



FEATURES

Jerusalem: Arab Cultural Capital of 2009?

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Israeli settlers have occupied the rooftops just above the Mamluk era Hammam al-Ayn and al-Quds University's Centre for Jerusalem Studies, one of the participants in the cultural capital festivities.

Source: C. Seitz

Jerusalem's quarters and alleys are expected to be the site of an important celebration, beginning at the start of 2009. For 365 days, the city will be celebrated as the Arab cultural capital. The festivities are intended in part to confront Israel's settlement activities, which are gradually crushing Palestinian hopes that the city's eastern section will be the capital of a future state.

Yet, major flaws are hampering the slow preparations. The failure to devise a strategy due to political polarization, bureaucracy, and numerous differences in the decision-making process, as well as the lack of a specified overarching authority, are all getting in the way of what could have been a major initiative.

Arab culture ministers issued a joint resolution in mid-November 2006 anointing Jerusalem the Arab cultural capital of 2009. The goal of the resolution was to "foster cultural activity within and beyond

Jerusalem to support its resolve, strengthen its Arab and cultural identity, and develop aspects of its daily life in all cultural, social, media, and economic arenas, in addition to intensifying Arab participation in support of the city.”

Palestinian sources say that the city of Jerusalem was not scheduled to be an Arab cultural capital until 2014, and the earlier date occurred rather haphazardly. The change was made after Arab culture ministers heard about Israeli attempts to register Jerusalem on UNESCO’s world heritage centre website as a capital for Israel alone, implicitly annulling Arab or Islamic ties to the city.

The resolution was subsequently made in Oman’s capital, Muscat. Present was Attallah Abul Subih, culture minister in the government created by Hamas after its 2006 elections upset, leading the cultural affairs delegation from the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip. According to its resolution, this decision was made as a response to continual Israeli attempts to erase Jerusalem’s history and culture, to alter its landmarks, and to Judaize it. The celebrations are a shared venture between all Arab states and its activities are to be divided – financially and logistically – between them, Jerusalem, and the rest of the Palestinian territories.

In two other meetings held in Algeria and Saudi Arabia, Arab ministers agreed to support the celebrations after Palestinians presented their vision of the projects they seek to accomplish during 2009.

The Palestinian Authority subsequently issued a presidential decree on 26 July, 2007 that established a national preparatory committee consisting of 47 members. Its presiding member is President Mahmoud Abbas himself, and its head was Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish until he excused himself from the role, leaving the committee’s leadership entirely to President Abbas. Rafiq al-Husseini is the vice-chair of the committee, and its defacto head due to Abbas’s preoccupation with the political situation. On 15 October, 2007, another presidential decree established an executive office to oversee preparations, and an administrative committee of 15 members to follow up on the activities of the executive office. Five months later, on 2 January 2008, Bassem al-Masri was appointed to head the executive office.

It is no surprise that al-Masri considers the time that remains for his office to achieve its goals extremely limited. To try to meet this challenge, he has formed several committees with various jobs to try to achieve the event’s goals. According to the Palestinian vision:

We aspire to celebrate al-Quds as the Capital of Arab Culture for 2009, on both the Arab and international levels and we emphasize the fact that al-Quds (East Jerusalem) is an integral part of the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967. We also aim at consolidating the political dimension of al-Quds

as the capital of the independent State of Palestine and its status within religious and human consciousness and to support Palestinian presence and steadfastness within it, in order to confront the Israeli occupations measures and consolidate the feeling of Arab national allegiance towards a unified Arab culture.

The original preparatory committee is comprised of politicians, artists, and intellectuals from Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In the beginning, this setup inspired criticism from a number of Palestinians in the Diaspora and in Israel. As a result, the president incorporated additional personalities representing Palestinians outside the occupied territories.

Among the committee's members are Palestine Liberation Organization Secretary Yasser Abed Rabbo, Mufti Muhammad Hussein, Patriarch Michel Sabah, Minister of Higher Education Lamis al-'Alami, Minister of Tourism and Women Khuloud Da'ibis, Minister of Youth, Sports, and Culture Tahani Abu Deqqa, and former ministers Muhammad Shtayyeh and Mazen Senokrot.

Criticisms have also been directed at the national preparatory committee because it does not include prominent cultural personalities, save Palestinian writer Mahmoud Shaqir and novelist Yehia Yekhlaf. Some circles have accused the committee's leadership of being bureaucratic and not allowing creative individuals an opportunity to contribute to the success of the Jerusalem's 2009 cultural capital festival.

Abdel Rahim Abdullah, director of the press unit in the media development centre of Birzeit University, does not believe that the Jerusalem 2009 festival will be a success. In his view, it is unclear who – between the PLO's education, culture, and science committees, the ministry of culture led by the Palestinian government, and the institution of the presidency – is responsible for supervising the celebration. The ongoing tug of war between these parties, Abdullah holds, is having a negative effect on the preparations. Moreover, existing cultural institutions are being leveraged out of the process because of criticisms that these organizations follow the agendas of donor states. Abdullah also says that the cultural infrastructure of Jerusalem is in "extremely poor shape for there are very few cinemas or theatres and that, in turn, affects the degree to which society can take part in the celebrations."

Abdullah believes there are also changes taking place in Palestinian society itself that will hamper the celebration. One cannot speak of culture in light of the current cultural divide in Palestinian society, he says. This divide is directly connected to the political situation and the factional conflict that has separated the authorities of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. These factors are bringing to the fore differences in thought between secular and religious intellectuals, as well as a third, central current that Abdullah describes as "repentant secularist".

A source close to the executive committee supervising the technical preparations for the 2009 Jerusalem celebration complains that individuals in the Palestinian Authority are controlling the preparations and marginalizing important parties such as the ministry of culture. This is turning the cultural capital celebration into a mere “public relations campaign,” the source says.

A state of confusion reigns in the management of the upcoming Jerusalem celebration, which has yet to be given a creative vision. Jerusalem is not merely a geographic area, but rather a spiritual place in need of Arab, Islamic, and international contributions, supported by Diaspora Palestinians, to elevate the city properly. But, according to the source, little has been done to guarantee such an achievement.

Ghassan Zaqtan, a writer for *al-Ayyam* newspaper, has attacked the preparations underway for the 2009 celebration of Jerusalem as a cultural capital. He holds that Palestinians made a mistake in accepting or initiating plans for this event in Muscat, taking the step prematurely “due to the minister’s lack of experience and ignorance of the nature of the Palestinian cultural scene.”

Zaqtan says that numerous factors have slowed the pace of preparations for the celebration, and that “when the wheel turned, there was no clear and correct assignment of leadership – it did not go to the Ministry of Culture and the Higher Council of Culture in Palestine, which are specialized parties with the best experience for handling such a celebration.” Very little has yet to be accomplished in the planning; an emblem has been selected and a website launched (<http://www.alquds2009.org>), but no events comprehensively planned. He believes the vision for the event’s preparations lacks clarity and order, which has led to the celebration’s executive council “getting lost and fumbling about in devising appropriate strategies and time schedules for implementation.”

Zaqtan recommends reconsidering the upcoming celebration in light of the few months remaining and the “massive scope of national responsibility placed upon all Palestinians.” He calls on the national preparatory committee and its administrative council and executive office to meet again and either bravely decide to move ahead with the event under a tightly-organized plan, or to withdraw entirely, in order to avoid embarrassment. In Zaqtan’s opinion, “for a celebration to not take place is much preferable to an adventure of uncertain outcomes.”

He notes that the national preparatory committee has not met more than once – the meeting at which poet Mahmoud Darwish was selected as its chair and declined. The meetings of the administrative council are irregular, despite plans to meet the first Saturday of every month. Sources close to the committee believe that there are sharp differences between its members, and that this has affected its decision making and implementation.

Those in charge of planning the celebration admit to logistic flaws in the Jerusalem cultural capital project. Ismail Talawi, a member of the PLO's National Committee for Culture and Science who sits on the Jerusalem 2009 administrative council, says that all parties involved, without exception, are creating confusion and mismanagement. Only meetings and the formation of committees have occurred thus far, he says, and not a single decision made towards implementation. "The Arab culture ministers said 'Give us your plans so we can fund them' and we are moving incredibly slowly and haven't done anything yet other than to form ideas that haven't yet found their way to the light," he admitted.

Talawi says that the ideas proposed include the production of 30 documentary films about Jerusalem, each one with a different emphasis, such as the wall, pressures on Jerusalem residents, or excavations under the al-Aqsa Mosque. Another proposal is the publication of a series of books about the city's history, families, and cultural landmarks. Other ideas include restoring historical buildings in Jerusalem and then naming them after Arab states, such as the Moroccan cultural house or the Tunisian cultural house, etc. Support may be offered for cultural institutions within the city, such as al-Hakawati Theatre and al-Sanabel, and new projects established with the aim of reviving Palestinian life within a Jerusalem under relentless occupation, as al-Talawi says.

Ayed Amr, a journalist on cultural affairs, wrote in *al-Hayat al-Jadida* newspaper that the celebration is proving to be less than a true festival in both quality and quantity of events. There are yet no books, translations, films, or songs specific to it, and to date, no texts have been printed on the city's history. This, he believes, makes him sceptical that the celebration will be a success.

Talawi confirms that celebrations will take place in all Arab states parallel to the events in Jerusalem. The events will include activities and festivals calling to preserve the city's Arab identity and establish it internationally as "of two parts – one that is a capital for Israel and another for Palestine." Cultural weeks addressing Jerusalem must be held in Arab capitals, as well as book fairs, poetry readings and cultural evenings focused on the city. Talawi notes that a proposal has been made to hold a competition for poets writing on the occupied city and whose winner would be dubbed the 'poet of Jerusalem'. Other proposals include training Palestinian youth in Palestine and other regions in debke, folkloric dances and theatre.

Talawi also acknowledges that the celebrations' media committee has not even been formed yet. "Sometimes there is embarrassment [on the part of committee members] in front of journalists due to the lack of a media committee that can clarify what is happening or will take place on the ground," he stated. But Talawi believes that despite the lack of a clear agenda and progress towards implementation, the idea of holding any event to support Jerusalem, no matter its size, is better than nothing.

Projects proposed demand a budget of at least \$60 million, says Talawi. This support is supposed to be provided by the Arab states, according to official promises. The Palestinian Authority has not objected to how this money is obtained, and is prepared to present financial reports to guarantee transparency.

“We told the Arab ministers, ‘You set the mechanism and means, and we are ready,’” says Talawi. “We don’t want you to give us money in our hands – pay it directly according to the payment rules we’ll lay out for you in the project proposals we’ll submit to you.’ And even though we haven’t submitted anything until now, we still have time for that.” Talawi says he sent a letter to Arab culture ministers to remind them of their financial obligations for preparations for the Jerusalem 2009 celebrations, and their response is expected to be positive. He points out that support will also depend on a number of international and foreign institutions that support cultural projects, such as UNESCO.

Talawi says that certainly a kickoff celebration will be held, even if it is merely symbolic. But he declines to disclose what will follow the initial ceremony. “We can’t reveal everything to the media, for we don’t want to burn all our bridges,” he says. The kickoff will occur in Jerusalem and speeches broadcast by the general secretary of the League of Arab States, the director general of the Arab organization for education, culture and sciences, and the head of the 2009 culture ceremony.

Many are concerned that the events will be shut down or undermined by the Israeli military. “If that happens, that too will be an accomplishment for the Authority, which will go out and tell the world, ‘Look at what Israel is doing, it refuses to allow the holding of cultural activities in the city it occupies,’” Talawi says. Contingency plans are being prepared if the celebration is destroyed, but Talawi refuses to disclose more information than this. The idea is to talk about Jerusalem as “not only a geographic area that is hard to reach, but an area that can be celebrated anywhere in the country or the world in order to highlight its Arab identity and shed light on the oppressive occupation actions against it and its people.”

Palestinian Authority Minister of Culture Tahani Abu Deqqa warns that “Israel does not want to coexist with Palestinians in their holy city, and has written off the successful holding of the event in the city, even though it is peaceful, not directed against the occupation, and not harmful towards any one individual.”

In Gaza, there is an entirely separate administration being run by Hamas officials. The culture minister, Ibrahim Abrash, said in a television interview that challenges before the 2009 festivities will be immense. “To what extent can the cultural conditions in Jerusalem be revived under conditions of Judaization and the erasing of its Arab and Islamic culture?” he asked. “What is happening is not only an attempt to occupy land, but also to erase culture.”

Abrash believes that the celebration might provide an occasion for neighboring Arab states to do something for Palestine, as culture is an arena that unites. “Although Arabs differ over political programs, they won’t over Jerusalem.”

Abrash did not respond to questions as to whether his ministry will cooperate with the culture ministry in Ramallah in organizing the celebrations in Gaza. The two administrations have been hostile ever since Hamas forces overwhelmed Fatah-controlled security men in June 2007. Abdel Rahim Abdullah says that this situation is “laughable, for we can’t even unite culturally. We are split over everything, and this won’t strengthen our position before the Arab and Islamic world.”

Preliminary activities have already run headlong into opposition from Israeli officials. On 25 March, 2008, occupation forces barred an event held at al-Hakawati Theatre to announce the winner of a contest for designing the emblem of Jerusalem as the capital of Arab culture.

“Ten minutes before the event, the Israeli police gave us a written decision signed by the minister of public security prohibiting it on the pretext of it being an activity of the Palestinian Authority,” says Jamal Ghosheh, director of the theatre.

Israeli police then entered the theatre and ordered those present to vacate the premises. Other police closed the theatre gates and barred people from entering. (Khalid Hourani was subsequently announced the winner of JD5,000 for best design. His logo is an octagon enclosing the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem’s walls, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and barbed wire.)

The Arabic translation of the order issued by Israeli minister of public security Avi Dichter said, “After being informed that the Hakawati Theatre meeting in Jerusalem is being planned under the auspices of the Palestinian Authority without a permit, I have ordered for this meeting to be stopped and all those present dispersed.”

Israel promulgated a law in 1995 prohibiting the presence of any offices or headquarters representing the PLO or its affiliates in Jerusalem or any other place in Israel, saying that these areas fall under the authority of the Jewish state. The law brought about the closure of the Orient House, which was run by the PLO and organized against Israeli settlement of the occupied city.

Ghosheh asks, if Israeli police closed down Orient House and prohibited an event inside a closed hall intended to unveil the Jerusalem cultural capital emblem, how will large-scale cultural festivities be organized in the city’s streets and alleys? “Jerusalem should be a city open to all the cultures that are part of it,” he says. “This violates the most basic foundations of the freedom of expression.”

Since Jerusalem's occupation during the 1967 war, the city has been subject to a series of settlement campaigns intended to Judaize the city, expel its Arab residents or contain them in isolated pockets. Part and parcel of this is measures taken to prevent eastern Jerusalem from becoming the capital of the Palestinian state. Even if Arab neighborhoods were turned over to the Palestinian Authority, they would be neighborhoods outside the borders of the original city that are now surrounded by Israeli settlements, says Khalil Tufakji, a Palestinian expert in settlement issues. The Greater Jerusalem plan approved in 1993 "thickened" the settlements within and beyond Jerusalem's municipal borders, as expanded by Israel, and connected them through bypass roads that prevent interaction with the city's Arab residents. This plan guaranteed Jewish contiguity and isolated Arab neighbourhoods from each other, while also isolating Jerusalem from the West Bank. Finally, the wall that Israeli is constructing through the city surrounds these settlements, Tufakji says, and removes any hope that a part of the city could become a Palestinian capital.

Muhammad Abed Rabbo, a Jerusalem-based journalist, says that Israel has geographically split Jerusalem into three sections. The first is 100 percent Jewish, that being West Jerusalem. The second is 80 percent Jewish: East Jerusalem. The third area is 100 percent Arab, and this area consists of Arab Jerusalemite neighbourhoods outside the municipality borders, such as al-Ram, Bir Nabala, Kafr Aqab, and al-'Azariya. All of these communities fall on the West Bank side of the wall, and have been designated by Israel as the capital for any future Palestinian state.

Abed Rabbo says that under these circumstances, talk of Jerusalem as the Arab cultural capital of 2009 is a joke without the required permission from Israeli authorities. Smaller festivities have been prohibited, such as meetings between the families of prisoners.

"There is not much left in Jerusalem that is Arab," says Abed Rabbo, "and the celebrations won't add anything or take anything away. Even if we hold a million celebrations, Jerusalem would remain the capital of all Arab capitals. The problem is bigger than that. The problem is related to how we can oppose Israel's attempts to Judaize the city? I believe that Arab support must be focused on supporting the Palestinian presence in Jerusalem through financial and legal cover for Jerusalemites, who are experiencing a campaign of expulsion, in order to secure their presence there."

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