbol of their long agricultural connection to the land. For decades, Jewish people from around the world have been invested, both economically and emotionally, in planting trees in Israel, while Palestinians have been cultivating and harvesting olive groves on what they consider to be Palestine's hills. It is difficult to imagine that these ostensibly apolitical acts could actually fuel a brutal yet clandestine war that has been going on in the area for more than a century: the war over the natural landscape. What is it that makes these seemingly innocuous, even natural acts of planting, cultivating, and uprooting trees into acts of war? How is this war reflected, mediated, and, above all, reinforced through the polarization of the natural landscape into two juxtaposed treescapes? And how does law play into this story?

*Planted Flags* addresses these questions through an ethnographic study. It relies on more than sixty in-depth interviews and observations conducted with military and government officials, architects, lawyers, Palestinian and Israeli farmers, and Jewish settlers. By telling the story of trees through the narratives of these different people, the seemingly static and mute landscape of Israel/Palestine assumes life, expressing the cultural, economic, and legal dynamics that constantly shape and re-shape it.

The next several subsections of Section I introduce three themes that run throughout the book: naturalization, bifurcation, and lawfare. These themes facilitate and amplify the nationalistic properties of the natural landscape in Israel/Palestine. Section II then discusses the methodology employed in this work, and Section III describes the book's structure.

### ***First Theme: Naturalization***

It seems obvious that landscape is quite capable of becoming an idol in its own right; that is, a potent, ideological representation that serves to naturalize power relations and erase history and legibility (W. J. T. Mitchell in Abu-Lughod, Heacock, and Nashef 1999, back cover).

*Planted Flags* is concerned with the intricate ways in which power dynamics are obscured by constructing their exercises and consequences as natural. This process of concealment is what I refer to here as “naturalization.” The work that naturalization does for the national enterprise is the first major theme that runs through this book.

Natural landscapes are convenient ways to make certain power struggles appear inevitable and immutable. By using the ostensible innocence of nature and its framework of necessity, political agendas are thus cloaked in green, granting them an appearance of neutrality and legitimacy. This is especially true in the case of national agendas, which rely heavily on what are considered the natural characteristics of a place – namely wild landscapes, vegetation, and animals – for the promotion of patriotic sentiments within their populations. Moreover, beyond providing a convenient cover for state power, the construction of various treescapes such as forests, gardens, and orchards<sup>2</sup> also provides a convenient cover for counterstate and nonstate practices. Generally, *Planted Flags* problematizes the clandestine relationship between nature and nationalism, arguing that it renders invisible what is in fact in plain view.

Before moving to identify what *Planted Flags* is about, I would like to briefly clarify what it is not and does not claim to be. Although drawing on a variety of disciplines and literature, *Planted Flags* does not offer a systematic historical analysis, nor does it provide an elaborate philosophical or psychological perspective on nature. Rather, the book is a study of the legal, spatial, and political demarcations that are drawn through the use of nature. In *What is Nature* (1995), Kate Soper takes a similar political – yet a less concrete or legal – approach. Soper draws contrasts between those discourses that focus on human destruction and waste, which she categorizes as ecological, and those that emphasize the ideological purposes behind the appeal to nature, which she calls

<sup>2</sup> On forests see e.g., Guha (1989, 2000) and Rajan (2006); on gardens see, e.g., Mukerji (1997); and on hedges see Holder (1999).

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postmodernist (1995: 4). Ecologists usually portray nature as a domain of intrinsic value and show little concern for questions of representation and conceptuality. Postmodernists, on the other hand, are quite skeptical about any attempt to eternalize that which is merely conventional, and depict the order of nature as solely discursive and unstable (*ibid.*). At the same time, both discourses, according to Soper, share a heightened suspicion of scientific rationality and of Western discourses of development.

*Planted Flags* is not so much concerned with the conservation or even the preservation of nature. In this sense, it probably would not fall into the category of an ecological study per Soper's definition of one. Instead, the book highlights the cultural construction of nature and the role it plays in policing, disciplining, and, more generally, governing social constellations. In this sense, the tendency displayed here is toward what Soper identifies as the postmodernist discourse. In this vein, *Planted Flags* stresses that nature is not only an idea or a human construct but is also a detailed technology that governs lived spaces.

However, *Planted Flags* is also not a postmodernist study per se. It refuses to collapse the material into the discursive, instead demonstrating the importance of matter to the working of power and the specific reality checks that matter imposes on various social constellations. The book shows, for example, how the tree's concrete physical properties are socially created but at the same time they also both direct and confine the various social configurations that are in turn attributed to the tree. The book, in other words, stresses the importance of the tree's physicality for the working of power: it is through the rooting of the concrete body of the tree that the land becomes occupied and it is with the uprooting of the same corporeal tree that such land claims are then contested. After all, it is precisely these physical traits of the tree – as either present or absent, planted or uprooted – that grant the war over the juxtaposed tree landscapes in this region such an explosive potential. The construction of particular power dynamics through the planting, uprooting, or controlling of trees, of all things, is hardly incidental. The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is, to a large extent, a conflict over the physical

thing called land (see, e.g., Abufarha 2008; Bisharat 1994; Ben-Ari and Bilu 1997; Kimmerling 1983).

Beyond its insistence on the tree's material significance for this story, the book also touches upon the materialist aspects of trees, although this is not its focus. Other tree- and forest-related studies – for example James Scott's *Seeing like a State* (1998), Ramachandra Guha's *The Unquiet Woods* (1989/2000), William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* (2003), James Fairhead and Melissa Leach's *Misreading the African Landscape* (1996), and Scott Prudham's *Knock on Wood* (2004) – focus much more explicitly on the materialist properties of the colonial or imperialist forest. However, in the context of the Zionist pine planting project, which is a large part of this book's focus, the economic aspects of colonial forest management prove to be much less significant.

How can one explain the uniqueness of the Zionist forest tradition, in that it does not have an explicit investment in timber yield, in comparison to other colonial contexts, which were largely structured around economic interests? Indeed, most of the persons interviewed for this study do not depict the economic value of forest trees as central to the discussion. First and foremost, this is probably because of the simple fact that forest trees in Israel/Palestine have rarely been used as timber. It might also be because economic considerations pale in comparison to the much stronger and blunter dynamics of the national struggle over territory in Israel/Palestine. One way or the other, unlike so many colonial afforestation projects of the twentieth century, the significance of the Zionist afforestation project lies not in the economic role of forest trees, but rather in the heightened significance of trees as symbolic, physical, and imaginary<sup>3</sup> connections to (and disconnections from) land that are

<sup>3</sup> I use this triadic combination through the book as a nod toward Jacques Lacan's three psychoanalytic orders, developed during a series of lectures in the 1950s. In the Lacanian arena, the symbolic-real-imaginary forms a trio of intrapsychic realms that comprise the various levels of psychic phenomena. See Lacan (1956) as well as <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/symbolicrealimaginary.htm> (last viewed December 4, 2008). This triad resonates well in this context, whereas in many studies the imaginary realm is neglected (but see Anderson 1991).

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exercised through these trees. As much as this other significance is material, in the sense that the war over and through trees in Israel/Palestine is about the material value of land and territory, it is not so much materialist. However, materialist perspectives do assume a more central role in my later discussion of the olive tree. First, the olive tree's economic significance in the occupied West Bank<sup>4</sup> has increased in the last two decades, mainly because the political conditions there have resulted in greater Palestinian reliance on olive cultivation. Additionally, economic considerations are central to phenomena such as olive smuggling and pine poaching, both discussed toward the end of the book. Finally, the economic significance of the olive tree has definitely played a role in its transformation into a fashionable Jewish crop for small-scale farming that relies on elite international markets.

In *Facts on the Ground*, Nadia Abu El-Haj argues that in the Palestinian Israeli context, archeology has developed into an ongoing practice of *kibush* (conquest), helping “to realize an intrinsically Jewish space, continuously substantiating the land’s own identity and purpose as having been and *needing to be* the Jewish national home” (2001: 18; emphasis in original). The work of archeology in this context, then, assembles material-symbolic facts that render visible the land’s identity as Jewish, often before the actual settlement of specific places within it. “Historical-archeological landscapes, architectural forms, urban designs, and artifactual remains embody the very Jewishness of a place . . . and they *naturalize* Jewish presence” (ibid., emphasis in original; see also Hoffman 1998). Even more ingrained in the natural landscape than archeological artifacts, the tree’s very physicality renders it a useful tool for grabbing land.

<sup>4</sup> Because this study does not include the Gaza Strip, I have decided to refer to the area discussed throughout the book as the “occupied West Bank” rather than the more general “occupied Palestinian territories.” Another term frequently used to define this space is “Judea and Samaria,” which invokes a biblical connotation. Each term carries its own political connotations and historical weight. One way or the other, *Planted Flags* focuses only on the *occupied* West Bank (mostly Area C) and does not include those areas controlled by the Palestinian National Authority (Area A).

On the other end, however, it is important to remember that both national obsessions about land and the strong link between trees and land are as social as they are physical. Although the tree's physical features connect it to land and territory, the tree has also come to symbolize connection to land and is protected as such, especially by the legal system of the nation-state. In other words, *Planted Flags* maintains that the intrinsic correlations between nationalism and territory cannot be explained by material forms alone. Symbolic and imaginary aspects are also important components of the relationship. It is precisely the interchangeability and interconnectedness between the material and the discursive that *Planted Flags* grapples with, and it does so through a detailed examination of the physical and discursive thing called the tree.

This is also where law steps into the picture. The tree's physical connection to the land and the significance ascribed to it are powerful only when supported by legal norms. In this case, Israel's legal system grants certain trees protection from arbitrary uprooting while designating others the status of a national forest reserve. I further explore this dynamic under the theme of "lawfare."

In addition to its study of the natural, this book also explores what it loosely refers to as "landscape." The use of the term landscape adds a layer of materiality that is perhaps less apparent in the term nature by itself (see also Grodzins Gold and Gujar 2002: 6). The many definitions of landscape can be posited along a continuum – with the morphological emphasis of landscape on the one hand and the representational understanding of landscape on the other (see, e.g., Cosgrove 1984; Holder 1999; Jackson 1984; W. J. T. Mitchell 2001; Schama 1995). On the physical end of the continuum, landscape has been defined as that "portion of land which the eye can comprehend at a glance" (Jackson 1984: 3) and as "an organization of man-made spaces" (ibid.: 143). On the representational end, landscape scholars have denied the existence of any prediscursive material world, focusing exclusively on the politics of reading, language, and iconography (see, e.g., Cosgrove 1984; Darian-Smith



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2004). This book largely draws on a definition of landscape as “always both a material form that results from and structures social interaction, and an ideological representation dripping with power” (Mitchell 1996: 34; see also Abu El-Haj 2001: 18; Blomley 1998: 568). The book’s definition of landscape, then, combines the material and representational perspectives, referring to landscape both as a physical environment and as a particular way of seeing a place.

### *Second Theme: Bifurcation*

In addition to studying the process of naturalization and the work that it does for the Israeli/Palestinian national project, *Planted Flags* also studies the way in which bifurcating the landscape into two opposing treescapes promotes these national projects. Specifically, the book examines how two distinct species – the olive and the pine – have been singled out and used in the Israeli/Palestinian context as markers of territory and as competing methods for asserting dominion over land. Although there is nothing naturally antagonistic about pines and olives, they have nonetheless been positioned as natural enemies in this region. This brings into focus two interconnected questions: first, why trees? And then, why olives and pines?

As discussed earlier, I believe that the tree’s special “thingness” is what has enabled it to become such a potent weapon in the Israeli/Palestinian war.<sup>5</sup> Most importantly, both olives and pines root into and

<sup>5</sup> One might even take a step further, claiming that trees are binary in their nature. This indeed is the approach articulated by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), who have also coined the terms “arborescent” and “rhizomatic” to illustrate the two distinct modes of societal operation. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the arborescent properties of trees conform to a binary logic, which is based on the one becoming a dialectical two. In other words, they propose that the tree’s material and discursive thingness ipso facto lends itself to binary constructions. Although hesitant to agree with the underlying claim that tree logic, and by extension the physical trees themselves, *naturally* lend themselves to war and bifurcated landscapes (see, e.g., the complex yet nonbinary plant taxonomy in Lévi-Strauss 1996), I

occupy territory, creating an apparently unambiguous and neutral presence in the landscape while continually claiming it. These characteristics have made trees into national entities that function similarly to, say, fortresses in a conflict zone.

The olive and pine are not the only natural entities in Israel/Palestine that have, through the years, performed national agendas. For example, the orange tree, the prickly pear cactus (*sabra* or *tsabar*), the eucalyptus, and the date have all figured, both physically and symbolically, in the national construction of the Israeli/Palestinian landscape.<sup>6</sup> However, these trees are not as distinct as the olives and pines in their national affiliations, nor are they as intimately juxtaposed among each other as the olive and pine trees are. Beyond their identities as tree types, the olive and the pine are manifestations of two distinct tree archetypes: forest and field. Whereas pines are quick to grow into a forest landscape, olive trees are long-lived and develop into an orchard scenery (curious inversions of these archetypes occur as these rigid taxonomies take on a dynamic of their own).

Indeed, beyond their physical dimensions, the pine and the olive are unique in that, more than any other type of tree, they have become the quintessential symbols of Palestinian and Israeli national discourses: the pine is synonymous with the Zionist project of afforesting the “desolate” land of Israel, and the olive has become emblematic of the Palestinian struggle against Israel’s occupation and for national independence. An exploration of the relationship between these two trees thus provides some insight into the mechanisms that have shaped the

wish nonetheless to claim that the trees in the Israeli/Palestinian context have indeed evolved through the years into symbolic, physical, and imaginary manifestations of such bifurcated war landscapes.

<sup>6</sup> On the role of various trees in Israel/Palestine see, e.g., Bardenstein (1998); on the eucalyptus in particular see JNF’s monthly newsletter *What’s New*, “Saving Eucalyptus Trees Worldwide: KKL-JNF Forestry Experts and Scientists Worldwide Mobilize their Knowledge,” November 18, 2008 as well as the interview with Leket; on the orange see discussion of Herzl’s *Altneuland* in Chapter 2 as well as Kanafani (1963) and interview with Morin; finally, in his interview Avrutzki mentions the astounding story behind the Iraqi date’s importation to Israel/Palestine.