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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# MINARETS: THE SKYSCRAPERS OF THE GALILEE

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### ABSTRACT

This article is a preview of a comprehensive research study of one of the most prominent structures in the Galilean skyline. Their incommensurate height penetrating the natural landscape and their increasing numbers give the impression that the classic role of these buildings has shifted from serving a very defined function to acting as a symbol. The purpose of the study is to examine whether the "landscape text" has changed and to determine whether this change has any particular meaning. Beginning in the 1990s, the structure of the minarets became more externalized, their shape changed and they became higher. It seems that the events of the Land Day and the Nakba Day influenced this phenomenon. The minaret structure has become a proclamation: "We are here; we are on the map." From a structure defined by religion, the minaret has become a structure symbolizing territory and nationalism.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Galilee is a mountainous region in northern Israel, bordered by the Jezreel and Beit She'an Valleys to the south, the Jordan Valley, Sea of Galilee and Hula Valley to the east, the Mediterranean coast and the Zebulun Valley to the west, and southern Lebanon to the north. The academic geographic community in Israel commonly considers the political border between the State of Israel and Lebanon to be the northern border of the Galilee. The Lower Galilee is the southern subdivision of the Galilee, called "lower" because it is less mountainous than the Upper Galilee. Throughout history, the Lower Galilee has always been more settled than the Upper Galilee. The Arab population of the region settled at the foot of the hills and cultivated the land. Israeli Arabs live in 125 localities spread throughout the state. Half of them live in the Galilee, where they constitute about half the population.<sup>1</sup> Over the last 200 years, the Arab localities within Israel have undergone many changes.

The development of Arab villages has been marked by several stages: Stage A) village establishment; Stage B) village growth and expansion; Stage C) overcrowding of Arab localities, mainly due to dwindling supply of vacant land.<sup>2</sup> This article is a preview of a comprehensive research study of one of the most prominent structures in the Galilean skyline. A traveler on Galilee roads cannot help but notice the number of turrets projecting into the sky. Their incommensurate height penetrating the natural landscape and their increasing numbers give the impression that the classic role of these buildings has shifted from serving a much-defined function to acting as a symbol. Transforming a space into a symbolically meaningful place is one of the significant means of building social identity through establishing and declaring geographical space as such. Since the dawn of civilization, architecture has invested much effort in designing the geographical landscape and transforming it into a place of religious or political symbolic utterance. From the palaces and temples on the Acropolis to the skyscrapers of the modern age, deciphering the symbols embedded in a particular structure may illuminate the initiating

<sup>1</sup> As of 2001

<sup>2</sup> Fine Z., Segev M., Lavie R. 2007:179

entity and reflect its political or religious identity or both. The connection between landscape, culture and politics is called "reading the landscape" and in recent years has characterized geographic and cultural research such as that of Shlomo Hasson.<sup>3</sup> The minarets erected above the urban horizon are a good example of "reading the landscape". Further to the work of Calderon and Sindawi<sup>4</sup> in which they explore sites that have national significance, in this article I seek to address only one aspect that can be defined as "religious"—the minaret. The purpose of the study is to examine whether the "landscape text" has changed as a result of a change in the structure of the minaret, from the time prior to the establishment of the State of Israel to the period after statehood, and to determine whether this change has any particular meaning.

**The minaret and its origins:** The minaret is a building belonging to the vocabulary of Islamic architecture. The Arabic word for minaret is *Manara* (منارة), referring to a tower or a lighthouse. In Persian, it is called *Madhana* (مئذنة), the place where the *muezzin* (مؤذن) sings the *Adhan* (أذان), calling on believers to come to prayer (see Figure 1). Naturally, such a structure will always refer to the prayer structure determining the use of the mosque. There are no rules dictating the architectural location of the minaret in space, just as there are no rules dictating the shape and number of minarets in the religious complex. On the other hand, the canon determining how a mosque is built is binding: The mosque must have a *Qibla* (قبلة)—a wall facing Mecca—and a niche—a *mihrab* (محراب) or other marking on the wall of the *Qibla* designed to make it easier for worshippers to find the prayer direction (see Figure 2).



Fig. 1. Bith Zarir looking from Timrat (photo taken by author)

At the same time, it is impossible to imagine a Muslim religious space that does not boast at least one minaret. Islam emerged on the stage of world history during the first quarter of the 7th century, making it the newest monotheistic religion. Islam was born and evolved with and for the "nation". Indeed, the concept of *Ummaha* ("أمة") enfolds all believers and sets them apart from other human beings.

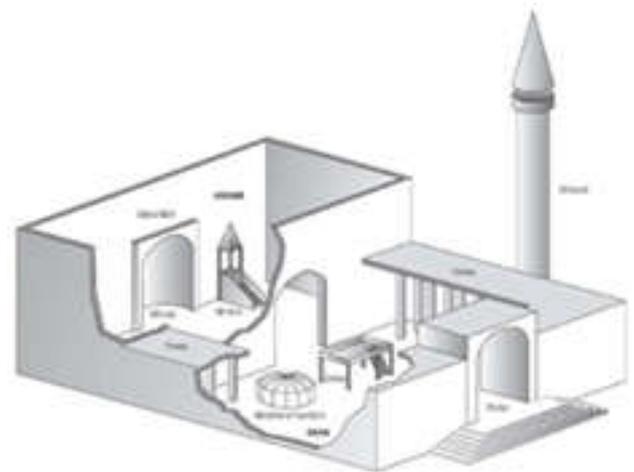


Fig. 2. A schematic drawing of a Mosque  
[https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Typical-Parts-of-mosque-Kavuri-Bauer-2012\\_fig2\\_284446235](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Typical-Parts-of-mosque-Kavuri-Bauer-2012_fig2_284446235)

Tradition says "Wherever there is a time of prayer (الصلاة) this place is a mosque." Despite this worldview, praying at the mosque also fills a social need as a place where one meets fellow believers. Later on, the mosque's role became more social and less religious, as a place where one prayed, learned, was judged and conducted business.<sup>5</sup> The first structure to serve as a mosque was the Prophet's house in Medina, where worshippers were called to prayer from the roofs of houses. Bilal Ibn Rabah (بلال بن رباح), the first *muezzin*, responded to the Prophet's request—"Get up Bilal and gather the worshippers"—by going up on the roof of the Prophet's house and calling the worshippers for prayer.<sup>6</sup> At the outset of Islam, there was resistance to using tall buildings as a place to call people to prayer lest from the height of the altar the *muezzin* would be able to look into the courtyards of the houses around the mosque. For the same reason, the job of *muezzin* was only available to the blind or visually impaired.<sup>7</sup> The ban on the establishment of tall minarets was in effect in Muslim countries such as Malaysia, Kashmir and East Africa until the 20th century. Opponents have argued that there is no place for such an extroverted structure in the Islamic religion, which preaches modesty, and that the minaret does not fit the Prophet's legacy. Only in the 20th century, with the spread of visual communication, the opening of trade routes and the movement of travelers, did researchers begin studying homogeneity in the Muslim international architectural style.<sup>8</sup> Minarets were unknown in the Prophet's time, raising questions regarding their origin, how they became the most prominent hallmark of the presence of Islam, and why they are so different from each other. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, various explanations were raised as to the origin of the minaret, ranging from the lighthouse of Alexandria (pharos)<sup>9</sup> through the Roman pillars of victory<sup>10</sup> to the bell towers of churches<sup>11</sup>. This question should be answered by examining the following questions: What architectural structures were encountered by the Muslims who came from western Saudi Arabia? Moreover, what architectural item met their requirements and could be adopted? In order to

<sup>5</sup> Cherif Jah Abderrahman 2007

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig W. Adamac 2009:68

<sup>7</sup> Bloom J. 2002:26-35

<sup>8</sup> Bloom J. 2002:26-35

<sup>9</sup> Strzygowski J. 1901

<sup>10</sup> Similar to the Trajan pillar

<sup>11</sup> Theirsch H. 1909

<sup>3</sup> Hason S.1983

<sup>4</sup> Calderon and Sinsawi 2018

understand the source of the minarets, we must consider the time and place of their appearance and the different styles of the new turrets appearing on the skyline. The first mosques built in Al Basra (البصرة) and in Kufa in Iraq (see Figure 3) were devoid of minarets<sup>12</sup>.

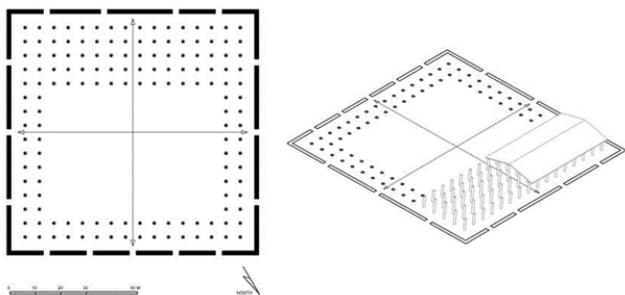


Fig.3.The Mosque in Kofa <https://www.archnet.org/sites/382>

This was not the case in Damascus, which was a powerful cultural and religious center in the Byzantine period. In the center of the city, in a place where there a temple to Jupiter once stood, was a cathedral dedicated to John the Baptist. This cathedral boasted high bell turrets that soared above the urban horizon. The Muslim conquest of Damascus, the establishment of Umayyad rule in the city, and the choice of the city as capital meant that the city's traditional religious center was chosen for the establishment of the Friday Central Mosque (see Figure 4).

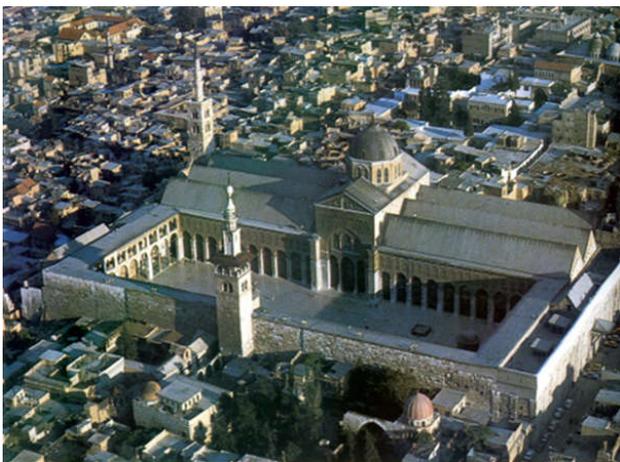


Fig. 4. The Great Mosque in Damascus <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/553590979186863951>

The church was transformed into a mosque by El Walid I<sup>13</sup> (الوليد بن عبد المل), while the bell towers, which were the highest element of urban architecture and in the past used to announce the time of prayer for Christians, became the first minarets. The ringing bells were removed and replaced by the muezzin's voice. The highest element, which was previously Christian, was converted to Islam. In this case, the structure of the minaret indeed signifies the presence of the new religion. The first intentionally built minaret was the minaret above the Prophet's home in Medina. Walid I also built this mosque, but unlike the mosque in Damascus, nothing remains of it today. According to historical references, it had four spires. Historians called the spires *Manara* (منارة), or manar (منار) but

do not mention the role they must have played.<sup>14</sup> The Umayyad minarets were rectangular, in memory of the bell tower in Damascus, and they are the earliest minarets in Andalusia and the Maghreb (see Figure 5).



Fig.5.The Kairouan Minaret <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/385409680589615075>

Only in the 9th century, with the establishment of the Abbasid caliphate that ruled from the Atlantic coast to the deserts of Central Asia, did the turrets become buildings regularly associated with mosques. Some would argue that it was only during Abbasid rule that a single turret adjacent to the Friday mosque began to mark the importance of the mosque in formulating the Muslim community (the Ummah أمة الإسلام), and only then did the height of the turret become a symbol of religious power. At that point, the minaret clearly became a prominent feature of the presence of the new religion. The cylindrical style that developed mainly in Central Asia, Iran, and Afghanistan did not remain unnoticed by Turkish Seljuk eyes, and from there the road to the Ottoman cylindrical style was short (Figures 6 and 7).

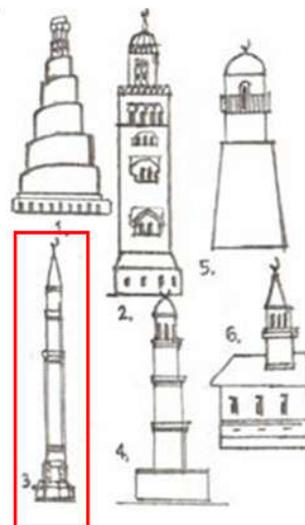


Fig. 6. The Mausoleum of Arsalan Jazib Iran <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minaret>

<sup>12</sup> Ettinghausen R. and Grabar O. 1994:35

<sup>13</sup> 668-715 C.E

<sup>14</sup> Ettinghausen R. and Grabar o. 1994:35; Arffin S.A.I.S 2005:62



Fig.7. Mina ret Style:a schematic drawing  
[https://archnet.org/sites/1657/media\\_contents/42627](https://archnet.org/sites/1657/media_contents/42627)

**Minarets in the Galilee: Style and Meaning:** The minarets erected in the Galilee prior to 1948 were mostly cylindrical or “pencil” minarets, as we refer to them. These originated from those in the Ottoman Empire that rule the region over 400 years. Such minarets were derived from those located in the plains of Central Asia (Figures 8, 9). These minarets were modest in shape and height, and adjacent to the mosque, with each mosque having only one minaret. Their modest height fit into the settlement pattern regardless of the height of the surrounding houses (Figures 10,11,12, 13).



Fig.8. Akko El-Bahar or El-Mina Mosque(photo taken by author)



Fig.9. Haifa the “Tiny” Mosque (photo taken by author)



Fig. 10. Zefat 1949 <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/Article-555838>



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Fig.11. Tiberias El Bahri(Sea Mosque)  
[https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%9E%D7%A1%D7%92%D7%93\\_%D7%94%D7%99%D7%9D\\_\(%D7%98%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%94\)](https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%9E%D7%A1%D7%92%D7%93_%D7%94%D7%99%D7%9D_(%D7%98%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%94))



Fig. 12. Shefar'am, old versus new (photo taken by author)



Fig.13. Isti Kdal Mosque, Haifa (photo taken by author)



Fig.14. al-Khalisa (Qiryat Shemona) px-Khalisa\_mosque\_05 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Khalisa-2008



Fig. 15. Hitin Mosque https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%97%D7%99%D7%98%D7%99%D7%9F

Beginning in the 1990s, the structure of the minarets became more externalized, their shape changed and some even returned to partial use of rectangular elements (Figure.16), perhaps as a reminder of the magnificent Umayyad period.



Fig.16. Arab Zubidate (photo taken by author)

Today the element of height has become increasingly significant. The turrets can be seen from a distance and appear to break down the landscape patterns to which they refer. A good example of this type of turret is found in the Abu Bakr (أبو بكر)<sup>15</sup> mosque in Tur'an (طرعان) which can be distinguished from the "new" communities of Hosh'a'ya and Beit Rimon. (Figures.17, 18), as well as the new spire in the Bedouin neighborhood of Arab Zubidate, which belongs to Basamat Tivon<sup>16</sup> (بسمة طبعون), which can be easily distinguished above the background (Figure. 19). The mosques have begun to flaunt many minarets, as if more is better. A new landscape is rapidly developing in the rural localities and cities of the Galilee, one to which travelers on the Galilee roads cannot remain indifferent.



Fig.17. Turan 1970 https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%98%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%A2%D7%90%D7%9F

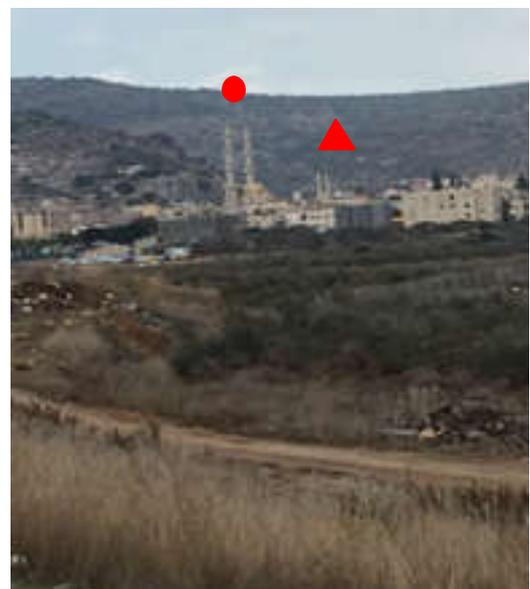


Fig.18. Turan 2020 (photo taken by author)

As part of the arts, architecture responds to reality and that same reality should be sought in the elements of national identity that emerged in Arab society towards the end of the last millennium. One of the questions we must ask is: What is the culture that was engraved in the Galilee landscape during the formation of the new landscape?

<sup>15</sup> Built in 2003

<sup>16</sup> Built in 2019



Fig.19. Arab Zubidate (photo taken by author)

Shlomo Hasson in his article titled "Cultures Engraved in the Landscape"<sup>17</sup> argues that even the immediate rollover between Ottoman and British rule and then the rule of the State of Israel underwent scenic changes, as each government attempted to impose its seal on the landscape as a declaration of control.<sup>18</sup> In the context of the geopolitical power system, the Galilee is a national ethnic space in which Jews and Arabs struggle, i.e., a complex area where Jews and Arabs live side by side in a relationship of tension and interdependence. Traditionally, Western culture has had some difficulty understanding abstract concepts related to the material elements associated with Islam. This difficulty was mainly due to a lack of in-depth knowledge about the culture itself. Yet surprisingly, Western scholars were also the first to study this art. Investigating semiotics is always ambiguous and complex if one considers that the symbols that emerge are not static and may change depending on the feelings and attitudes witnessed by the observer. At the same time, our daily lives are full of important symbols, which serve as visual mediators for moods that are difficult to describe rationally. Thus the tower, an architectural structure whose great height originally functioned as a defensive or communicative structure, changed its role throughout history and assumed a role of control and power.<sup>19</sup> In human consciousness, height is always perceived as something sublime or even supreme. Two examples from the ancient world worthy of mention are the Tower of Babel as a symbol of challenging the supreme power of the deity and the Mesopotamian *ziggurat* as a symbol of the supremacy of the knowledge and wisdom of the priesthood. In modern times, we are witness to buildings like the Eiffel Tower or the skyscrapers as symbols of technological superiority. All of these reinforce the human desire for commemoration. In the summer of 1975, the first news of intentions to expropriate land in the Galilee were published in a project called "Converting Galilee to a Jewish region,"<sup>20</sup> and on March 29, 1976 the government announced the expropriation of 20,000 dunams (دونم)<sup>21</sup> of privately owned land in the region of Deir Hanna (دير حنا), Arabah (عربية) and Sakhnin (سخنين). The growth of the Jewish population in the Galilee and the intentions to facilitate this growth by nationalizing land in the Arab territories motivated the Arabs to declare what has become known

as Land Day (يوم الأرض), which entered our national consciousness that year.<sup>22</sup> The Arabs felt an urgent need to mark the geographical areas that belong to them by means of symbols identifying the territory as Muslim Arab. The minaret as a tower dominating the surrounding agricultural areas was the best solution. Another notable event that occurred toward the end of the last century was the *Nakba* (النكبة) or disaster. The term *Nakba* first appeared in Constantine Zurik's book titled *The Meaning of the Disaster*, published in 1956. Zurik writes as follows: "The defeat of the Arabs in Palestine is not just a defeat, it is a cataclysmic misunderstanding or a passing lightning of evil."<sup>23</sup> The word *Nakba* embodies the horrific event that transpired in the Arab settlement in 1948 with the Israeli occupation, leading to the departure, escape or deportation of some 700,000 Palestinians during the War of Independence, the loss of their land and the creation of refugees.<sup>24</sup> This event is engraved and seared in the self and cultural consciousness of the Arabs and is likely to find expression in artistic and cultural layers as well. According to Ben Zvi, the *Nakba* was the catalyst that led the Palestinians to change their perception of nationalism and what is more important, to find ways to realize it.<sup>25</sup> Nakba Day (يوم النكبة) was officially announced by the Palestinian Authority for the first time in 1998, in parallel with the 50th anniversary of the State of Israel. The events included rallies, parades, exhibitions, seminars, and the publication of numerous articles in the Arab and Palestinian press that discussed the meaning and place of the *Nakba* in Palestinian identity. Only toward the end of the 1990s, did the *Nakba* story mature and converge into a more cohesive narrative. Indeed, a change in the minaret structures during this period may point to the special psychological and geographical meaning of this structure to the viewer.



Fig.20. Dir al-Assad, <http://dugrinet.co.il/17862/story/2016/january/05>



Fig.21. Zurich, <https://news.walla.co.il/item/1615901>

<sup>17</sup> Hasson 14 1983:12 Hebrew)

<sup>18</sup> ibid

<sup>19</sup> Such as Watch towers and beacons

<sup>20</sup> Also known as the observatory program

<sup>21</sup> 1000 m<sup>2</sup>, which is 1/10 hectare

<sup>22</sup> Yftachel O. 1999 (Hebrew)

<sup>23</sup> Zurayk 1956:14

<sup>24</sup> Moris B. 1999 (Hebrew)

<sup>25</sup> Ben Zvi 2010:28 (Hebrew)



Fig.22. Berlin <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4692907,00.htm>



Fig. 23.a-Taibeh a-Zuabia (الطيبة الزعبية)

### Summary

For many years now, recording equipment and loudspeakers have replaced the voice of the muezzin in calling worshippers to prayer, so that the minaret's declared role has ceased to be relevant (Figure 20). After the conquest of Constantinople, one of the first acts attributed to the Sultan of Mehmet II (محمد ثانی) was the erection of a wooden minaret on the roof of the Hagia Sophia Church as a symbol of Islam's final victory over Christianity. During the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, the Serbs in the city of Kosovo systematically detonated the minarets in order to "erase the Islamic presence in the city." Moreover, in November 2009, a referendum was held in Switzerland calling for banning minarets on the grounds that they symbolize Islamic rule and that there is a direct link between them and Europe's Islamism. As a result of the referendum, a section prohibiting the building of minarets was introduced into Swiss construction law (see Figures 21,22). Among the recognizable signs in any Islamic city or town, the minaret is most prominent: a high turret towering over the urban horizon from which the muezzin calls worshippers to prayer five times a day. Even today, in the era of skyscrapers, the minaret infuses the landscape with a typical Muslim appearance (see Figure 23).

Differences in the minaret structure express differences in how the structure is perceived. Through this structure, the Arabs define their national identity, regardless of the definition of the structure's true and original role. The spire that rises up to the heights symbolizes territory in its new role. And indeed, territory is a prime component of Palestinian nationalism, as stated in "The Future Vision for Palestinian Arabs in Israel," a document written in 2006: "Belonging to this place is the first element of national and cultural identity." The minaret structure has become a proclamation: "We are here; we are on the map." From a structure defined by religion, the minaret has become a structure symbolizing territory and nationalism. As Tal Ben Zvi states in her essay "Representations of the Nakba in Palestinian Art": "Palestine is gone and the catastrophe that

led to it still have somewhat turned into a memorial site," with the minaret as its monument.

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