

UNIVERSITE DE TOULOUSE I – SCIENCES SOCIALES

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Conflits*



National Security and Collective Memory in Israel
Symbolic and mythical dimensions of Masada as a parameter of the Israeli
military doctrine

Israeli army
Masada
Myth & Symbol
Heroism

Before the creation of the State of Israel, the leaders of the Jewish community in Palestine (*Yishouv*) started a very important process of *reading* and *rereading* Jewish past that is socially constructed in such a way as to fit the needs of the Zionist's national project. This construction of a collective memory requires deceptions and fabrications but also "corrections" and the Masada mythical narrative obeys to this process. Despite its bloody history (a collective suicide as a rejection of surrendering to the Romans), it represents today an heroic and symbolic myth that played a central and important role in shaping the national and personal identity of many young Israelis. Masada symbolises the continuity of the Jewish people in its homeland and, through a reinterpretation and a glorification of the historical battle, it represents also a positive and heroic symbol: the national struggle for freedom. Despite the condemnation of suicide by the Jewish law (Halakha), Masada was seen as "a liberation war, a heroic war, a war of the few against the many, a war of loyalty to the country, a war of the loyalty to the nation" (D. Ben Gourion).

When the question of a Jewish national sovereignty was revived through the formulation of a modern national ideology (Zionism), Masada became not only

a geographical site, nor was it merely an episode in the history of the Jews in Palestine. In fact, it became the basic starting point for a real historical quest to define a common cultural base for a multicultural Jewish State, and above all the Israeli collective memory has associated Masada with the struggle to secure Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel. "Never again shall Masada fall" became a national motto for various generations of Israelis. This assumption fundamentally shaped a security vision committed to defending the State and helping to the formulation and conceptualization of the Israeli security doctrine. Like Masada defenders against the Romans, Israelis ("new Hebrews") have to fight for liberty and sovereignty in a hostile environment. Like the zealots who preferred to die (patriotic death) rather than to live under a foreign rule, the Israelis are determined to fight for their national sovereignty. Benyamin Netanyahu declared to Bill Clinton during an historical visit to this fortress in 1996: "I want to show you what the Jewish determination is".

It justifies thus how the overwhelming majority of Israeli soldiers have gone to Masada as part of their training on treks designed to acquaint them with the geography and the symbolic history of the Israel. This "haut-lieu de mémoire" is a central patriotic ritual that strengthens and deepens the sense of serving/desire to serve the nation and feeds the soldier's motivation to be ready, like his ancestors two thousand years earlier, for the supreme sacrifice in the name of national sovereignty.

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