

Palestinians among themselves

By Greta Hofmann Nemiroff, Dawson College

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In late October, along with about 49 other members of FNEEQ, I attended the World Education Forum in Palestine. Like many people horrified by the numerous oppressive and murderous actions of the Israeli state against Palestinians, I was anxious to see Palestine for myself. As an educator, I was especially interested in hearing how education is formalized and delivered to a population of children and young people, many of whom have suffered trauma; as well I am very interested in the pedagogical and educational concerns of Palestinian educators.

Like my colleagues, I was disgusted by the wall, by the numerous check-points, run on the whims of eighteen year old soldiers, and by the presence of the many illegal “Settler” colonies on the heights above Palestinian villages and towns. I had the opportunity to witness how the lives of Palestinians are regulated by numerous Israeli harassments every day. On the other hand, I had known about these issues for years, had often demonstrated about them, and had kept up with the situation through the media and numerous in-person reports.

Because I wanted to witness the Palestinians among themselves, I attended presentations at the Forum delivered in Arabic. The first one was an opening panel on “Education, Culture, Art and Identity,” where six panelists presented formal papers in Arabic with simultaneous translation in French, English and Spanish.¹ The moderator, Hamid Shaheen, introduced the event with the apt observation that it takes more than military force to control people, that to really control a people one must change their culture. For this reason the maintenance of Palestinian culture is an important issue to people living under the Israeli occupation. All the speakers emphasized the importance of promoting their cultural values and practices in order to maintain Palestinian identity.

¹ Unfortunately I cannot give the names of most of the presenters whom I saw since I had to leave my program behind because of possible searches of my luggage by the Israeli authorities at the Tel Aviv air port.

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The first presentation described how, after 1967 the Israeli state had changed curriculum to strengthen Hebrew as a language in order to erase Palestinian identity...“to cut it off from its roots.” As well, current globalization and the technological revolution make it difficult to promote national identity through education. Liberalism and neo-liberalism challenge the promotion of national identity, given the power of institutions such as USAID and the World Bank to dictate policy. While it is important to teach about human rights, democracy and tolerance, one must also talk about the Nakbah, Palestinian identity, freedom and equality.

The next speaker discussed the role of Palestinian women in maintaining Palestinian identity. She deplored the fact that 75% of the Palestinian people live in a Diaspora where they are being influenced by numerous other cultures. The General Union of Palestinian Women counters efforts to erase Palestinian culture through popularizing proverbs, food, narratives, and songs. Public expressions of solidarity are extremely important for the maintenance of Palestinian identity. As well people should refuse to use the Israeli names for Palestinian towns and cities. For example Tel Aviv should be referred to as “Tel Arabia”. Maps indicating destroyed villages must be circulated. Palestinians in the Diaspora must maintain their pressure for the right of return.

The next speaker presented thoughts on the need for “Creative Educational Strategies” for dealing with young people who need life skills training in order to deal with the challenges of their daily life under the occupation. The life skills were comparable to life skills education in the west, with an emphasis on critical thinking, decision-making, working with others, listening and communication skills. This kind of education can lead to civic education through teaching such competencies as how to analyze the media, how to express opinions, and how to participate in public debate.

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In his discussion of “Popular Culture and National Identity,” the next speaker, a well known Palestinian writer, wished to identify concepts useful for the discussion of identity. What is culture, he asked. Why culture? Culture, he argued, meets the psychological, social, and national needs of people when the self-awareness of communities starts as they examine their environment, create ideologies and form political structures and regulations. From this process the psyche identifies “what I can and cannot do.” Culture manifests itself in the names of villages, food, songs, dress, and stories. There are dangers facing the maintenance of Palestinian culture. The Zionists want to impose their cultures and their version of history on the Palestinians. A further danger is the development of an easily accessible international pop culture. In the face of these forces, Palestinian heritage must be taught and consciously maintained.

The last presentation that morning was on “Art and Culture as a Comprehensive Approach to Education.” The speaker was very much in favour of experiential learning. Children, she argued, must have the opportunity to discover their cultural identity. Using olive harvesting as an example, she said that the first experiences of olive picking are sensual; children develop a sensual knowledge and memory of the experience which then inform their cultural heritage through daily life. One cannot really teach a culture, she argued; one must live a culture. She further emphasized that culture is best presented to children through the creative arts and arts education. National identity must be constructed in a way that calls for hope, she said, through a “beautiful resistance.”

That afternoon in my search for a presentation by a woman’s organization, I blundered into a room where presentations were being delivered in Arabic. As I was about to excuse myself, several people intervened and offered to translate for me; so I stayed.

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The first presentation on the “Employment of Educational Technology and Popular Education” addressed the fact that since the First Intifada of 1988, Palestinians have been in active resistance to the Israeli occupation. Technology, the presenter argued, can be helpful in the ongoing struggle. E-learning could help Palestinians breach the wall through popular education as an important way of participating in the struggle. Through the use of the internet, education can be moved to the learner’s house; e-learning can be interactive. Such education is a valuable tool in teaching old people, in teaching illiterate people, and in spreading ideas of peaceful resistance. It would also be practical for those times when Israeli aggression forces Palestinian school closures. Internet school can still go on. Through e-learning, proper distance teaching methods, and the use of academic advisors, one can reach many people. The responses to this presentation were mixed, very much like responses I heard in Canada 25 years ago when distance education was widely debated.

The second speaker spoke about the proud history of Palestinian education from the Balfour Declaration, through the Palestinian uprisings of 1920, 1929, 1935, 1936, 1948, 1976, 1987 and the First and Second Intifadas. He emphasized the cultural practices of voluntary and collaborative work in times of harvesting, olive picking, and house repairs. He advocated imparting these values to children along with a knowledge of international humanitarian laws. This must be supported by a boycott of Israeli products, universities and companies.

The third speaker discussed the cultural invasion of Palestine by Israel which, he argued, caused feelings of inferiority among some young people. One must emphasize to students how criminal the occupation is. While it is important to consider one’s individual interests, it is also essential to think of what is good for Palestinian society as

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a whole. People must take a position and hold it; all issues ultimately refer to the occupation and people's allegiance should not be divided. The Palestinians, he concluded, need to respect and commit to each other; they cannot afford the factionalism that was exhibited when various political groups, who had agreed not to do so, raised their flags at the opening demonstration of the conference.

I watched a circus performed by young people, aged about 11-16, from one of the refugee camps. They later joined a performance of traditional Palestinian dances. They showed wonderful spirit and mastery of their art. The circus opened with a rap number in Arabic. Can Palestinian culture absorb rap, I wondered?



The Circus Performance: Ramallah

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Young People Traditional Dancing, Ramallah.

As interesting as the above presentations and performances were, the most enriching times I experienced were in direct dialogue with Palestinians. I met with Nadim Sami of the General Palestinian Teachers' Union, where he is in charge of formulating and giving teacher training courses. To this end, he has taken many courses offered by NGO's in Palestine and abroad. We had an interesting conversation about training, its flaws and values. I also enjoyed a visit from Farid-Murra, a university professor who was one of the organizers of the forum. I was very impressed by his liveliness and intellect. We had an interesting discussion regarding how to get young people interested in politics and resistance. I shared some of my experiences regarding that very challenge at the New School at Dawson.

In my many travels, while I obediently look at important markers of history and the arts, I must admit that my best times usually are spent people watching. I spent some time at

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the destroyed Bedouin village of Al-Araqib in the Negev Desert, watching the men gather at the end of their work day. They sat in a semi-circle drinking coffee and talking. Before seating himself, each new arrival paid homage to the Sheikh, a very handsome older man with a serious moustache. Later, the men prayed together before putting together a welcoming ceremony for our group. Despite their horrendous situation (their village had been razed six times by the IDF), they were most welcoming to us. Despite the horror of their situation, these people were able to create a peaceful environment with the murmur of their conversation on a small hill overlooking the wreckage of their homes, and the starkness of the desert landscape as the day faded away.



View of wreckage from hill-top: Al-Araqib

In Nablus, where my colleague Joy and I went to make a presentation, I sat for a while in the Al Amein restaurant in the center of town. In this Palestinian version of the Chalet Bar BQ, I watched families enjoying their chicken dinners with a sense of celebration in their Saturday evening outing. Wherever I went, I was struck by the amazing hospitality

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of Palestinian people and their curiosity about me. They do not get many “tourists” there and like to know about the lives of others.

In 2007 I visited Israel for the first and only time; I spent most of that time in the town of Beer Sheva where I have cousins. They live within 15 km. of the village of Al Araqueeb. When I visited them, the village and its destruction were not mentioned. It is still puzzling to me when I recollect my time in Israel, how inured Israeli society seems to be to the Palestinian reality so close to them. They are right next door to a huge prison they have created, and yet their lives go on almost completely insulated from that reality. Their desire for life to proceed with “business as usual” seems to have totally numbed them to the plight of the Palestinians in Israel, in Palestine and in the Palestinian Diaspora.

This memory struck me again and again as I traveled in Palestine where every corner presents a sharp contrast to life on the other side of the wall. It must be said, though, that what remains the most with me after experiencing Palestine, is not just the terrible oppression of the Palestinian people, but also their admirable resilience. They will not stop resisting; they will not give in. They will continue to maintain their culture and build and rebuild their society against terrible odds.