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# In Jerusalem, Looking for Peace in Backgammon and Music

By ISABEL KERSHNER OCT. 9, 2017

JERUSALEM — The Old City walls echoed with the clack-clack of a backgammon tournament as Israelis and Palestinians from all walks of life tried their luck with a roll of the dice.

As the moon rose over the ancient stones on another night, 2,000 people, most of them Israelis but including scores of Palestinians, squeezed onto benches at an outdoor pop concert in Arabic and Hebrew.

Part of the annual Mekudeshet festival, the concert was called “Kulna”— Arabic for “all of us,” and close to the Hebrew “Kulanu” of the same meaning — and was billed as “a night without borders” and a glimpse of “the Middle East of our dreams.”

Just weeks earlier, the Old City and its environs seemed on the verge of explosion, the focus of mass Muslim prayers, protests and bloody clashes prompted by the latest crisis over the Aqsa Mosque compound.

A deadly wave of Palestinian stabbings, shootings and car-ramming attacks that broke out two years ago is still fresh in many residents’ minds, and the 50th anniversary celebrations of Israel’s capture of East Jerusalem from Jordan in the June 1967 war only accentuated the city’s deep political, religious and social divisions.

Still, after years of impasse in the peace process, a growing number of Israelis and Palestinians seem to be searching for creative ways to bypass politics, reaching across the divide to find professional peers, new resources and receptive audiences. And a number of recent events have sought to provide a common language for Israelis and Palestinians here.

On Sunday, thousands of supporters of Women Wage Peace, a Jewish-Arab movement established after the Gaza war of 2014, converged, first in a reconciliation tent in the desert near Jericho in the West Bank, and then at a rally in Jerusalem. And a website, 0202, named for Jerusalem's 02 telephone area code, translates local news into Hebrew and Arabic.

Riman Barakat, an East Jerusalem-born Palestinian peace activist, is involved in both the Mekudeshet festival and Women Wage Peace. "You may think I'm naïve," she told a group of Israelis on a recent tour of the seam between East and West Jerusalem, "but there can't be any other way for me."

Given the history, organizing anything in this city is a complicated, risky business, particularly if it involves both Israelis from the predominantly Jewish west side and Palestinians from the east, which Israel annexed in a move that was never internationally recognized.

"We understand it's a risk, and that's the inspiration," said Karen Brunwasser, the deputy director of Mekudeshet, adding, "It's all about showing people, even Jerusalemites, what they have not yet seen."

The festival producers were in the midst of selling tickets when Israel unilaterally placed metal detectors around the Aqsa Mosque compound, a contested and volatile holy site, after a shooting attack that killed two police officers.

"People were phoning the box office saying they wanted to book, but is it safe?" Ms. Brunwasser said. "These are the liabilities of living in and producing a festival in Jerusalem. But when it works it's the most extraordinary thing."

The Kulna concert brought together an eclectic cast of artists. The king of Palestinian rap from the Shuafat refugee camp in northeast Jerusalem teamed up

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An Armenian from Jerusalem's Old City sang duets with a soulful Arab Israeli singer, and Jews sang in Hebrew and Arabic. An after-party at a club in West Jerusalem featured Palestinian hip-hop artists from East Jerusalem and, in what was probably a first, fellow rappers from Ramallah, Jericho and Hebron in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

One factor contributing to the new collaboration is the so-called Mizrahi awakening of a younger generation connecting with its Arab cultural roots.

The after-party was organized by the Jerusalem disc jockey Ram Spinoza, a.k.a. DJ Ramzy, whose grandmother came from Syria, and who specializes in contemporary Middle Eastern music. Mr. Spinoza, who served in the Israeli Air Force, regularly holds his signature "Monolingua" parties in West Jerusalem's alternative music venues, letting the music do the talking.

"I stopped hoping for a peace agreement," Mr. Spinoza said in an interview, "so I do it my own way — I live the peace." Of the more traditional methods of fostering coexistence in the city, he added: "Dialogue groups are not the best fun. This is fun."

Mr. Spinoza often hosts Palestinian rappers like the duo Muzi Raps, from the Old City, and Raed Bassem Jabid, from the Palestinian neighborhood of At-Tur on the Mount of Olives. "If you're looking for peace," Mr. Jabid said, "you'll find the peace."

Even in peacetime, though, attempts to escape politics can be viewed as political. Many Palestinians, for instance, reject what they call cultural normalization with the Israelis.

The Jerusalem-Armenian musician, Apo Sahagian, whose guitar was recently held by the Israeli airport authorities for extra security screening, appeared to be grappling with those sensitivities.

On the day of the Kulna concert, a post appeared on the Facebook page of Apo & the Apostles, Mr. Sahagian's band, denying rumors that it was scheduled to perform in Jerusalem. The band, most of whose members come from Bethlehem, in the West Bank, declined to comment and the post appears to have been taken

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The backgammon tournament did break down a few barriers. The idea came about when a group of Israeli and Palestinian activists took a break from a tense brainstorming session and looked for an activity that would let people engage with one another. They ended up playing backgammon.

Karem Jubran, a Palestinian from the Shuafat camp, said his friends came to the tournament for “the love of the game.”

A youth from the camp, Abdullah Jubran, 16, said he had taught himself to play by watching YouTube and hoped to win the 25,000 shekel (almost \$7,000) prize. He was knocked out of the competition early, though a friend of his father reached the finals.

Hundreds of players faced off across rows of tables in qualifying rounds in the Armenian and Jewish quarters of the Old City and on the grassy verge outside the Damascus Gate to the Muslim quarter, the scene of numerous attacks in the past two years.

Zaki Djemal, an Israeli of Syrian descent and a founder of the tournament, acknowledged that many of the Israeli players assigned to the Damascus Gate area were frightened and asked to be moved.

But Mr. Djemal said he was not nervous. “It’s a state of mind,” he said.

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