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Furthering Cultural Understanding Through Music

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Furthering Cultural Understanding Through Music

Sophia Abukamail
Williams Honors College
Honors Research Project
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Introduction

Throughout human history, we have seen how music reflects culture and in turn, affects it. Music has also been a way for people to create a sense of group identity and trust. Many people, especially younger generations of Palestinians and Israelis alike, are attempting to use music to not only express their beliefs and opinions, but also to create positive political and social change concerning the conflict between their two nations. Considering the tense, violent nature of the conflict between Palestine and Israel, music may seem to be a rather futile way to go about solving these tensions. To clarify, though, the point is not necessarily to solve every issue between Palestine and Israel, but more accurately, to try and promote and improve understanding between the two peoples on an individual level, which will, theoretically, progress into greater understanding on a state, national, and international scale. In this paper, I will detail various examples of Palestinian and Israeli musical collaboration, discuss the intentions and emotions driving these musicians and musical programs, and finally, draw my own conclusions about how these programs and music as a whole may or may not create positive change regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

A Brief History of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

In order to understand the conflict that exists between Palestine and Israel, we have to go back and explore some key events in world history. As a disclaimer, this next section barely scratches the surface of the conflict between Palestine and Israel and should not be construed as a comprehensive examination of their history, but rather a brief overview.

The late 1800s is considered the start of the Zionist movement, which was a nationalist, political ideology with the main goal of creating a Jewish state where all Jewish people could escape persecution and growing Anti-Semitism.¹ The Zionist ideology today also includes "the movement for the development of the State of Israel" and its protection as a nation.² At this point in time, the land that is modern Palestine was controlled by the Ottoman Empire, and it was not being considered as the location for the new Jewish homeland.³ However, it should be

1. Kali Robinson, "What Is U.S. Policy on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, last modified April 12, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-us-policy-israeli-palestinian-conflict>.

2. "Zionism: A Definition of Zionism," *Jewish Virtual Library: A Project of AICE*, American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, accessed January 5, 2021, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/a-definition-of-zionism>; Needless to say, Zionism is a fraught concept; for a very different understanding of its implications, see: "Zionism," *Al Jazeera - Palestine Remix*, Al Jazeera, accessed January 5, 2021, <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/palestineremix/zionism.html>.

3. "Theodor Herzl: On the Jewish State, 1896," *Modern History Sourcebook*, Fordham University, accessed January 5, 2021,

noted that religiously, all three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) regard "the Holy Land" as their homeland, which encompasses not only parts of modern Palestine, but also Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. As World War I came to a close and the Ottoman Empire was effectively dismantled, the land that is modern Palestine was given to Great Britain, and clearer borders began to form.⁴ The Zionist movement continued to grow, and Palestine was now considered the best option for Jewish settlers escaping persecution.⁵ Jewish Zionists began immigrating to Palestine and creating Jewish settlements.

Over the next few decades, tension grew ever higher as Great Britain passed various legislative actions regarding the allocations of land in Palestine.⁶ Great Britain allowed Zionists to settle in Palestine as Anti-Semitic sentiments grew throughout the world, and although British leaders established parameters for the settlers, oftentimes these were not approved by the Palestinian people and not enforced by the British

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1896herzl.asp>; "Palestine," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., published July 26, 1999; last modified February 24, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Palestine>.

4. "Palestine," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

5. "The Crusades of Palestine," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., published July 26, 1999; last modified February 24, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Palestine/The-Crusades#ref45065>.

6. "World War I and After," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., published July 26, 1999; last modified February 24, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Palestine/World-War-I-and-after>.

government.⁷ In 1933, the Nazi regime came to power in Germany, and Jewish people began to flock to Palestine by the thousands. This sparked a revolt by the Palestinian people the likes of which had not been seen up to that point.⁸ In response, Great Britain officially declared a partition of the land, allotted a large portion to the Jewish Zionists, and called for the forceful removal of Palestinians from the newly allocated land.⁹ Palestinians were appalled by the announcement and continued to revolt against the Zionists and against British rule.¹⁰

As World War II loomed ever closer, the British began to worry about their relations with the Palestinians and the surrounding counties that supported Palestine.¹¹ The British would require access to oil and other resources in the area if a war were to break out, so they reexamined the formerly proposed plan. They instead recommended against partitioning the land, called for a reduction in the amount of land to be given for the new Jewish homeland, and also suggested giving limited independence to both nations.¹² Both sides disapproved of this

7. "World War I and After," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

8. "The Arab Revolt," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., published July 26, 1999; last modified February 24, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Palestine/The-Arab-Revolt>.

9. "The Arab Revolt," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

10. "The Arab Revolt," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

11. "The Arab Revolt," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

12. "The Arab Revolt," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

plan, and the number of Jewish settlements in Palestine only continued to grow.¹³ As a point of reference, from 1918 to 1938, the number of rural Zionist colonies had grown from forty-seven to around two-hundred, and the Jewish population had grown from 83, 790 to 467,000, making up about a third of the total population.¹⁴

The outbreak of World War II brought even more international attention to the question of Israel and Palestine. Great Britain was attempting to stop the flow of Jewish immigrants to Palestine to attempt to maintain order so the British could continue to use resources in the area for the war effort.¹⁵ Zionists in other parts of the world (perhaps most notably in the United States), however, were on the side of the Jewish people, especially those fleeing the Nazi regime.¹⁶ After WWII, Great Britain withdrew its presence in the Middle East and proposed that the issues between Palestine and the Jewish settlers be handled by the United Nations. In 1947, it was decided that the land would be partitioned into a Palestinian state and a Jewish state.¹⁷ After meeting intense opposition,

13. "The Arab Revolt," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

14. "The Arab Revolt," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

15. "The Arab Revolt: World War II," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., published July 26, 1999; last modified February 24, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Palestine/The-Arab-Revolt#ref45070>.

16. "The Arab Revolt: World War II," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

17. "The Arab Revolt: World War II," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

that plan was postponed, and fighting continued between Palestinians and Zionists.¹⁸ In 1948, the State of Israel declared itself a nation, and was recognized by the United States and the Soviet Union.¹⁹ By 1949, Israel had established truces with surrounding nations, was recognized by over fifty governments across the world, and had joined the United Nations.²⁰ These developments had dire consequences for the Palestinians, as thousands were displaced and became refugees in their own homeland.²¹

From that moment on, a moment known as *al-nakbah* ("the catastrophe") to many in the Arabic-speaking world, violence has become the norm between Palestinians and Israelis, and often involves other countries as well, including the United States.²² Israel has continued to expand its borders by force, displacing thousands more Palestinians, with very little moderation from the global community.²³ Israel has also actively worked to quell

18. "The Arab Revolt: World War II," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

19. "The Arab Revolt: Civil War in Palestine," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., published July 26, 1999; last modified February 24, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Palestine/The-Arab-Revolt#ref45070>.

20. "The Arab Revolt: Civil War in Palestine," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

21. "The Arab Revolt: Civil War in Palestine," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

22. Kali Robinson, "What Is U.S. Policy on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict?"

23. "Palestine and the Palestinians (1948–67)," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., published July 26, 1999; last modified February 24, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Palestine/Palestine-and-the-Palestinians-1948-67>.

any sense of Palestinian national identity, psychologically and through the use of military force.²⁴ Organizations have formed throughout the years both within occupied Palestinian lands and among Palestinians living outside of Israel and occupied Palestine to liberate Palestinians and establish an independent Palestinian state.²⁵ None, however, has been successful. Most attempts have led to further suspicion and tension between Palestine, Israel, and surrounding countries.²⁶

In the 1990s, peace seemed within reach, as Palestinian and Israeli leaders met and agreed upon the Oslo Accords.²⁷ The Oslo Accords were meant to decrease the presence of Israeli settlers and troops in the West Bank and Gaza, give more sovereignty to those lands, and overall establish independent Israeli and Palestinian states.²⁸ However, instead of having the desired effect, life for Palestinians actually became worse.²⁹ Jewish settlers continued to overtake Palestinian land, Israel kept in place the restrictions on travel for Palestinians, and the

24. "Palestine and the Palestinians (1948-67)," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

25. "Palestine and the Palestinians (1948-67)," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

26. "Palestine and the Palestinians (1948-67)," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

27. "The First Intifadah," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., published July 26, 1999; last modified February 24, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Palestine/The-first-intifadah#ref342462>.

28. "The First Intifadah," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

29. "The First Intifadah," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

questions of the status of Jerusalem, displaced Palestinian refugees, and the statehood of Palestine were not answered as promised by leaders on both sides.³⁰

Acts of violence on both sides increased in frequency and scale. The casualty rate of civilians, both Palestinian and Israeli, was and continues to be astronomical. Today, the possibility of peace is discussed often, but progress on the matter is difficult to measure. The general consensus seems to be that people around the world will continue to hope for the best but expect the worst. As we turn now to instances of musical collaboration, the presence of hope in the Palestinian and Israeli communities as well as the global community will become more apparent.

Questions to Consider

What are the positive and negative consequences (intended and unintended) of programs and events designed to bring Palestinian and Israeli musicians together in performance and discourse? Are these programs and events equitable and accessible to all? Can music change the way people think and behave, and in doing so, lead to greater understanding between Palestinians and Israelis?

30. "The First Intifadah," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

Examples of Palestinian and Israeli Musical Collaboration

The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra ("Divan" meaning "a council or assembly") was founded in 2000 with the goal of bringing Palestinian and Israeli musicians together and giving them a space to communicate through a common language of music. As opposed to focusing on their differences, which many outlets are prone to do, this ensemble focuses on what these musicians and people have in common while giving them a chance to get to know and understand the "other." Founder Daniel Barenboim (an Israeli pianist and conductor) hopes and the late Edward Said (a Palestinian scholar and advocate) hoped for this project to encourage an ongoing dialogue, especially in the younger generations of musicians living in a world of conflict.³¹

"Heartbeat" is a scholarship-based music program founded under a grant from the Fulbright Program and MTV. Heartbeat provides a safe, neutral environment for Palestinian and Israeli musicians to come together to learn, create, and engage in discussion about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Over one hundred musicians are involved in the program, and Heartbeat

31. West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, accessed February 5, 2021, <https://west-eastern-divan.org/divan-orchestra>; David Tereshchuk and Laura Fong, "Arab-Israeli Orchestra Celebrates 20 Years of Harmony," *PBS News Hour Weekend*, Public Broadcasting Service, published July 4, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/arab-israeli-orchestra-celebrates-20-years-of-harmony>.

also provides a platform for these young musicians to have their music and voices heard by a wider audience, one to which they probably would not otherwise have had access.³²

The Jerusalem Youth Chorus invites high-school-aged Palestinian and Israeli singers from east and west Jerusalem to perform and get to know each other. Part of the Jerusalem Youth Chorus's mission is to give these musicians a platform to speak, sing, and share their stories with each other and the world as they become leaders in their communities. The Jerusalem Youth Chorus has participated in collaborative projects with big names in the music industry such as American artist Andy Grammar, Israeli artist David Broza, and YouTube sensation Sam Tsui.³³

Implications of Collaboration

While all of the previously mentioned projects and programs may seem idyllic in theory, not everyone is ecstatic about moments of staged collaboration between Palestinians and Israelis (as a stipulation, the following comments do not necessarily refer to the three listed programs above, but rather

32. "Heartbeat," *Peace Insight*, Peace Direct, accessed February 5, 2021, <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/heartbeat/?location=israel-palestine&theme>.

33. The Jerusalem Youth Chorus, accessed February 5, 2021, <https://jerusalemyouthchorus.org/>.

to Palestinian and Israeli collaboration as a whole).³⁴ In reference to the first question asked, one consequence is that there are some that would say collaborations are “just for show;” in other words, a way for people to say everything is fine in Palestine and Israel because of how peacefully these few groups of musicians are getting along.³⁵ For certain events where many of the groups or artists are simply trying to have their music and their voices heard, the secondary agenda of presenting a spectacle of coexistence can take away from the legitimacy of the music itself.³⁶ Suleiman Harb, of the Jerusalem-based band “El Container,” explains in an interview with BBC why their band declines certain performance invitations, stating: “They try to connect Israeli and Palestinian bands on the same stage to show that they can exist in the same space, so the music is never the focus.”³⁷ Coexistence can be seen as an acceptance of the way things are between Palestine and Israel at the moment, which, according to many, is inadequate. *The Economist* writes “There is still no shortage of Israeli-Palestinian co-existence projects, but serious activists are more sceptical of them than they used

34. William Ralston, “The Rise of Palestinian Pop,” *BBC Culture*, BBC, published September 17, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20190917-the-rise-of-palestinian-pop>.

35. William Ralston, “The Rise of Palestinian Pop.”

36. William Ralston, “The Rise of Palestinian Pop.”

37. William Ralston, “The Rise of Palestinian Pop.”

to be... PEACE between Palestinians and Israelis is not a problem; anyone can make it."³⁸ Another reason why some musicians are not fond of staged collaborations is because musicians in the Middle East and especially Palestine often struggle to find opportunities for their music to be heard, disseminated, and appreciated, so these events are all the more important to them.³⁹ That secondary agenda of displaying coexistence is not only harmful to the musicians at that point, but also to the global society that is shown that the fact that Palestinian and Israeli musicians can coexist is more important than their music.

In addition, these events and programs (including the three listed) are by nature more populated by Israelis.⁴⁰ Israeli musicians have more access to resources, music education, and education in general, not to mention the rights to travel and access to transportation.⁴¹ Above all, many more Israelis than Palestinians have access to basic needs such as food and safe housing that allow them to focus their attention on hobbies such

38. "Still campaigning," *The Economist*, September 1, 2007, 38(US), Gale In Context: Biography (Accessed April 19, 2021), https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A168178252/BIC?u=uakron_main&sid=BIC&xid=633d71f8.

39. William Ralston, "The Rise of Palestinian Pop."

40. David Tereshchuk and Laura Fong, "Arab-Israeli Orchestra Celebrates 20 Years of Harmony."

41. "The First Intifadah," *Encyclopædia Britannica*; David Tereshchuk and Laura Fong, "Arab-Israeli Orchestra Celebrates 20 Years of Harmony."

as music. Scholarship programs such as Heartbeat surely help with the considerable monetary equity gap, but a scholarship cannot provide the time, energy, or peace of mind that some people may require in order to participate in music programs such as those listed.⁴² MC Gaza, a Palestinian rapper, told BBC that it's "hard to focus on music" because they "don't have the basics to live."⁴³ Therefore, it could be argued that an unintended consequence of these programs is the propagation of the socioeconomic divide between Palestine and Israel.

Conversely, there are also those who believe moments of collaboration between Palestinian and Israeli musicians do indeed make a positive impact on not only the musicians, but also on people observing these collaborations. Barenboim and Said (the aforementioned founders of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra) are a few such people. Both believe that if they can show peace is possible through music, then people will believe peace is possible politically as well.⁴⁴ Barenboim, in correspondence with Al Jazeera, said, "When you hear the narrative of the other from somebody with whom you share a passion, in this case music, and you practice it together, maybe your curiosity is aroused and maybe it takes away from the

42. "Heartbeat," *Peace Insight*.

43. William Ralston, "The Rise of Palestinian Pop."

44. West-Eastern Divan Orchestra.

aggressiveness and violence... Music making in its highest form is the act of most resistance; [it does not] evade the problems, but really solve[s] the essence of them."⁴⁵ Ultimately, a goal of these music programs that bring Palestinian and Israeli musicians together seems to be to inspire a new generation to be able to communicate with the "other" and solve conflicts in a healthy, productive manner.⁴⁶ Many believe that by giving Palestinians and Israelis more options for conflict resolution and by showing them that productive, peaceful communication and problem solving is possible, they will begin to shift out of a mindset of violence.⁴⁷ Underlying this belief is another, that education (not only for Palestinians and Israelis, but also the rest of the world) is one of the most important steppingstones to progress.

How Music Can Help Improve Intercultural Understanding

At the heart of this conversation is the potential of music to be a positive force for change. Musical environments provide

45. "Daniel Barenboim: A Musical Path to Peace," *Talk to AlJazeera*, Al Jazeera, published February 2, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/talk-to-al-jazeera/2013/2/2/daniel-barenboim-a-musical-path-to-peace>.

46. David Tereshchuk and Laura Fong, "Arab-Israeli Orchestra Celebrates 20 Years of Harmony."

47. David Tereshchuk and Laura Fong, "Arab-Israeli Orchestra Celebrates 20 Years of Harmony."

a safe space for conversation and collaboration through a common medium. For example, in the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, young musicians are brought together because of a shared love of music, and from there they are able to create music that represents and synthesizes their two cultures.⁴⁸ Additionally, the performance and composition of music requires the use and practice of skills that are equally applicable to political discourse. Guy Gefen, a member of Heartbeat in 2013, states “‘When I play a solo, I need the band to listen to me in order for me to say something, in order to be something, and I need to listen to the other band [members] to know when [it] is my time to do a solo, and in life it’s exactly the same way and I need to listen in order to talk. If I’m not listening, what’s the point of it?’”⁴⁹ As Gefen mentions, music can teach us how to listen, make our voices heard, express our feelings in relation to others’, and so much more.

Music has always been a channel for expressing emotions, words, thoughts, and problems, and in a way that is less threatening, than an interview on the news, for example, or a debate in a political setting. In this way, programs such as the

48. The Jerusalem Youth Chorus.

49. Osseily Hanna, “Heartbeat: Palestinian And Israeli Youth Musicians On Debut Tour in U.S.,” *HuffPost*, HuffPost, published February 19, 2013; last modified April 20, 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/heartbeat-palestinian-and-israeli-youth-musicians-on-debut-tour-_b_2695789.

Divan Orchestra are attempting to teach a new generation of musicians and people to be able to solve issues through productive discourse rather than through violence. Music is also an incredibly useful medium for this because it can be publicly spread and shared easily with larger groups of people. It is important to note that a goal of musical collaborative programs such as the ones discussed in this paper between Palestinians and Israelis is not only to change the relationships between those musicians, but also to change the mindset of an entire population that has been taught to view the "other" without empathy.

This idea of educating a younger generation in methods of productive conversation is especially important when considering the demographics of the Palestinian and Israeli people. Based on the most recent statistics from CIA World Factbook in 2018, approximately 60% of the Palestinian population in Gaza and the West Bank and 40% of the Israeli population is under the age of twenty-five.⁵⁰ As a point of reference, in the United States, approximately 32% of the population is under the age of twenty-

50. "Israel Age Structure," Israel Age structure – Demographics, IndexMundi, last modified November 27, 2020, https://www.indexmundi.com/israel/age_structure.html; "Demographics of the Palestinian Territories," *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, last modified March 13, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_the_Palestinian_territories#Age_structure.

five as of 2018.⁵¹ Educating the younger generation can have an incredible impact on peace negotiations between Palestine and Israel in the future as these young people grow up to be politicians, activists, and leaders, and share what they learned with their peers.

Conclusions

It is not yet possible to say if the efforts of musical groups such as the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, Heartbeat, and the Jerusalem Youth Chorus are making a difference in the negotiations and tension between Palestine and Israel. However, it *is* possible to note that these programs are making a difference in the lives of the individual musicians that are participating. Musicians involved in these programs have expressed that they have greater sympathy for each other and have made lasting friendships and connections.⁵² Additionally, they probably would have never gotten the chance to reach this greater level of understanding without the aforementioned groups. I believe, as many of these musicians seem to, that any

51. "Demographics of the United States," *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, last modified April 19, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_the_United_States#Distribution.

52. Osseily Hanna, "Heartbeat: Palestinian And Israeli Youth Musicians On Debut Tour in U.S."; David Tereshchuk and Laura Fong, "Arab-Israeli Orchestra Celebrates 20 Years of Harmony."

positive change, even as small as within a group of twenty musicians, is worthwhile.

As someone who is living on the outside of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, I find it incredibly encouraging to see instances of collaboration and productive conversation between Palestine and Israel. It makes me more hopeful that peace between the two nations is possible, and potentially close at hand. I think that one way for those of us looking in on the conflict from the outside to affect positive change is to spread the word of the purpose of these groups and the art they are creating together. We should share their stories and their music, support their mission, and encourage our friends to do the same. Perhaps, if enough people believe peace is possible, peace will be achieved. No matter what the outcome between Palestine and Israel, at the very least the world has gained some beautiful music and long-lasting friendships through these programs, and that is absolutely a cause for celebration.

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