

perspectives

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POLITICAL ANALYSES AND COMMENTARY

Middle East & North Africa

50 Years of Occupation, 50 Years of Resilience



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Not for Entertainment: Jerusalem, the Eternal Cultural Capital of the Arab World

By Mahmoud Muna

The place: the city of Jerusalem.

The date: June 1967. To be exact, the 7th of June, 1967.

For Palestinians, this is the day that Jerusalem, the Pride of the Arabs, the Jewel of the Middle East, the Centre of Gravity, the city we call Al-Quds, fell into the hands of a new occupier. For Israel, this is a day to remember with joy, the culmination of their campaign to reunite the ancient city and reestablish their state's capital on God's Promised Land.

Since then, Jerusalem has become a city torn: divided and confused, stressed and angry, hard to charm, and impossible to understand. Leafing through the history books, you will struggle to find a civilization that did not at one point attempt to capture Jerusalem and declare the city its capital. It is as if conquering Jerusalem is a mark of success or achievement, a sign of power, a proof of wealth and vigor.

There is, however, one thing we can all agree on: Jerusalem is greater than any civilization or colonizer. Of all the civilizations to have captured, controlled and governed the city, none has lasted. A few managed to leave their names on record as builders and developers; many stained their names with blood and destruction. Walking in between the markets, mosques and churches of the city, I often imagine myself talking with the stones of this ancient place. Like its people, some of the stones are crying and some are laughing, but all are confused and angry - or so it seems to me. In their name, the people who live behind them are being insulted, humiliated, tortured and killed.

Over the last fifty years of occupation, Israel has tried every trick in the book to change

the character of the city, to destabilize its community by strangling its economy and to reinvent the historical narrative by manufacturing archaeological artifacts and manipulating biblical references. On the other hand, in an attempt to compensate for its failures, the Arab League voted for Jerusalem as the cultural capital of the Arab world in 2009, a decision which was later extended, making Jerusalem the cultural capital until its liberation from Israeli occupation.

While some argue that Israel has succeeded in its mission to Judaize the city, many see the Arab population's obvious and strong presence - particularly in the East - as proof of the occupier's failure to completely eradicate of Jerusalem's Arab identity. While it is a fact that close to 300,000 Palestinians are still residents of the city - albeit with restricted rights - many are under intense social and financial pressure to leave and seek a life elsewhere with less stress and hardship.

Jerusalemites often look to unusual avenues for hope as a way of maintaining their vibrant presence. Long-awaited political change and economic intervention never materialized, so they draw upon the power of culture as their final defense against displacement and fragmentation.

While in most parts of the world, culture serves as a form of entertainment, in Jerusalem, it has become the vehicle for social and political change; more than this, it is an unshakeable buttress to identity. For cultural planners and managers it became synonymous with resilience and steadfastness, or what is called *sumud* in Arabic.

Mahmoud Muna was born in Jerusalem and has received degrees in Media and Communication from University of Sussex and King's College London. Known as the "Bookseller of Jerusalem," he is the proprietor of the Educational Bookshop and the bookshop at the American Colony Hotel where he hosts of cultural and literary events. When not reading or selling books, he is a writer and commentator on culture, politics, language and identity.

Two demonstrators dressed as Santa protest the separation wall in Bethlehem. 23 December 2016. Iliia Yefimovich/AFP/Getty Images, via Institute for Palestine Studies.



Now culture was invested with this potential a new set of opportunities and challenges presented itself to these cultural planners: challenges stemming from the need for a new form of thinking and a different strategy and philosophy of implementation, as well as more practical issues, matters related to logistics, coordination and finance.

Challenges

To burden cultural activities with the responsibility of social and political change presents an added challenge. Jerusalem's cultural institutions are asked to think both at micro and macro levels: how to achieve the organization's own aims and objectives while at the same time keeping in step with the greater national aspiration which their society upholds. In some fields, this can be easily done. For example, literature, photography, theatre and cinema are perhaps mediums that are closer to people's daily reality, but those working in areas like conceptual art or modern performance art are often confused by the planners' intentions.

A total of eight cultural institutions are active in East Jerusalem: one theatre organization, a museum, a music school, two art galleries, a single multidisciplinary culture centre and a pair of bookshops. They all refuse to accept funding from the Israeli-run Jerusalem municipality, a decision that was taken primarily as a political stance. The municipality of Jerusalem is an Israeli institution representing the State of Israel, and is widely regarded as an arm of the occupying force. Any dealings with this institution are seen as normalizing the occupation, accepting and legitimizing it, hence the refusal of East

Jerusalem's cultural institutions to take funds from the municipality and its cultural attaché.

Furthermore, the municipality's objectives are the same as those of the state, namely to eradicate the Palestinian identity and present Jerusalem as the eternal capital of the Jewish people. Such a vision certainly is in direct contradiction to the collective and shared aims of the Palestinian cultural community. This being the case, and putting the legitimacy issue to one side, Palestinian institutions have little reason to bring their proposals to the municipality funding office.

To make things worse for Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem, the Paris Protocol (an agreement between Israel and PLO that was signed as an annex to the infamous Oslo Accord in 1994) forbids the Palestinian Authority from directly or indirectly funding any activities in East Jerusalem until "final status" is reached at some indeterminate point in the future. In effect, this leaves the institutions isolated, lacking not just essential funding but also any strategic advice, planning procedures, or coordination. In fact, it cuts East Jerusalem's institutions off from the wider Palestinian cultural scene in the West Bank and within the Palestinian areas occupied 1948, which today are the state of Israel.

The lack of funding and the absence of a collective strategy has created a vacuum which is currently filled by international organizations, diplomatic missions and a small but growing private sector. Funding from international organizations comes with strings attached: allocations are seasonal, themed and often politically motivated, leaving little room for maneuver. It is quite normal in Jerusalem to hear of French film festivals funded by the French



After being denied permission to travel to Jerusalem to perform at the Palestine International Festival, the band Dawaween sings instead at the entrance to the Erez crossing in Gaza. 6 August 2016, Mahmud Hams/AFP/Getty Images, via Institute for Palestine Studies.

consulate or Spanish festivals funded by the Spanish and so on. Palestinian institutions have to tailor their events and proposals to match the expectations of the foreign donors. This donor-driven culture is irritating to the city's cultural consumers and has marginalized local artist and writers. Local creatives who fail to attract donor funds become redundant, regardless of their work's merits or its relevance to social and political change.

This new landscape has exacerbated the insecurities of local artists and writers and pushed them to pursue talking engagements, exhibitions and performances abroad. Far from encouraging local participation in the cultural sphere the donor-driven climate drove an intellectual immigration, and it became normal to hear of Palestinian artists achieving success in the Diaspora, particularly in the visual arts (cinema and filmmaking). We have all become deeply familiar with names and artists who are well-known overseas but have few followers inside the Palestinian Territories.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing cultural institutions is their lack of audience, something that contributes to the assumption that Jerusalemites do not appreciate culture. This is factually inaccurate, of course, but it is also insulting. Jerusalemites are known for their cultured past and for their sophistication in general; it would be more accurate to say that Jerusalemites do not attend cultural activities en masse because they do not see the value and the relevance of the activities on offer - particularly when most of these activities exist solely to meet the agenda and objectives of international donors.



A government building destroyed by Israel in "Operation Summer Rains" in Gaza, 2006. Courtesy of Bettina Marx.

Before the Israeli colonization of Palestine, Jerusalem was a Mecca of culture. Writers, artists and singers, intellectuals and journalists from all across the Arab world would flock to the city. Modeled after the BBC, the Palestine Broadcasting Service was a melting pot, its offices a place where high culture was celebrated and honored. Regional celebrities, poets and writers were regularly invited as guest speakers at various venues and cultural salons or to conduct live interviews on the radio.

With six cinemas and theatres the capital, East and West, was a truly vibrant place, crammed with stars and actors. Famous singers would launch or premier their work from Jerusalem. Egyptian singer Umm Kulthoum who was known as "the planet of the East", legendary composer Abdel Wahhab, Lebanese singer Fairouz and the beloved Leila Mourad, among others, all made multiple appearances in cultural venues around the city.

Demanding audiences and challenging planning conditions embedded in a complex and contradictory political and social landscape have resulted in a kind of cultural immigration to other cities around Jerusalem. For culture to flourish, fertile soil and an encouraging climate are necessary, but such prerequisites are sadly often unavailable in Jerusalem and as a consequence another city, Ramallah, has stepped forward, becoming a cultural hub for many. Although it lacks any historical, biblical or archeological significance, this small city can boast an increasingly positive cultural environment and a vibrant scene which manifests itself in a busy cultural agenda and high levels of participation.



Opportunities and hope

In most parts of the world, cultural managers argue in favor of cultural competition between cities. In fact, they encourage it. But given current political conditions such competition poses a threat to the standing of Arab Jerusalem and I believe it should be challenged. The over-promotion of Ramallah and its elevation as an alternative cultural hub will feed into Israeli plans to realign the Palestinians of Jerusalem and develop the notion that Ramallah, not Jerusalem, is the de facto capital of Palestine. Add to this that all government organizations are based in Ramallah, alongside the banks, insurance companies and the main institutions of trade and finance, cementing Ramallah's growing status.

The salty-sweet competition between the cities of Jerusalem and Ramallah is simply unfair: the two cities are not equal and cannot be compared. Both should be encouraged to develop their own, particular cultural identity, as both have much to offer. Ramallah maintains a relaxed, outgoing ambiance, while Jerusalem brings heavier baggage, a deep-rooted social and religious history. That said, Jerusalem should always be treated as the future capital of Palestine and cultural programming should reflect this aspiration.

On the other hand, that its cultural organizations are independent of the official state institutions is an opportunity which should be embraced. Freed from bureaucratic constraints, the relevant ministries can give these institutions the flexibility to maneuver and act rapidly, as well as the space (both actual and metaphorical) to be creative and inspirational in terms of ideas and projects.

Distance from official bodies also encourages critical discourse and might lead to the implementation of radical programs which would not be possible under government supervision. This is particularly important considering the culture of censorship and the lack of democratically elected governments across the Middle East.

Cultural managers need to chart a course through these contradictory dynamics, collectively challenging prevailing conditions and dictating terms in order to break new grounds. This could be made possible through the establishment of an informal body or umbrella organization through which cultural institutions can communicate, coordinate and organize. Eventually, this might lead to the adoption by Jerusalem's cultural scene of a collective position and shared strategy that transcends the narrow interests of individual organizations.

*Wall graffiti near a former Israeli military checkpoint at Tufah, west of Khan Younis, after the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in September 2005.
Courtesy of Bettina Marx.*

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