

Under Occupation: Celebrations and Contradictions of al-Quds Capital of Arab Culture 2009

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The celebration of al-Quds Jerusalem as the 2009 Capital of Arab Culture has been debated ever since the decision was made by the Ministers of Arab Culture in 2006 and accepted by Palestine. Opponents argued that it is inadmissible to confer legitimacy on the illegal military occupation of an Arab capital and to expect Arab countries to share in this celebration. Proponents countered, that the occupation makes it even more necessary to focus on Jerusalem and to continually confirm its status as occupied and an integral part of the Palestinian territory occupied by Israel in 1967. Additionally, as the al-Quds 2009 brochure emphasizes, the celebrations have interwoven cultural and political objectives – whether supporting the steadfastness of Palestinian Jerusalemites, challenging borders and restrictions that prevent the exercise of their rights, or articulating the Arab and Palestinian character of the city – that are unique to celebrating a capital of culture like no other in the world.

Practically, however, the acceptance of the decision was a two edged sword. Accepting a celebration under occupation meant a monumental task under difficult circumstances posed primarily by the occupation, but also the challenge of responding to Palestinian and Arab critics. Organizers argue (and continue to argue) that rejecting the celebration would mean denying al-Quds the opportunity to use “the power of culture”, in Edward Said’s words, to confront the “culture of power” embodied in the occupation and the Israeli government’s policies to Judaize the city and to reduce and confine Palestinian presence.

Since day one of the Israeli occupation, the Israeli government has been systematically working on reshaping the face of the city

on all fronts: demographically, geographically and culturally. Israel's acts in Jerusalem constitute a gross violation of its obligation to uphold international conventions regarding economic, social and cultural rights. The aim is very clear: to transform the city into a Jewish city via facts on the ground that leave nothing for negotiations if and when the ever-delayed final status negotiations over the city take place. In essence, there are very few other cities in the world where the economic, social and other forms of survival let alone development are so strongly interwoven with politics as is the case with Jerusalem.

Could the celebrations serve to counter, however, modestly, these illegal transformations of Jerusalem and the denial of rights to its Palestinian Arab inhabitants? Expectations were initially very high regarding the ability to attract both Arab and international funding. After all, the city in question is al-Quds - Jerusalem, not any city or capital, but a capital of history, civilization, religion and politics. It is an Arab city that is illegally occupied and annexed by the occupier and claimed as an eternal Capital of an occupying state. It is the city that is the heart of the Palestinian state without which there is no state. This -one would assume - ideally places the city in a position to attract significant funding and support from countries of the world that espouse liberty, freedom and emancipation of the oppressed as well as active support from the Arab and Islamic world to whom al-Quds is the third holiest place for Muslims. Early on, these dreams of obtaining vital support were shattered. Responses to the celebration's calls for funding support were meager and overshadowed, rather ironically, by the politics of Jerusalem and occupation. Promises from the international community and from many of the Arab countries failed to materialize.

Responding to the War on Gaza

Israel's brutal aggression against Gaza also affected the celebration. How could Palestinians embrace 2009 as a capital of Arab culture when their people were brutally slaughtered in the Gaza Strip? The decision to postpone the opening was warranted. As the aggression with its humanitarian needs intensified, the prospects of providing funds for a celebration of culture dwindled. Obviously, providing food and shelter for those in disaster became an urgent priority. The internal Palestinian political strife has also taken its toll on the celebration. The celebration ended up with two logos, two national committees and further geographic and political polarization. The establishment of two national committees overseeing the celebration wasted efforts and resources. The committee established through a presidential decree operates on the West Bank whilst the other established by the de facto authority operating in the Gaza Strip.

The motto espoused by the national committee on the West Bank was "al-Quds unifies and does not divide," a motto very much needed under the circumstances of internal political divisions. The work of the two committees continued with no interface but a shared understanding that al-Quds needs as many people, voices and

efforts from all possible sides and fronts to challenge Israeli measures in the city.

Despite the paucity of funding for the celebration, the decision was made to do whatever possible under the circumstances. With limited financial resources the Administrative Council of the celebration through the relatively small executive office was able to plan the celebration's agenda. The launching of the celebration's logo in Jerusalem in April 2008 was banned by the Israeli police and marked the first of many subsequent prohibitions of activities of the celebration.

Opening the Celebration... in Bethlehem

The opening of the celebration was a true Palestinian national event. In spite of all the legitimate concerns and reservations, the mere fact that the official opening on the 21st March – in the evening in the city of Bethlehem and in the morning with informal street celebrations in the city of Jerusalem—expressed the determination of Palestinians to exercise their right to celebrate their culture even under occupation, and to be part of regional and global cultural agendas. It also brought Palestinians residing in different geographical areas together as a unified people. The program was varied and included official speeches, poetry, traditional dance (*dabke*), traditional music and a book exhibition. One of the visiting Arab ministers very honestly said: “I truly wasn't expecting this and had not dreamt that you Palestinians- will be able to pull off an opening of this nature. I am stunned.” For critics, this was an extravaganza under deteriorating socio-economic and political conditions. Yet for others, the well executed opening despite all the shortcomings reflected the determination and will of the Palestinians to uphold their rights.

The presence of Arab Ministers of Culture and others from abroad alongside Palestinian officials and representatives of civil society at the opening attested to the Arab character of the city being celebrated. This participation too evoked intellectual debate over whether this presence was part of normalization with the occupier or in solidarity with the occupied. Regardless, those visiting from outside have witnessed firsthand the face of occupation and the Apartheid Wall surrounding al-Quds. As eloquently stated by a member of the Kuwaiti delegation: “Seeing is believing... all respect to you Palestinians who endure and resist... we all bear part of the responsibility, we do not do enough in your support; more should and can be done not just at the official level but also through civil society.”

As expected, the opening was not spared Israeli harassment. The initial opening program was slated for five sites; Jerusalem, Nazareth, Gaza City, Bethlehem and Mar Elias refugee camp in Beirut connected via satellite. The Israeli minister of so-called internal security issued a prohibition order for the site in Nazareth while the Israeli soldiers raided the site in Jerusalem and confiscated its holdings. Ironically, the de facto authority in Gaza banned the opening in Gaza City. However, the events committee had previously recorded the program at both the Jerusalem and the Gaza

sites and thus presented the recording.

The popular morning celebration in Jerusalem was a reflection of people's steadfastness and defiance of occupation. One reporter stated: "this day reminded me of the days of the *intifada* where defiant children struggle for liberation." It confirmed that children, adolescents, the elderly, women and men in Jerusalem were very much Palestinian Arabs despite all Israeli measures of Judaization. Children of all ages in many of the city's schools had a special cultural and educational program on al-Quds. Similarly the Union of Clubs had its program including scout parades, *dabke*, singing in the streets and sports competitions in the name of the celebration. The scenes of soldiers chasing celebrating children holding balloons of different colors in the streets of Jerusalem were a confirmation of the occupier's fear of a never eroding Palestinian Arab identity and their presence in the city. Several community centers and clubs were raided and closed whilst others—involved in the festivities and members of the administrative board in Jerusalem—were summoned for interrogation.

While Arab countries have established their own committees to celebrate al-Quds, locally, the first half of the celebration's year has witnessed over 250 cultural activities, both from governmental and non-governmental institutions. In spite of all difficulties over 40% of activities have taken place in Jerusalem. Each Palestinian governorate is holding a culture week on Jerusalem—its history, culture, traditions, and people, with attention focused on Palestinians in Jerusalem and the denial of their rights under occupation.

Supporting the Infrastructure of Culture

A prime objective of the celebration is to support cultural infrastructure and cultural institutions in Jerusalem, which have been systematically undermined by Israel for the importance they serve in preserving the Arab and Islamic identity of the city. Despite the importance of all cultural activities throughout 2009, it is the development of infrastructure and institutions that will remain and support cultural activities in the future. The celebration was envisaged as a golden opportunity for attracting the increasingly needed support for cultural infrastructure and was able—although to a much more limited extent than anticipated, with total funds of seven million dollars to date. The needs remain monumental to rehabilitate sports facilities, courts, halls, theatres, museums, libraries and public markets. This is exacerbated by the fact that the occupation government and municipality, as well as Jewish philanthropists, are pouring millions of dollars into the city to ensure its transformation into a Jewish-Israeli city. Thus, whatever is achieved throughout the celebration in 2009. It is only the tip of the iceberg in regards to what is needed. If there is to be a serious endeavor towards counteracting Israeli strategies, which requires concerted effort and funding from the Arab countries and the international community who share the responsibility towards preserving the city are required.

The media has been playing an important role in promoting the celebration particularly in light of the exceptional circumstances of Jerusalem. The celebrations website is increasingly visited and the celebration is widely covered in the local and regional media. The intellectual debate on the celebration continues and further adds to the overall political debate over Jerusalem and Palestine. In this context, the media has highlighted the moral success of Palestinians whose culture is under attack, where Israel is suppressing a peaceful people from expressing their rights, dreams and hopes through their writings, poetry, theatre and children's works.

The experience of celebrating al-Quds as a designated Capital of Arab Culture may happen only once or twice in a lifetime. But for Palestinians, al-Quds has been and will continue to be our capital of culture, light and inspiration as much as it is the capital of our long yearned for independent Palestinian state. Many questions however remain unanswered. Have we as Palestinians and Arabs best utilized the opportunity of al-Quds as capital of Arab Culture 2009? Have we been able to put our differences aside in the best interest of al-Quds? Have we done all we can for the celebration to succeed? These and other questions remain short of answers and will be best revisited at the end of 2009.

Dr. Varsen Aghabekian is Executive Director of al-Quds Capital of Arab Culture. JQ thanks her for taking time to give our readers this special report.