

soundings issue 5 Spring 1997

Wrong and wrong again

*Women for peace
in Israel*

A Photo-Narrative by Cynthia Cockburn



In the cattle yard at kibbutz Megiddo is a ruined stone building. At one time it was used as the carpentry workshop. If the Jewish kibbutzniks notice it at all, it reminds them of the early days of the kibbutz. Escaped from the European Holocaust, constructing shelter, clearing the stones from the newly-settled land from dawn till dusk.

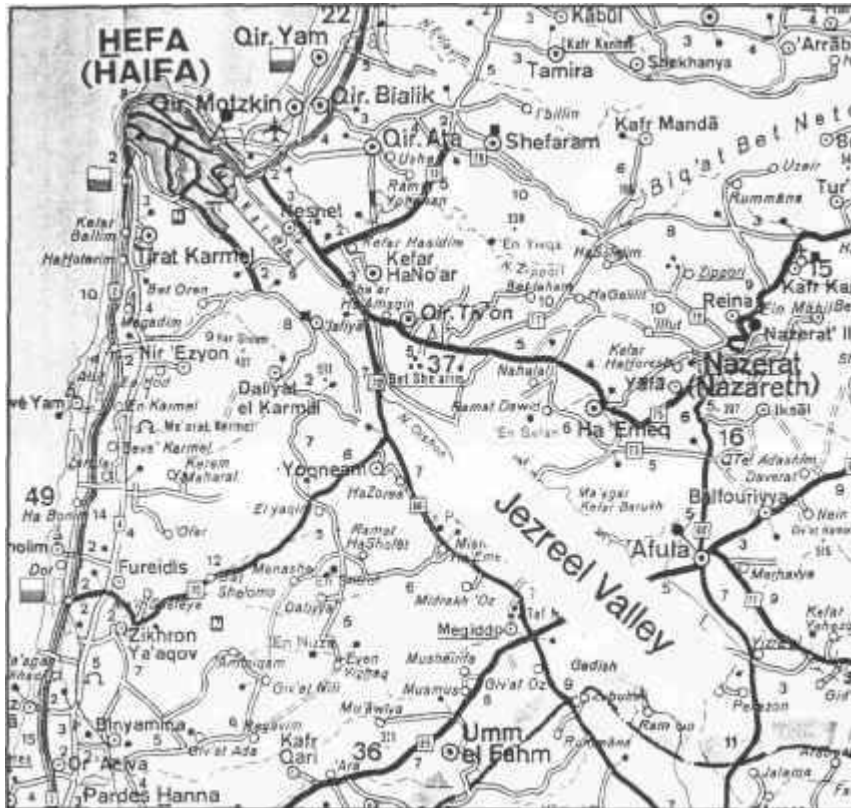
Wrong and wrong again



For the Palestinians looking down on the kibbutz today from the hill villages of Musmus and Musheirifa it's a reminder of something else. Before 1948 an Arab village stood where today the Jews' dairy cows are milked. This building was its mosque.



Soundings



What they remember is how the homecoming of the Israeli diaspora created a Palestinian one, scattering 750,000 to refugee camps and exile. Conflictual meanings, contrasted trajectories - but consonant memories of being wronged.

The difference is, the Jews today control the state. And the rather few Palestinian Arabs who hung on in there, now a fifth of the Israeli population, feel themselves second class citizens. Judaism is the established religion, Jews worldwide have their right of return to the land of Palestine. Arabs don't.

Kibbutz Megiddo is on the edge of the Jezreel Valley, to the south of Galilee. Round here are many kibbutzim, spread confidently across the fertile land.

Wrong and wrong again



Soundings



On the kibbutz you live simply, without cash. You eat in a dining hall with several hundred others, use collective transport, own little personal property, enjoy verdant gardens, work at whatever task arises: in the laundry, the kitchens, the factory, the dairy.

Your children start in the creche, progress to the kibbutz school, go on to the armed forces. You aren't religious, are probably socialist. You live surrounded by Jews, mostly Zionists like you. The few Arabs you see are hired manual labourers.



Wrong and wrung again



On Kibbutz Megiddo jobs include laundry and jewellery manufacture.



Soundings



But this is also the part of Israel with the highest concentration of remaining Arabs. They aren't agriculturalists any more. They're confined to ever denser villages and small towns, building upwards.

In Musmus, or Nazareth, or Umm El Fahm, or Ar-Ara you live in a flat in your family home, and the family is everything. You invest your earnings in house, car, jewellery, clothes. You struggle and compete. You probably worship in church or mosque. And may well be a communist.



Wrong and wrong again

For Arab women the range of occupations is narrow, and there's a glass ceiling. Right: sewing (for a Jewish entrepreneur) swimsuits she'd never wear.



Your children play in a pot-holed street where the sanitation is poor. They go to an under-resourced school, learn in Arabic, rarely meet a Jewish child. Your young are not called to the army. (Could you trust an Arab to fight Arabs?) Anyway, this is one right you perhaps feel better off without.



Soundings

One region, two lifestyles, two languages, two cultures, no mixity. Bat *Shalom* (Daughter of Peace, Issue of Peace) is a women's group, a bridge between Israeli Jewish and Israeli Arab worlds.

The women meet because they want to know each other. For that, a *Jew* risks being called 'whore of Arafat'. And the Palestinian? Her cousins in the Occupied Territories (or Lebanon) may see her as a collaborator.



Together they organize events and workshops. And they demonstrate for peace, for the creation of a Palestinian state. With placards in Hebrew and Arabic they stand on the junctions of major roads, way out there in the countryside, and receive, with equal passivity, the supportive honks and hate-filled jeers of passing motorists.

Wrong and wrong again



On the day after Hamas bombed a Jerusalem bus, *on* the very afternoon of the Dizengoff Centre suicide bomb, the women were together on the roadside signalling: don't let this *de-rail* the peace process.

Soundings



But behind and beneath the area of agreement is an area of silence: uncharted differences.



Together one day, in a hired bus, the women of Bat *Shalom* visited the ghost villages of Biram and Iqrit where the Palestinians, displaced almost half a century ago, are still stubbornly squatting a church.



The women listened as the villagers put their case: 'the courts supported our claim to this place, the government won't honour it'. They listened to the spokesman of the kibbutz that now farms this land. 'But I was born here. We planted these orange trees.'

Soundings

The women argued the wrongs and wrongs. It hurt. There was no-one who didn't feel history quake beneath her feet.



Wrong and wrong again



Soundings



A Janus-faced dilemma trailed the bus home: too many differences hidden beneath the table make for a fake alliance; too many placed on the table make an alliance impossible. What do you need to hear me say before we can work together? Are there things you would prefer I didn't ask to know?

This essay derives from a research project on gender and cross-communal relations in conflict zones, on which I am working in the Centre for Research in Gender, Ethnicity and Social Change, City University, London. It is the last of a series of three photo-narratives in Soundings, earlier issues representing women's projects in N.Ireland and Bosnia. I would like to thank the Lipman Trust, the Scurrah Wainwright Charity and Womankind Worldwide for grants towards materials, and to record a specially warm thank you to the women of Bat Shalom living in and around the Jezreel valley in Israel for including me in their activities and sharing their thoughts with me.