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Transitional Justice: Memory As an Instrument of Peace

(Kathryn Pyle is a regular contributor to PhilanTopic. In her previous post, she wrote about [transitional justice in post-conflict situations](#).)

In a [post](#) last week, I mentioned monuments and memorialization as one of the components of a successful post-conflict resolution process. Coincidentally, an upcoming event on this theme was announced Saturday.

The [International Coalition of Sites of Conscience](#) was founded in 1999 by nine groups dedicated to remembering crimes against humanity and the never-ending struggle for justice: the [District Six Museum](#) (South Africa); the [Gulag Museum at Perm-36](#) (Russia); the [Liberation War Museum](#) (Bangladesh); the [Lower East Side Tenement Museum](#) (United States); [Maison des Esclaves](#) (Senegal); the [National Park Service](#) (United States); [Memoria Abierta](#) (Argentina); the [Terezin Memorial](#) (Czech Republic); and the [Workhouse](#) (United Kingdom).

There are now seventeen member sites in the coalition and more than two hundred and sixty individual and institutional members. The mission of each of these sites is public education -- to promote understanding about past crimes against humanity and prevent their recurrence, partly by raising awareness of the contemporary legacy of such crimes. Support for the coalition is provided by the [Ford Foundation](#), the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) and the [National Endowment for Democracy](#), the [Museums & Communities Collaborations Abroad](#) (MCAA) program, the [Institute of Museum and Library Services](#) (IMLS), the [Oak Foundation](#), the [Open Society Foundations](#), the [Nathan Cummings Foundation](#), the [Compton Foundation](#), the [Henry M. Jackson Foundation](#), the [Lambent Foundation](#), the [Libra Foundation](#), and the [Sigrid Rausing Trust](#).

In May, the coalition, in partnership with the [International Center for Transitional Justice](#), will hold a workshop in Morocco for organizations and other interested representatives from the region interested in the role of memory and memorialization in a reconciliation context. The timing for sharing the experiences of post-conflict countries that have engaged in transitional justice approaches couldn't be better.

ICSC is hopeful the workshop will help advance the process toward peaceful resolution already under way in many countries. Or, as promotional material for the conference puts it: "As calls for a break from past repressions ring out from Egypt to Libya, how can the lessons of history be tapped to envision new futures? What steps can historic Sites of Conscience in the Middle East and North Africa take to engage in democracy building?"

The choice of Morocco is significant because it was the first country in the region to conduct a truth-finding program. In 2004, building on previous initiatives to address the human rights violations -- torture and disappearance -- associated with the post-independence period, and at the recommendation of a group of Moroccan human rights organizations, King Mohammed VI established the [Equity and Reconciliation Commission](#) (IER).

An [Amnesty International](#) evaluation of the process published a year ago by the [UN High Commission for Refugees](#) reported some progress, mainly in establishing the scope and details of the abuses. But the report also notes that testimony was sought only from victims or their families, neglecting "the narratives and perspectives of the perpetrators and the forces behind such human rights violations." Transitional-justice scholars believe that for reconciliation to occur there needs to be a common understanding of events, and for that to happen witnesses from both sides are necessary. The report, [Broken Promises: The Equity and Reconciliation Commission and its Follow-Up](#) (110 pages, PDF), goes on to identify weaknesses in the process and the results. Whatever your view of reconciliation processes, this kind of report is invaluable for understanding and improving them.

The ICTJ, in an [overview](#) of the Moroccan efforts, notes that the IER's reparations program, another key element in transitional justice work, also has made progress. "The distribution of individual compensation to victims is nearly completed, with \$85 million distributed to some 9,000 people. The Advisory Council on Human Rights, established by King Hassan II in 1990, has signed agreements with ministries and official agencies to provide victims and their families with medical care and vocational training at the state's expense. It also identified 11 regions as deserving of communal reparations. A program was launched in 2008 to manage and fund that effort."

Events in Morocco and the region are still unfolding, as media outlets around the globe and contributors to this blog have noted. One of the important questions, says the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, is whether, at this historic moment, "new Sites of Conscience such as Egypt's Tahrir Square, where so many protests took place, [will] emerge?" The answer could tip the scales between a continuation of the repressive, authoritarian rule that has condemned so many countries in the region to backwardness or a brighter, more prosperous future.

-- Kathryn Pyle