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Under the Mermaid Flag: Achzivland and the performance of micronationality on ancestral Palestinian land

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Abstract: This article considers the relationship between symbolism, interpretation and grounded reality with regard to "Achzivland," a small area on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean that was declared an independent micronation in 1972. The article commences by identifying the principal geo-political and military factors that created the terrain for the enactment of fantasy utopianism, namely the forced removal of the area's Palestinian population in 1948 and the nature of Israeli occupation and management of the region since. Following this, the article shifts to address related symbolic/allusive elements, including the manner in which a flag featuring a mermaid has served as the symbol for a quasi-national territory whose founder — Eli Avivi — has been compared to the fictional character Peter Pan, and his fiefdom to J.M. Barrie's fictional "Never Never Land". Consideration of the interconnection of these (forceful and figurative) elements allows the discourse and rhetoric of Achzivland's micronationality to be contextualised in terms of more concrete political struggles in the region.

KEYWORDS: Achzivland, Micronationality, Palestine, Israel, Mermaids, Peter Pan

Introduction

Over the last 50 years, the term "micronation" has been applied to usually (but not exclusively) small territories that have been declared independent by their inhabitants. These territories are either located within established nation states or else, on occasion, on islands, sandbanks or platforms outside of national territorial waters. One aspect they share is a lack of recognition of their claims to sovereignty by established nation-states or by international bodies such as the United Nations. Surveys such as *Shima's* online anthology of island micronations (2016–18) illustrate the diversity of seriousness with which micronational enterprises are conducted by their claimants and/or responded to by established nation-states, their variable viabilities and the range of durations that they operate for. Some micronations, such as Sealand, located on an abandoned British fort in the English Channel, have operated as independent entities for extended periods (in Sealand's case, continuously since 1967) (see Dennis, 2002), while others, such as Lamb Island, in the Australian state of Queensland, were the sites of putative micronations that only existed as temporary conjecture avidly covered by national and international media during a single month (Hayward, 2014). In recent years, these types of entities, which at least have *some* degree of association with physical spaces, have been joined by a throng of virtual micronations entirely constituted on websites and social media, where claims (and often counter-claims) have been made for actual or purely fictional territories as a form of online gaming and role-playing (see Hayward and Khamis, 2015 for discussion).

As discussed at length in the aforementioned *Shima* anthology, and in subsequent work such as de Castro and Kober (2019), micronations — like nations themselves — can be understood to be performed by rhetoric, by quasi-legal and administrative practices and/or by symbolism and symbolic acts. Symbolic images have a particular strategic value in micronational contexts in signalling the existence of an entity that claims autonomy for itself. One of the most important of these images is the flag. Broadly speaking, flags

represent social entities of different kinds: transnational organisations, nation states, provinces within nation states, cities etc. and variously archaic, emergent and/or contested geo-political entities. In all of these, the flag serves to assert the existence of what it represents in a loop between the flag-as-thing and the geo-political-entity-as-thing, generating what Callahan and Ledgerwood (2016) refer to as *entitativity*. The constant reiteration of the flag as symbol of a something that exists by the entity that it symbolises confirms the validity of the flag as an officially sanctioned and/or definitive symbol of the entity. But micronational flags operate significantly differently in that symbolic manifestations of micronationality, such as flags, passports, websites etc., are often the *primary* constituents of a (real or virtual) place asserted as a micronation. Flags convey gravitas by virtue of being symbols *of* something and invite interpretation in that regard. They also exist in an historical context. The components of their (usually rectangular) form have symbolic and/or design aspects that relate to, derive from and/or respond to previous vexillological, art historical and/or other visual practices.

The first section of this article discusses the establishment of Achzivland, its relation to Palestine and Israel and the Avivis' development of the territory. The second section considers Achzivland's flag, and its mermaid motif in particular, as a cameo of the micronation and compares it to a long-established tradition of fish-tailed femininity in the region concerning the Arabic *Hourriyat al-bahr*. As the article discusses, the latter has been deployed very differently by the Palestinian artist Imad Abu Shtayyah. In this manner, the article analyses the differential use of similar imagery to markedly different ends, crystallising the contrasting fates of Achzivland and dispossessed Palestinian people through two focal images and, thereby, demonstrating the resonance of traditional folkloric figures in modern political discourse.

Achzivland[1] and Avivi

Achzivland was established in a small area of Israel's far north coast, immediately to the north of the historical site of Achziv[2] (from which the micronation takes its name) and south of the highly sensitive Lebanese border region (Figure 1), which has been the site of

recurrent clashes between Palestinian guerrilla groups and the Israeli armed forces since the 1940s. The micronation's history is entwined with that of the state of Israel through its founder El Avivi's participation in the establishment of both. Born into a Jewish family in Persia (now Iran) in 1930,[3] Avivi migrated with his parents to the British Mandated Territory of Palestine in 1932 following a rise in anti-Semitic sentiment in Persia that was fanned by the country's authoritarian leader Reza Pahlav. The British administered territory of Palestine was contentious and highly contested from its inception, through a League of Nations mandate in 1920, until its dissolution in 1948, following the proclamation of the state of Israel by Zionist activists. The principal cause of conflict in the territory from the 1920s on was the tension between the wishes for self-determination and security of the area's established Palestinian (and predominantly Muslim) population and the desires of Jewish settler-refugees to set up Jewish areas and spheres of influence in response to varying degrees of marginalisation and/or hostility in their former countries of residence. The tenuous basis of the Jewish settler/refugees' presence in Palestine led to the formation of various Jewish activist and/or paramilitary groups, initially deployed to oppose the British authorities and military and to assist the arrival and settlement of Jews in the territory (in contravention of British policies to limit this). Following the defeat of Germany in 1945, Zionist activists organised an unofficial navy, known as the Palyam, to ferry Jewish settlers to Palestine despite the British Navy's attempts to blockade the coast in order to prevent their access. Avivi joined the Palyam in 1945 and worked with the organisation until joining the Jewish Resistance Movement following the rebellion of Arab communities against the United Nations' Partition Plan for Palestine (moved and adopted in November 1947) that proposed the partition of Palestine between Jewish and Palestinian communities.

Figure 1 – Position of Achzivland within Israel and broader region (Christian Fleury, 2018)

While the far north-west of Palestine was identified as a Palestinian area under the United Nations plan, forces acting on behalf of the newly proclaimed state of Israel invaded the area in May 1948 in an initiative named Operation Ben-Ami. The coastal village of al-Zeeb, a settlement with a population of around 2,200 built on and around the historic site of Achziv (which its name is a variant of), was a major target on account of its serving as a regional centre for Palestinian resistance to Jewish settlement over the preceding decade (Zochrot, 2014). Israeli forces secured control over the village after the majority of its residents fled a mortar barrage. After detaining and removing the remaining residents, the village was razed to the ground in an act of retribution.[4] In the following year a kibbutz (communal settlement) was established in the area to house Jewish migrants from the United Kingdom, USA and South Africa and there has been no Palestinian repopulation of the village in subsequent decades.

Avivi first visited al-Zeeb in 1952, settled there and restored a derelict house on the northern outskirts of the former village site,

earning a living from fishing (selling his catch to the local kibbutz), learning about the area's ancient history, collecting artefacts and living with his German partner Rina. The couple led a quiet life until 1959 when the Israeli Government declared the area around the historical site of Achziv and adjacent offshore islets a national park and went on to announce their intention to remove residents from the area. Despite this the Avivis refused to vacate their home and land. After four years of dispute, the national government authorised the destruction of the Avivis' home and sent in bulldozers to demolish it. The Avivis successfully resisted all attempts to evict them over the next eight years, resulting in the authorities escalating the dispute in 1971 by attempting to fence off the couple's home and thereby to block their access to the coast and to prevent Eli Avivi earning a livelihood as a fisherman. The couple responded by renouncing Israeli identity and proclaiming their home and surrounding block as the independent territory of Achzivland. In response, Israeli police detained the couple and sought their prosecution. But the state action proved ineffectual and the couple were released from custody with the matter being resolved by their being allowed to continue residing in their 1.4-acre property within the designated park site (with access to the coast via a pathway) on a 99-year lease (ibid). Buoyed by their success in retaining right of residence, the Avivis developed the micronational identity they had initially adopted as a protest move and attracted counter-cultural cache by embracing libertarian values. Achzivland held one of Israel's first 'counter-cultural' music festivals, in 1972, and became notorious in Israel for tolerating and encouraging nudism (and on account of Tel Avivi's penchant for photographing female nudists). This fashionable rebelliousness attracted a stream of visitors in subsequent decades including high-profile actors such as Sofia Loren and Paul Newman.

The effaced Palestinian presence in the area had a brief, dramatic but ultimately ineffectual moment of return in January 1971 when a group of Palestinian guerilla fighters arrived in a small boat from Lebanon with the intention of kidnapping Eli Avivi. Accounts of what followed differ. The most frequently cited one describes that when one of the group entered the house (while the others waited outside) he was met by an armed Rina Avivi who had been warned of the arrival of a suspicious group inquiring as to her husband's whereabouts. Thwarted, the group dispersed and were captured by Israeli forces soon after. While the reasons for the attempted

kidnapping (subsequently attributed to affiliates of the Fatah faction) remain unclear, it is likely that the presence of such a high-profile "soft target" espousing values abhorrent to Islam in an area close to the Lebanese border was an enticing one.

The paradoxes and suppressions of history inherent in Achzivland's perception and promotion as a utopic haven were also apparent in the marketing of the area to its immediate south in the same period. Keysar (2009) reflected on these aspects in her analysis of a 1970s postcard image of the historical/touristic centre of Achziv. The image (Figure 2) shows young people in abbreviated swimming costumes relaxing in the sun against a background of ruins. Keysar's analysis of the postcard (mail-franked in 1977) is also singularly apposite for the micronation located a few kilometres further north. Commenting on the postcard and its caption — which describes it as showing an "abandoned" Arab village on the site of what is now a holiday area (ibid: 94) — she contended that the photographer responsible for the image "was fulfilling a social mission by depicting, through an idyllic view, a fixed and condensed idea of the Jewish nation state … as a 'promised land' [constructed in] the abandoned and uninhabited land of Palestine" in which the "traces of pre-1948 omnipresence are *there* and at the same time no longer there" (ibid: 95–96).

Figure 2 – Postcard of Achziv (c early-mid 1970s) (from original photograph by Werner Braun)

The Avivis cemented their rule in their depopulated enclave by adopting various trappings of micronationality. Eli Avivi declared himself president, by means of an election in which he was the only voter, produced Achzivland passports that were available for purchase, adopted a flag and, in recognition of the micronation's location and his maritime associations, adopted the sound of the sea as the micronational anthem. While I have been unable to ascertain when it was adopted by the Avivis and how much input either/both had into its design, Achzivland's flag exhibits two distinct symbols — to the left, a mermaid, and to the right, a simplified rendition of the Avivis' house (the built centre of the micronation and the location of its micronational museum, containing various historical artefacts from the area and mementos of various guests) (Figure 3). While the mermaid does not feature in traditional Jewish folklore,[5] Avivi would have been likely to be aware of international maritime folklore/imagery concerning the mermaid as a result of his career as a sailor and fisherman and as an aficionado of regional history and collector of archaeological artefacts. It is also possible that he would have been aware that the figure of the mermaid had its antecedence in that of the Assyrian goddess Atargatis, often represented with a fish-tailed lower body (see Shalaby, 2018), who was associated with the port city of Ashkelon, located 125 kilometres to the south of Achziv. On the flag, the mermaid's arms are extended in a welcoming gesture appropriate to both Eli Avivi's own past in facilitating Jewish settlers' arrival and settlement in Palestine and Achzivland's policy of welcoming visitors.[6] The colours of the flag — which can be read as representing the dark blue of the sea (bottom band), the yellow of the area's sandy landscape (middle) and paler blue of the sky (top) — also echo Israel's national flag, with its blue and white stripes and (singular) central motif.

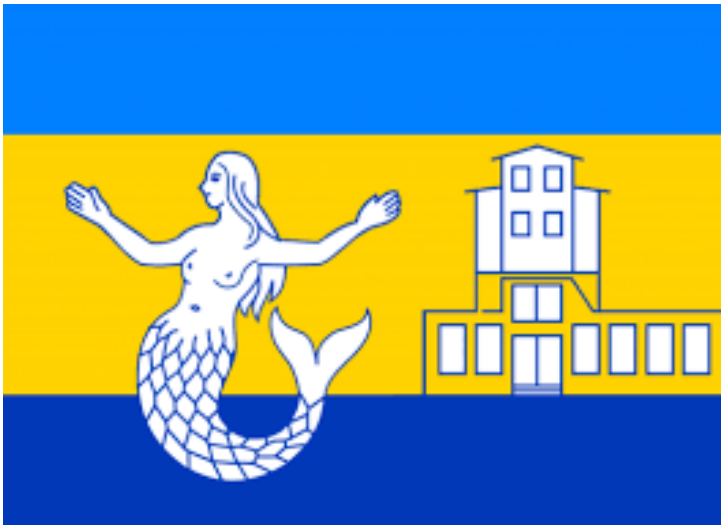

Figure 3 – Achzivland's official Flag

Taking another approach to the flag symbolism, Verveer has characterised the presence of the mermaid as:

> *a symbolic representation of Eli's love for the ocean, but as a creature of duality, belonging to two worlds, the mermaid also embodies the contradiction and unity of Achzivland. She is a half-human, half-fish creature that absorbs and transforms whatever hopes, anxieties, ambitions, and fears we imprint upon her.* (2018: online)

This characterisation accords with recent critical analyses and discussion of mermaids, particularly with regard to the *polyvalence* of their cultural role and symbolism (Hayward, 2017: 188) and with regard to their ability to express *slippery* concepts of identity formation. Indeed, Inkol has characterised them, in Deleuzian terms, as ideal navigators of the "desiring machines" that are at work in all socio-political systems (and individuals within these), providing:

> *keys that open and close domains, instituting and rupturing connections that previously existed, dictating the course of movement of the flow of desire, its ingress and egress between things.* (Inkol, 2018: 6)

Further to this, Verveer has also characterised Achzivland as a latter-day "Mermaid Land" (ibid), commenting that its strangeness reminds her of "Never Never Land,"[7] the island in J.M Barrie's play *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* (1904) inhabited by Peter, the "Lost Boys" and the mermaids who frequent its lagoon. To this end she quotes a passage in the play that relates that:

> *If you shut your eyes and are a lucky one, you may see at times a shapeless pool of lovely pale colours suspended in the darkness; then if you squeeze your eyes tighter, the pool begins to take shape and the colours become so vivid that with another squeeze they must go on fire. But just before they go on fire you see the lagoon. This is the nearest you ever get to it on the mainland, just one heavenly moment.* (ibid)

Verveer's characterisation of Achzivland being a figurative island of a similar ilk ascribes a mystical/visionary aspect to its realm arising from its location in a liminal space — on the "mainland" but at the north-western fringes of Israel, close to the shore and in easy access to the sea. The comparison of the two fanciful locations is also pertinent since in Barrie's stage play and its subsequent novelisation (1911), Peter Pan and the Lost Boys effectively inhabit and manage their island as a "Temporary Autonomous Zone" (TAZ) of the type Hakim Bey characterised as being created by 18th century pirate societies.[8] The latter took the form of "whole minisocieties living consciously outside the law" (1991: online) for as long as they could sustain that position in the face of competing forces and discourses.

The mermaid image from Achzivland's flag was given an interesting interpretation in an artwork posted on the Deviant Art website[9] (not available for reproduction here) by an artist identifying herself as "israel600"[10] that engages with various political issues inherent to the micronation. The work is a digital sketch/cartoon rendered in a simple manner. It features two mermaids, one, black-haired, represented as floating erect in the sea in a manner that recalls the mermaid on Achzivland's flag, and another (slightly smaller) blonde-haired one shown more horizontally, colliding with the larger mermaid around the intersection of her fish tail and upper torso. The dark-haired mermaid's alarm at the impact is represented by her posture, with her hands raised, and both mermaids are open mouthed

and wide-eyed, suggesting an ambiguous and mutual sense of surprise at the situation they find themselves in. Aside from ambiguous red lines on the erect mermaid's upper torso and face, the only other significant images in the picture are the two identical grey (implicitly silver) chains tied around their waists. These give the image a particular inflection. Both feature the six-pointed Star of David that is a symbol of both Judaism and the nation of Israel. As the mermaid is not a folkloric motif that features in either traditional Jewish or modern Israeli culture, the image invites inquiry into the reason for this representation, which is answered in the artist's caption on the Deviant Art website: "'Mother mermaid Israel X child mermaid Achzivland." Given the minor size discrepancy, the dark-haired mermaid appears to be the "Mother mermaid" who symbolises Israel (the meaning of the "X" is unclear) while the blonde mermaid is both presented as her "child" and as symbolising Achzivland (with the nation of Achzivland thereby being posed as the "child" of Israel). Perceptions of the blonde mermaid as representing Achzivland are bolstered by the resemblance of face, hair and hair colour of the smaller mermaid to Eli Avivi's blonde wife Rina, who was herself subject to frequent representation in the Israeli press in the 1960s-1970s. In this regard, the image is notable for emphasising Rina's role in developing Achzivland, countering the strong emphasis on her husband in most press accounts.

Despite the artwork being simply executed in terms of detail, it neatly summarises one of the paradoxes of Achzivland's foundation and claims to legitimacy. After being an active participant in the struggle to assert Jewish migrant-refugees' rights to settle in Palestine, and then for the establishment of the state of Israel, Avivi found himself in conflict with a nation state attempting to evict him from the same area that Palestinians had been forced from two decades earlier.[11] His response, the unilateral declaration of a micronation, has obvious parallels to the unilateral declaration of the state of Israel in 1948. In this manner, the two mermaids are intertwined by the histories of the states they represent.

While israel600's artwork engages with Achzivland's flag and imagery to produce a nuanced interpretation of the microstate's relationship to Israel, another image featuring a mermaid, produced independently, provides a significantly different perspective. Imad Abu Shtayyah's 2016 painting 'Yaffa — Hourriyat al-bahr' (Figure

5) shows a figure that is neither on the liminal coastline nor in a position to welcome visitors to a terrestrial homeland. Instead she is represented hanging just below the surface of the water, reaching up to grasp an orange that has floated out from the coast. The painting's title associates her with the Palestinian port town of Yaffa that underwent major expansion in the 1950s and 1960s as the Israeli city of Haifa and also explains the very different nature of her appearance to the classic Western mermaid figure represented on Achzivland's flag. *Hourriyat al-bahr* (literally 'bride of the sea') is the common Arabic term for mermaid and the figure's appearance, in ornate garments covering her torso and arms, is typical of her representation in 20th and early 21st century Middle Eastern visual media (see Shalaby, 2018). *Hourriyat al-bahr* feature in a number of ancient Middle Eastern texts, including *Alf Leilah wa Leilah* (known in English as *One Thousand and One Nights*), a collection of regional folktales that have been the subject of modern representation in Middle Eastern television in recent decades (ibid). Shtayyah's painting represents his female protagonist as separated from Yaffa, positioned offshore and only able to access the fruits of the land when they fall into the water and drift out to her. This aspect of the artwork reflects Shtayyah's personal circumstances. His family fled from the town of Algebad, near Ramla, in 1948 and have remained in Jordan since, unable to return to their ancestral homeland. The artist has described his vision for the painting as inspired by the predicament of "someone in the middle of the desert who can see water but who cannot reach it; or someone in the ocean who can see the coast but who cannot go ashore because he may be killed" (personal communication, 4.9.2018). In this manner, the mermaid symbolises the plight of Palestinians in general for the artist (ibid), representing their estrangement from and their nostalgia for their former homeland. In a further level of irony (and estrangement), Haifa went on to become Israel's major *entrepôt* for Jewish migrants arriving by sea.

Figure 5: Imad Abu Shtayyah's 2016 painting 'Yaffa – Hourriyat al-bahr'

In terms of the mermaid and her role as within the previously discussed "desiring machine" of the region, Shtayyah's Hourriyat al-bahr manifestly *lacks* "the keys that open and close domains, instituting and rupturing connections" (Inkol, 2018: 6) and, instead, stands as a marginalised figure of exile, proud yet irreducibly

alienated from her homeland. Not all mermaids are equal — or equally empowered — along the shoreline of the eastern Mediterranean.

Conclusion

While the profile of Achzivland diminished in the 1980s–2000s, the demise of its founder in early 2018 prompted a ripple of nostalgia for Achzivland's heyday by some Israelis and Western media outlets. In the early 21st century it has occupied a particularly problematic position as a micronation affectionately tolerated by a nation-state that remains resolutely opposed to statehood for the population of its two major Palestinian enclaves, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The principal difference is that Achzivland's self-proclaimed status (and the Israeli state's tacit approval of it) represents a minor idiosyncrasy within the national system whereas some (currently dominant) political factions in Israel regard Palestinian statehood as an anathema and as untenable for national security (at the same time as the Israeli state is moving to define itself as Jewish one, further marginalising and disenfranchising its Palestinian population). In this manner, the fanciful and (now fading) counter-cultural enclave that Verveer (2018) compared to the Mermaid Lagoon in J.M Barrie's *Peter Pan* stands in stark contrast to the harsher realities of the Palestinian refugee camps of Southern Lebanon or the embattled enclaves on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As the above discussion has identified, Achzivland owes its existence to the dispossession of the Palestinian population who resided in the area until 1948 and its whimsical enclavity within the contemporary nation-state of Israel is entirely rooted in a recent process of dispossession. Viewed in this regard, the abortive Palestinian guerilla raid on Achzivland in 1971 represents the jarring encounter of two radically differently constituted, protected and enabled worlds in which the inhabitants of the whimsical micronation were supported by the agents of the Israeli state which the micronation had specifically disavowed as a tenet of its foundation. This characterisation chimes with the nature of Avivi's "Never Never Land," premised on a micro-utopian impulse enacted in a forcibly depopulated area whose most significant history (for its new occupants) was a deep archaeological past commemorated in its museum. The symbolism of the mermaid's

arms on Achzivland's flag is telling in this regard. Interpreting the image with regard to both the location of the sea to the immediate west of Achzivland and the worldview of the Avivis, her arms extend to the West — to those arriving from the West and to Western secular values. There is little suggestion of her offering an embrace for the dispossessed Palestinians who lived in the area within living memory nor for religiously conservative Israelis for whom Avivi's hippy haven was an anathema. Avivi's "Never Never Land" is, in this way, distinctly "out of place" in its geo-political locale, and represents an ephemeral performance of counter-cultural *chutzpah* in a region where bigger issues are in play and where daily tragedies continue to be enacted.

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Endnotes:

[1] Spellings of the micronation's English language name in media reports vary as to the manner in which they render its initial phonetic component — the two most common ones being Achzivland and Akzivland. I use the former throughout this article based on spellings on various official materials (passports, passport stamps etc.) but it should be noted that these also vary, occasionally rendering its name as Achzirland.

[2] The site has a rich and varied historical heritage. Established as a Canaanite town around 2000 BCE, the port became a Phoenician settlement during the first millennium BCE and was subsequently occupied by Persians, Greeks and Romans and later, in the early 1100s, was briefly the site of a European Crusader fortress.

[3] While Ryan, Dunford and Sellars' widely-read volume *Micronations* cites Avivi's birthplace as Tel Aviv (2006: 49), the majority of other sources — including authoritative obituaries such as Arad (2018: online) — give Persia as his birthplace.

[4] The village's mosque and village leader's house were later restored and are now tourist attractions.

[5] While an 11th century Jewish scholar named Rashid interpreted passages from the Talmud referring to "dolphinin" as mermaids, this characterisation was not common and did not lead to subsequent elaborations. (See Slifkin [2011: 85–116] for discussion of various Talmudic sea monsters). In recent years, the port town of Kiryat Yam, north of Haifa, has actively promulgated rumours concerning mermaid sightings to boost tourism. These are a recent phenomenon, however, and do not reflect any aspect of preceding local folklore.

[6] Her bare-breasted appearances also evokes Tel Avivi's frequently produced photographic images of topless female visitors to the micronation.

[7] NB Barrie's 1911 novelisation "Peter and Wendy' primarily — although not exclusively — refers to "Neverland" (i.e. in the singular).

[8] There is a degree of irony here in that in the play, novel and subsequent film adaptations, Peter Pan and his Lost Boys struggle to maintain their TAZ in the face of aggression from a band of pirates led by Captain Hook.

[9] Online at: https://www.deviantart.com/israel600/art/Mother-mermaid-Israel-X-child-mermaid-Akhzivland-466465835 — accessed 28 March 2018.

[10] Online at: https://www.deviantart.com/israel600/art/Mother-mermaid-Israel-X-child-mermaid-Akhzivland-466465835 — accessed 28 March 2018.

[11] There are similar parallels to subsequent secessionist/micronational initiatives in Israel. The two most notable of these have been the proclamation of micronationality made by Baruch Elmakias the mayor of Yeruham, in 1984 for the town in the Negev desert (on account of its alleged neglect by Israeli central government) or that declared by activist Arieh Izhaki for the Jewish community residing in Kfar Yam in the Gaza Strip in 2005. Whereas the first was merely a rhetorical gambit, the second had a brief moment of assertion and contestation when Izhaki first appealed for recognition by the United Nations and then mounted a lone attempt to resist the evacuation of the Jewish population until forced to surrender by armed Israeli police (Yney, 2005).