Israelis and Palestinians

Amy Horowitz

Amy Horowitz, a Ph.D. candidate in Folklore at the University of Pennsylvania, received a grant from the D.C. Community Humanities Council in 1986 to do five radio shows on culture in disputed territories featuring Israeli and Palestinian protest artists. Amy has worked for Sweet Honey in the Rock since 1977 as artist representative.

Situated at the crossroad of East and West, the Middle East has been the site of struggle for millenium. For over 3,000 years, the land between the Mediterranean, the Jordan River and beyond, which now occupies the center of controversy for Israelis, Palestinians, Arabs and Jews has been called by many names, claimed by many peoples and occupied by countless foreign rulers. Many Israelis date their claim back to the Hebrew Kingdoms of Israel and Judea (722 B.C. - 70 A.D.) and even beyond. Palestinians point to indigenous inhabitants living in the area throughout history as well as a continuous Muslim majority since the 7th century A.D.

In the 19th century, during Ottoman Rule (1500-1917 A.D.), European nationalism began to capture the imagination of peoples throughout the world. This trend had a strong influence on both Arabs and Jews. Various Arab national movements emerged in response to occupation under the Ottomans. When the empire was divided up after World War I, Arab nationalists resisted European dominance and sought to create a unified Arab world under the banner of the Arabic language and a common regional heritage. For European Jewry, the nationalistic trend emerged in the form of Zionism calling for a return to their Biblical homeland. They hoped that in their historical birthplace self-determination would replace centuries of exile and victimization.

These two incompatible movements clashed during the British occupation of Palestine (1917-1948). The dispute was intensified after Nazi annihilation of European Jews (1936-1945) resulted in greater numbers of Jews seeking refuge in Palestine. Arab and Palestinian nationalism increased in response to Jewish immigration and efforts to create a Jewish state.

After World War II, the United Nations Partition Plan divided the area (the size of New Jersey), into contiguous Palestinian and Israeli nations. Jewish leaders accepted the plan and the State of Israel was proclaimed in 1948. Palestinians rejected any plan which established a Jewish state on Palestinian land. The result of this dispute was the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Following Arab defeat, Israel expanded its territory allotted under partition, Jordan annexed the West Bank, and Egypt occupied the Gaza Strip.

Thousands of Israeli Jews and Palestinians joined together to protest the election of Rabbi Meir Kahane to the Kenesset in August, 1984. This demonstration took place in front of the Kenesset on the first day Kahane arrived to take his place in Israel's Parliament. Protesters sang out against the racism and religious fanaticism that characterize Kahane's movement. The placards "Judaism — yes; coercion — no" and "Enlightened Judaism and Democracy" reflected mainstream Israeli opposition to Kahane which subsequently succeeded when he was barred from the Kenesset and from elected office for racist activities. (Photo by Amy Horowitz)

During the 1948 War, vast numbers of Palestinians fled or were expelled from Israel, crossing borders into Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt, where they became refugees in the West Bank, Gaza and surrounding Arab countries. Those Palestinians who remained became Israeli citizens. At the same time, thousands of Jews, escaping oppression in Europe and Arab countries arrived in Israel. The stage was set for continuing conflict.

Subsequent Arab-Israeli wars (1956, 1967, 1973, 1982) have intensified hostilities and further altered geo-political borders. Portions of Jordan and Egypt came under Israeli occupation after the 1967 war. These territories — the West Bank and Gaza — are the site of the current Palestinian uprising.

Israeli Palestinian singer performs a peace song in Hebrew and Arabic at the "Women Go For Peace" Conference, January, 1990. The conference was organized by Jewish and Palestinian Israelis from the "Women's Peace Movement" in conjunction with several Palestinian women's organizations in the Occupied Territories. The agenda was peaceful co-existence, but the woman wears a raincoat in anticipation of being sprayed by police vehicles with dyed water used to disperse demonstrations. (Photo by Amy Horowitz)

But these historical landmarks do not fully articulate the complexity of the conflict. Many sub-groups among Israelis and Palestinians express a variety of positions and claims to the area. Each position relies on its own historical justification of rights to the land. Some Israelis and Palestinians seek compromise as the only just way to resolve the crisis. A growing minority in Israel opposes the occupation and supports establishment of a Palestinian State next to Israel.

The conflict centers on the difficulty of reconciling conflicting claims to one piece of land. Israeli claims portray the sole Jewish country surrounded by dozens of hostile Arab nations. Palestinian claims portray a stateless people dislocated by a hostile foreign presence. Cultural, political and religious passions are rooted deeply in this rocky soil that is held sacred by Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

A story is told in which an Israeli and a Palestinian went to visit a wise old woman. They asked her who owned the land they both claim. She put her ear down next to this restless soil and then turned to them and said: "Do you know what the land told me? That she belongs to neither of you but that you both belong to her."

Sabreen ("patience"), formed in 1980 and based in eastern Jerusalem, has been making music under conditions of Israeli occupation. Since 1987, the beginning of the Intifada — the uprising organized by Palestinians against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza — the band members report that it has been more difficult to acquire space for rehearsals, recording sessions, and performances. After they made sacrifices to finance the production of their two cassettes, sales on the West Bank were restricted by laws enacted to prevent trade between Palestinians in Jerusalem and in the other occupied territories. "We are not a direct threat to the authorities, because our songs are indirect in their message, but we are one of the threads that ties the Palestinian people together, so in that sense we are a threat" (Lems 1990). The growing numbers and enthusiastic response of their audiences in Jerusalem, the United States and Europe seem to nevertheless confirm the power of music to extend beyond governmentally imposed boundaries.

Traditional music and poetic forms of Arabian and Middle Eastern cultures provide the backbone for what they call their Palestinian "new song." Traditional instrumentation — stringed instruments including zither, bozuk, oud, and an array of percussion instruments — is augmented with guitar and bass. Vocalist Kamilya Jubran of Galilee sings in the melismatic style of classic Arabian music. The song lyrics are written by local poets and express contemporary Palestinian reality with the context of traditional Arab poetry. The fusion of past and present

Thousands strong, Palestinian and Israeli women joined by European and American supporters marched together across the invisible but very real boundary between West Jerusalem and East Jerusalem. This march represented an historical landmark at the outset of the 1990s as Arabs and Jews in the thousands together crossed over the border that divides their communities. The placards "The emerging solidarity of Arab and Jewish women" and "Negotiate now with the PLO" are messages conveyed by women protesting the occupation of territories held by Israel since the 1967 war. (Photo by Amy Horowitz)

affirms the inclusiveness and unity of the culture they champion. "We are creating tomorrow's folk songs and traditions," remarks bozuk player Oden Turujman.

Although the music calls for a response in movement, the poetic imagery demands contemplation:

I tell the world, I tell,
About the house whose lamp is broken,
About the axe which destroyed a lily,
About the fire that burned a braid. . .
(from "The Smoke of Volcanoes," written by Samih al-Qassem)

A verse from a different song employs the symbolism of the fertile land and affirms, "The valley will become full with new clusters of wheat." Both lamentation and celebration have the aim of making a "cultural contribution to the morale and education of their people" (Lems 1990).

Sara (Shuv) Alexander, born in Jerusalem, Palestine before the creation of Israel in 1948, raised on a kibbutz near Haifa, half Sephardic, half Ashkenazi, exhibited both a musical and independent spirit from a young age. She began playing the accordion at age thirteen. The same fiery spirit carried her through her service with the Nahal Entertainment Troupe of the Israel Defense Forces.

Alexander is an Israeli peace activist and singer/composer. In the 1960s, she was one of the first Israeli Jews to lend her voice to protest her country's policies regarding the Palestinian question. In the 1970s, "banned from the airwaves" in Israel, she left to live in France. She considers herself a member of the Israeli "Peace Now" group and travels to Israel to perform and participate in dialogue and demonstrations. "There are no good occupations" she says. About the confiscation of Palestinian land she sings the song of the almond trees that cry, "For such a long time the tears of the Arab people have watered the earth, it does not surprise us that the fruits are bitter." At the same time, Alexander addresses the oppression and persecution of Jewish people throughout history.

Sara has helped to organize Jewish-Arab music festivals in Europe and has performed with Palestinian musician Imad Saleh in the United States. She says, "It is necessary that Israelis and Palestinians recognize each other at last. The dialogue is essential."

Her songs and poems draw on historical references to Arabs and Jews, personal experience with Palestinians and Israelis, and images of her native land. In this way they are similar to Palestinian protest poetry that also draws heavily on natural imagery of the region. The song texts give voice to her conviction that for Palestinian and Israeli the solution must be "two peoples, two states, one future." In the song "My Brother and I" she says:

Thousands of years ago
Between the waves of sand and the palm trees,
We led our sheep together to the water.
Since the water has flowed in the Jordan,
We have been born brother and sister,
Blessed by the sea and by the shade of the olive tree.
It is said that without roots the tree dies.
It is said that without hope the heart stops.
... How much time, how much blood
Must be spilled until we learn
To forget our past errors and find the road to peace?

Sara's musical heritage combines folk melodies inherited from her Turkish mother and Eastern European traditions from her Rumanian father with traditional and contemporary Arabic and Jewish influences of her childhood in Palestine and Israel. These are blended with western elements to create a music combining traditional and contemporary ingredients. Sara performs with guitar and accordion and sings in six languages: Hebrew, French, Arabic, Yiddish, English and Spanish.

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Silence as Protest

Silence: Not all societies have protest songs. Some use silence. Silence doesn't express much unless everyone *else* is making noise. But there are some situations (singing a national anthem, a school song, a required chorus) when silence can be a statement of opposition. In some societies silence is more elaborately used.

Among the Suyá Indians of central Brazil, dissatisfaction was often expressed by non-participation. Living among them for two years, I never heard a lullaby or a work song, much less a protest song. Even direct verbal confrontation was relatively rare — anger was expressed through silence. All music was ceremonial; all song texts were said to be "revealed" rather than composed by human beings. Complete community participation in ceremonies was considered "beautiful" and good. But if a person was angry (and anger was sometimes related to politics) he could sing along without enthusiasm (a weak but public form of protest), go out fishing when everyone else was singing (a stronger form of protest), or sit silently and refuse to sing at all (a strong public declaration of anger). Each of these attitudes would be noticed and mentioned. Silence was protest in this society where music itself was only used as a statement of community.

Singing an Old Song In New Circumstances

Members of a social group engaged in political struggle sometimes perform traditional songs without changing them at all — neither lyrics nor music refer directly to their struggle. It is rather the larger context of the performance that lends political significance to the event and makes the unaltered traditional music a music of struggle. Many American Indian communities maintain traditional musical styles in spite of intense political and cultural pressures. Few if any protest song movements grow out of their traditional musical forms. Instead the songs are sung as they have been. Performing traditional music and speaking local languages not only recalls a past when that was normal, but can be a strong statement that the present situation is wrong and that the future should embody continuities from the past in these and other ways.

Unaltered traditions performed in situations of very severe oppression attest that simply maintaining an old tradition is itself part of a larger struggle for survival. To many North and South American Indian communities, whose social, political, and religious institutions have been supressed for centuries, the musical performances have complex meanings. But to people outside the society the message is often, "we continue to survive" and "we are not completely members of the surrounding society."