



# On Making Palestinian Cuisine “Jewish”



By Rima Najjar

**A**lthough noted for their hospitality, Palestinians are wary about sharing their heritage with Israelis. And no wonder, for Zionist invaders have literally seized upon Palestinian hospitality to appropriate their food, dress, and culture and call it Israeli.

Israelis appropriate Palestinian culture for three reasons: as a cover for Zionist myths and propaganda, to provide future generations of Israeli Jews with an authentic regional culture, and, among liberal Zionists, to develop “cultural commonalities” between Jewish Ashkenazi culture and Arab culture in Israel, especially now that the Arab Jewish population in Israel is no longer a minority group.

*Haaretz* has often featured in its food section Palestinian cuisine, ranging from *maqloubeh* (a rice, meat, and vegetable dish found only in Palestine) to Jerusalem’s famous *ka’ek*, as “Israeli” food, i.e., cuisine pertaining to Israel, a settler-colonial Jewish state forcibly established in Palestine in 1948.

The subterfuge takes place when food editors refer to Palestinian Arab cuisine co-opted by Israel as “Mediterranean” to avoid mentioning the words “Arab” and “Palestinian” in connection with the culture of the colonial state, a culture that the European Zionist Jews who founded the state regarded (and still do) as inferior. The subterfuge extends to the term “Middle Eastern,” which is often used to hide the fact that the region is predominantly Muslim and culturally Arab and that Israel is a violent Jewish Zionist colonial imposition on that culture.<sup>1</sup>

As a cover for its Jewish supremacist Zionist propaganda about Palestine, and to the revulsion of Palestinians everywhere, Israel has appropriated features of Palestinian Arab culture such as dress, embroidery, architecture, and food.

*Haaretz*, for example, featured an article<sup>2</sup> via the Jewish Telegraphic Agency – The Global Jewish News Source (JTA), in which it extolled a restaurant in Berlin as “a new Promised Land” and described it in the following terms: “Kanaan – a casual, vegetarian Middle Eastern restaurant named for the biblical lands before they were conquered by the Israelites – is something of a dream come true. And that’s not just because its hummus is ‘oh yes,’ as one German blogger recently described it. Rather it’s the result of a unique partnership between its 30-something owners, Oz Ben David, who grew up Jewish in Beersheba, and Jalil Dabit, an Arab Christian from Ramle.”

**The problem Israel faces is that it has failed (and not for lack of trying) in its mission to subjugate the Palestinians to the point of erasing their identity, heritage, and culture.**

Because of the prevalence and effectiveness of Israeli Zionist propaganda worldwide, it takes a lot for the casual reader to deconstruct the above for what it is: a Zionist propaganda piece that reinforces Zionist fictions:



Karma Shakhshir holding a tray of kibbeh and wearing a T-shirt that says, “Anti-Zionist vibes only.” This photo went viral on the Facebook group *Mama’s Palestinian Kitchen*. Photo by Rima Najjar.

that Palestine never existed, that the “Israelites” have a biblical claim to “the promised land,” that Christian (and by implication Muslim) “Arab” is a thing, but Jewish Arab is not. The real unspoken distinction here is that Ben David grew up as a Zionist Jew in a Zionist Jewish state rather than simply “Jewish” in Beersheba (i.e., Bir al-Sabe’ بنر السبع). Among Israel’s strategies in realizing its Zionist vision is the dissemination of outright lies (such as the falsehood of historical Palestine as an uncultivated land without a people<sup>iii</sup>) and the myth of the “Land of Israel.”<sup>iv</sup>

Palestinian outrage over Israel’s appropriation of Arab culture in

Palestine is further exacerbated when *Haaretz* presents it as a bid to reconcile “Jews” and “Arabs.” For example, Nir Hasson’s account in *Haaretz* of how a backgammon tournament between “Arab” and “Jew,” organized by Jerusalem activists, offers “a human solution in which people see a human being facing them.”<sup>v</sup> In this case of “culture mixing,” the Israeli Jew is playing a Middle Eastern board game in order to be able to empathize with the Palestinian Sam Al Araj from “Shoafat refugee camp in East Jerusalem,” who had been “alleged to be a terrorist.” Why Al Araj is a refugee in his own homeland is not discussed.

The objective behind this tournament is to allow Arabs and settler-colonial Ashkenazi Jews to discover “cultural commonalities . . . Shaikhe, a Jew who runs a car-parts shop, is playing with Munzir, a Palestinian originally from Bethlehem, and they’re speaking in Arabic. Shaikhe pulls out his oud and Munzir starts singing.”<sup>vi</sup> Notice, however, we are not told where Shaikhe is “originally” from; we are simply to understand that the two players are on an “equal” footing, with Shaikhe, the colonizer, conversing with Munzir in the latter’s native tongue and bonding over “a classic Mideast board game.”

Shaikhe and Munzir may or may not have gone out for hummus and falafel sandwiches afterwards. The reality is that Munzir’s citizenship in Jerusalem, in his own homeland, now a Jewish supremacist state, is conditional, and the activity merely uses Palestinian culture to whitewash the bitter truth with an illusory sense of inclusion.

Other than a minority of Arab Jews indigenous to Palestine, Israel’s

Jewish population that displaced the majority of the largely Muslim Arab-Palestinian population is immigrant, hailing from various regions of the world, including other Arab and North African countries. Each of these Jewish communities brought with it the cuisine and culture it had developed in its country of origin. This is not unlike the case of immigrants to any other place. The problem is not that those immigrants enjoy Arab food, but that Israelis falsely claim it as Jewish-Israeli food.

In recreating partitioned Arab Palestine as a Jewish state, the Zionist Ashkenazi Jews, who continue to be the ruling elite in Israel today in the security sector, sought to recreate an authentic, native culture in Palestine for future generations of Jews to inherit/adopt as a national identity. At the same time, they needed to continue the physical erasure of Palestinian Arabs – erasing not only the people themselves from hundreds of villages and towns (and planting trees to hide the evidence), but also the structures in them and the Arabic names on maps. What they couldn’t erase, such as certain cultural manifestations of Palestinian heritage like foods (hummus and falafel), dress (Palestinian embroidery or the kaffiyeh), they appropriated. Thus, the famous Palestinian Jaffa orange, for example, has become “Israeli” to most of the world.

By treating/portraying indigenous Palestinians as refugees in their own homeland, Israel has inverted the historical reality of Palestine. As one activist passionately told *Al Jazeera* when Israeli forces violently suppressed Palestinians protesting the razing of Bedouin farming land in the village of Al-Atrash in Naqab

**Whether it is eggplant from Battir, *knafeh* from Nablus, or oranges from Jaffa, it is Palestinian nutrition for the soul. Israel, lay off it!**

by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), which planned to plant trees there: “We are treated like refugees in our own land.”<sup>vii</sup>

The Palestinians currently in Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip as well as the millions outside Palestine/Israel in refugee camps and abroad have a national identity today stronger than that found in Palestine before the *Nakba*. The Palestinian identity is expressed through continued political and armed struggle for liberation as well as through language, food, and culture – how we speak (especially the *fellahi* salt-of-the-earth accent I have heard with horror used by an Israeli soldier at a checkpoint to issue directives) and how we write (our rich poetry in Arabic), what we eat, and what we wear.

A popular Facebook group called *Mama’s Palestinian Kitchen*,<sup>viii</sup> where an image of my niece holding a tray of kibbeh and wearing a T-shirt that says, “Anti-Zionist vibes only” went viral, perfectly illustrates the anger of the younger Palestinian generation at Israel’s appropriation of Palestine’s cuisine. And as Abbas Hamideh, founder, director, CEO at Al-Awda – Right of Return, and the administrator of *Mama’s Palestinian Kitchen* put it: “We RESIST [Israel’s appropriation of Palestinian food]!

Glory to our daily Palestinian warriors and the martyrs amongst them!”

In this group, Palestinians, mostly exiled or in refugee camps, exchange recipes and post homemade dishes and meals dear to the heart of all Palestinians. How they feel about such food was expressed on *NBC Nightly News* by the president of a company that supplies meals to Afghan refugee agencies in the United States. Eric Rosenfeld said: “When someone displaced from around the world has some of the creature comfort at home [they feel happy], and culturally appropriate food is one of the most meaningful, evocative and emotional things that someone can have... It may sound simplistic but sometimes seeing a certain grain of rice that you’re used

to can be a boost to your spirits.” The reporter chimed in: “... whether its lamb, biryani, kebab, or rice, it’s nutrition for the soul.”

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<sup>i</sup> Rima Najjar, “Israel is in the heart of the Muslim Arab world, not in the ‘Middle East,’” Medium, June 19, 2017, available at <https://rimanajjar.medium.com/israel-is-in-the-heart-of-the-muslim-arab-world-not-in-the-middle-east-eb2b2d705062>.

<sup>ii</sup> Toby Axelrod, “Meet the Israeli-Palestinian Duo Behind Berlin’s Hippest Hummus Joint: Kanaan is something of a dream come true. And that’s not just because its hummus is ‘oh yes,’ as one German blogger recently described it,” Haaretz, August 31, 2016, updated: Apr. 10, 2018, available at <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/the-israeli-palestinian-owners-of-berlin-s-hippest-hummus-joint-1.5431478>.

<sup>iii</sup> Roger Garaudy, “The Myth of a ‘Land Without People for a People Without Land,’” Institute for Historical Review, *Journal of Historical Review*, September/December 1999, 18(5/6), page 38, available at [http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v18/v18n5p38\\_Garaudy.html](http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v18/v18n5p38_Garaudy.html).

<sup>iv</sup> Asa Winstanley, “New book by Tel Aviv historian uncovers ‘Land of Israel’ myths,” *The Electronic Intifada*, London, January 28, 2013, available at <https://electronicintifada.net/content/new-book-tel-aviv-historian-uncovers-land-israel-myths/12116>.

<sup>v</sup> Nir Hasson, “Palestinians and Israelis Confront Each Other – Over Backgammon: Over 150 play in tournament organized by Jerusalem activists, who were looking to have Jews and Arabs sit face-to-face. ‘We are offering a human solution in which people see a human being facing them,’ organizer Hadi Goldschmidt says,” Haaretz, August 21, 2016, available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-palestinians-and-israelis-confront-each-other-over-backgammon-1.5427209>.

<sup>vi</sup> Abigail Klein Leichman, “Jerusalem Jews and Arabs bond over backgammon: New intercultural initiative uses a classic Mideast board game to break down walls between neighbors,” March 19, 2017, available at <https://www.israel21c.org/jerusalem-jews-and-arabs-bond-over-backgammon/>.

<sup>vii</sup> Zena Al Tahhan, “Israeli forces violently suppress Palestinian protest in Naqab: Dozens of Bedouin Palestinian protesters wounded by Israeli forces who fired rubber-coated bullets, tear gas and stun grenades,” Al Jazeera, January, 13, 2022, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/13/israeli-forces-violently-suppress-palestinian-protest-in-naqab>.

<sup>viii</sup> Facebook page of Mama’s Palestinian Kitchen: A diverse group from all walks of life who love Palestine and its rich ethnic food! available at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/620189612255674/>.