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IMAGE ON LINE Waseem Hosary overlooking Umm al-Fahm. "In the past, if you had a mufti here say something was prohibited, nobody would question him. Today, there's a new generation that just doesn't care." Amir Levy

In Israeli-Arab City, Some Pushback Against Religious and Political Fundamentalism

Umm al-Fahm is seen as a microcosm of Israeli-Arab life, with some younger residents straining against the more traditional ways of their elders

By [Judy Maltz](#) Oct 12, 2019

It was just over a year ago that firebombs were hurled at a music hall in the Arab city of Umm al-Fahm while a concert was underway.

It was just over a year ago that firebombs were hurled at a music hall in the Arab city of Umm al-Fahm while a concert was underway. Performing inside was a mixed-gender Israeli-Arab band, known for its repertoire of Arab classics. Nobody was injured in the drive-by attack — but that was never the intent of the perpetrators. They were out to make a point: That there would be zero tolerance in this northern Israeli city for performances in which men and women sang and sat together.

Tensions had flared [in the weeks leading up to the concert](#). The local association of imams denounced the performance, warning that holding mixed-gender events violated the Islamic religious rules of sharia. Progressive forces in the city struck back, unleashing a vicious attack against the old guard on social media.

Needless to say, the subsequent attack on the music hall hardly surprised anyone. After all, this was the same city that just a year earlier had issued a call to boycott [the film "In Between,"](#) which depicts three young women who defy the traditional norms of Arab society and move to Tel Aviv. And it was the same city that several months later bowed to pressure from religious authorities and banned what would have been a first-of-its-kind (for this city) mixed-gender marathon.

Two weeks ago, another popular Israeli-Arab band held a concert in Umm al-Fahm. About 500 local residents attended the sold-out performance. This group also specialized in classics: songs by Umm Kulthum and Farid al-Atrash, for example. It also included female singers. This time, though, the performance never made the news.

IMAGE on line Waseem Hosary overlooking Umm al-Fahm. Amir Levy

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“There was not a word from any of those who led the protests last year,” says Waseem Hosary, a local resident employed by Sikkuy, an organization dedicated to promoting civic equality among Arabs and Jews in Israel. “No statements. No denunciations. The whole event passed by without even one little peep,” he says.

It is evidence, he adds, that something is shifting in the city — long regarded as a key base for Islamic fundamentalism in Israel.

“In the past, if you had a mufti here say something was prohibited, nobody would question him,” says Hosary, 37, a lawyer by training. “Today, there’s a new generation that just doesn’t care. These are young people who have attended university and experienced life outside Umm al-Fahm. They’ve lived in places like [Tel Aviv](#) and [Haifa](#). They’ve traveled to Europe. These are people who are out to reclaim the public space; people who say there’s no reason they should have to travel to Nazareth or Haifa if they want to attend a performance, and that they should be able to do that right here where they live.”

Sitting at a local café, he points to the women at the nearby tables. “A few years ago, you never would have seen women sitting at a café like this, let alone at the same table with men,” he notes.

IMAGE on line The Arab city of Umm al-Fahm in northern Israel. Amir Levy

Located in the primarily Arab region of Wadi Ara, [Umm al-Fahm](#) is one of the largest Arab cities in Israel with a population of 55,000. Once a stronghold of the local communist movement, the city has since the early 1990s — and until very recently — been under the control of the northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel (which is considered far more radical than its sister southern branch).

Sheik Ra’ad Salah, the longtime leader of the northern branch, served three terms as mayor of Umm al-Fahm and has been accused by Israel of fundraising for [Hamas](#) and incitement to violence. The northern branch was outlawed in 2015 over its alleged ties to Hamas and the [Muslim Brotherhood](#).

It is no coincidence that Umm al-Fahm has also distinguished itself over the years as a hotbed of political fundamentalism. It was three residents of this city, for example, who carried out a terrorist attack on the Temple Mount two years ago that left two Israeli Border Police officers dead. And it is this city that has often taken the lead in organizing nationwide Arab protests against Israeli government policies.

About 18 months ago, Hosary and a few of his friends were curious to find out how their beloved hometown was perceived in the eyes of Israeli Jews. So they conducted a Google search and were flabbergasted by what they discovered. “Almost all the stories were negative — and some were downright untrue,” he relays.

IMAGE ON LINE A youth walking past graffiti in the old part of Umm al-Fahm. Amir Levy A man walking past an Arab political poster in the old part of Umm al-Fahm, October 6, 2019. Amir Levy

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Thus was born a unique initiative aimed at polishing up Umm al-Fahm's image: [A Hebrew-language Facebook page](#) — aptly titled “Umm al-Fahm in Hebrew” — whose stated mission is to “break the stigmas” associated with the city and its residents.

Visitors to the page can find stories that often don't make it into the mainstream press, such as a profile of the first woman — a mother of four — to be employed as a bus driver in Wadi Ara; an announcement about a local artist who will be exhibiting his work at a regional festival during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot; and news about the local soccer team, Hapoel Umm al-Fahm, which recently moved up a league and happens to have a Jewish coach.

“Our idea was to speak directly to Israeli Jews and bring them stories about real people,” explains Hosary. “Of course we've gotten some flack from extremist types who accuse us of pandering to the establishment, but we see this as a very important step in breaking down walls.” The Facebook page currently has nearly 7,000 followers.

IMAGE ON LINE Umm Al-Fahm Mayor Samir Sobhi in his office, October 6, 2019. Amir Levy

Different breed

Last December, a new mayor took office in Umm al-Fahm — a different breed from his predecessors. Growing up, Samir Sobhi, 55, attended Jewish schools outside the city. He holds a doctorate in plant genetics and spent almost his entire career in education, first as a schoolteacher and then as a school principal. Before assuming his latest position, he spent 15 years as principal of a high school in Umm al-Fahm that is renowned for its high graduation rates.

Sobhi heads a brand new party called Umm al-Fahm Home, which was supported in the last municipal election by a large cross section of local residents, including some well-known religious fundamentalists.

That could explain his most controversial decision since taking office: Banning a concert, scheduled for August, by the popular Arab rapper [Tamer Nafar](#). Haifa District Court [ultimately overruled the decision](#), following an appeal by the Association of Civil Rights in Israel, but by then, Nafar had decided he would rather not perform where he wasn't wanted.

“A lot of people who opposed my decision said my job isn't to be a babysitter in this city,” says Sobhi, speaking to Haaretz in his office earlier this week. “But as I see it, I was elected to uphold certain values — and those values represent most of the residents of this city. There is a lot of sexual content in Tamer Nafar's music, and I'm not willing for kids in this city to be exposed to that sort of stuff.”

IMAGE ON LINE A man carrying his child past a home in a new neighborhood of Umm al-Fahm. Amir Levy

His views on rap music aside, Sobhi appears to be remarkably open and accessible — certainly in comparison to his most recent predecessors. For example, he is the first Umm al-Fahm mayor in many years to grant interviews to the Hebrew-language press. He says he is sick and tired of the bad rep his city gets from Israeli Jews and is, therefore, “extending not one hand but two,” so

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that many more will visit the city and see for themselves that “there are many great people here.”

He is now putting together plans to open bed-and-breakfasts so that Jewish visitors will have places to sleep should they be interested in spending the night in Umm al-Fahm.

Said Abu Shakra, founder and director of the [Umm al-Fahm Art Gallery](#) dedicated to Arab and Palestinian art, thinks the mayor is doing an “excellent” job, given the special challenges he face.

“We have an old generation of stalwarts here who once wielded lots of control,” he explains. “For them, the family was at the center of everything and the role of young people was to serve the family. Now there is a young generation of better-educated people in this city who don’t see their role as serving the family. They want the family to serve them. The mayor, as I see it, is trying to bridge these forces that are pulling in different directions.”

IMAGE ON LINE A typical street in the old part of Umm al-Fahm. Amir Levy

Because the old guard still holds considerable power in its hands, says **Abu Shakra**, change can only happen in baby steps. “The Islamic Movement, when it ran this city, would never have allowed men and women to perform together in a building that belonged to the city,” he notes. “But two weeks ago, it happened. Still, that doesn’t mean this city is ready for a rapper who uses dirty words in his songs.”

Although he describes his gallery as “secular and modern,” Abu Shakra makes a point of not exhibiting works of art that contain nudity. “It’s not because I’m afraid of anyone, but rather, it’s out of respect for the local population, which is largely religious. I don’t want nudity to be the reason they don’t visit my gallery.”

Does he ever see a time when he might exhibit art that contains nudity? “Maybe one day, yes,” he responds. “But the time needs to be ripe, and maybe then it will be the people who demand it.”

Caught in the cross fire

IMAGE ON LINE Local tour guide Shireen Mahajna.

Shireen Mahajna, 41, is a local tour guide studying for her doctorate in archaeology at the University of Haifa. For the past few years, she has also served as director of Green Tapestry, a Jewish-Arab shared society initiative aimed at promoting tourism in the Wadi Ara region.

When she began her university studies at 17, she was one of barely a handful of young women from this city to pursue a higher education. “Today, there are hundreds of us and we outnumber the men,” she says.

But just because she’s educated and independent-minded, Mahajna says that doesn’t mean she has to tolerate all types of speech.

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“I was completely behind the mayor’s decision to ban Tamer Nafar,” she says. “I don’t think the mayor had anything personal against him, but I can tell you — as someone who has listened to his lyrics — that I found them to be quite offensive.”

IMAGE ON LINE Dr. Ziad Mahameed standing close to the site in Umm al-Fahm where he was shot in 2017. Amir Levy

Tolerance for rap music, she argues, should not be the standard by which her hometown is judged. “Instead,” she says, “I wish people were talking about the fact that just last Saturday, we had a wonderful event at the local community center — an art exhibit showcasing both male and female artists. And yes, men and women sat together there. And yes, the mayor was in attendance.”

A veteran activist in the Communist Party, local family physician Dr. Ziad Mahameed, 60, sounds far less upbeat when discussing his beloved hometown. Before last year’s municipal election, he says, he and his fellow party members were about to merge their slate with that of the new party headed by the current mayor, sensing change in the air. But negotiations broke down over whether or not to host a mixed-gender musical performance in the city. Mahameed and the other communists were in favor; the mayor’s party was opposed. “In the end we ran in two separate tickets, and this was the reason,” he says.

But for Mahameed and many other locals, an issue far more urgent than men and women singing together is [rising incidents of gun violence in Israel’s Arab community](#) — with Umm al-Fahm no exception. In fact, he has firsthand experience of this devastating phenomenon.

Two years ago, the doctor was making one of his regular morning stops at the butcher shop across from his clinic when he got caught in the cross fire of a gang war. One bullet ripped through his abdomen, another through his thigh. He ended up spending months in the hospital in recovery, much of the time in a coma.

For the first time in his life, this proud “Fahmawi” — as local residents often refer to themselves — is considering taking flight. “My wife and I haven’t yet decided where we’ll go, but it’ll probably be either a Jewish or Christian town — a place where there won’t be gunshot sounds to constantly traumatize me.”

IMAGE ON LINE Two woman sitting at a cafe in Umm al-Fahm. Amir Levy

[Judy Maltz](#)

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