

Between two worlds: Writer Claire Hajaj

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [January 21, 2015](#) issue



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*Claire Hajaj grew up as the daughter of a Palestinian father and a Jewish mother. She has lived in rural England and in the Middle East. She has worked for the United Nations in conflict zones all over the world, from Bosnia to Baghdad, most recently as a consultant on Syrian refugees in Lebanon. A former journalist for the BBC World Service, Hajaj recently published the novel *Ishmael's Oranges*, which follows her parents' own story.*

**Your novel *Ishmael's Oranges* stays very close to the facts of your parents' upbringings and marriage. Why did you decide to write a novel and not a memoir?**

When you are writing about people who are still living and whom you love and whose views are very opposing, it is hard to be brave enough to write a memoir.

Fiction has that wonderful capacity to create empathy. I wanted Jews who were reading the book to enter into the experience of someone growing up as a Palestinian boy. And I wanted Palestinians and Arabs who might read the book to imagine what it would be like to grow up as a Jewish child, either during the pogroms or in the protected environment of the United Kingdom. You can't really achieve that with nonfiction; it is too didactic. But with fiction, you can conjure emotions.

### **What kind of responses has the book received?**

I had been working on the book for more than seven years. It came out this past summer during the very week that the renewed conflict in Gaza kicked off. I've lived in the Middle East for a very long time, and I've seen a lot of Gazas, but this came so suddenly. It felt like a gladiator event where the whole world was cheering on their particular champion to greater and greater excesses. This was a difficult time to release a book that tries to get people to empathize with a viewpoint other than their own. This was not an easy time for my family.

Many of my colleagues at the UN have lived and worked in the occupied territories, and they have deep feelings about what are truly nightmare living conditions for many Palestinians. To put out a book that showed sympathy and understanding for a Jewish perspective, when some of my colleagues were sitting in Gaza with bombs falling on their heads, was difficult.

But at the end of one particularly difficult day in which I had been insulted by a number of people who had decided for whatever reason that they hated what I stood for, when I had been dealing with the embarrassment and even shame of my family in being associated with me, I received a review from a Palestinian man. He said that in this book he had seen his own story and had been able to feel the story of the others. He wished that this book could be taught in schools and that both Jewish and Palestinian children could read it because it would save them a lot of grief.

### **In the novel, you move back and forth between these two families who have very different realities. Was one side more difficult for you to inhabit than the other?**

Two things about my own life became clear: one was that I really did understand both sides and the other was that I didn't understand them at all. I approached them both as a kind of outsider. It was like hearing a familiar song that you know you've heard all your life—then you are asked to stand up and sing it by yourself, and you

realize that you can't remember any of the words.

I would switch between the two families like two channels: Ramadan in East London and then Yom Kippur in Regent's Park. Two very different ways of looking at the world. I knew them both, and yet I didn't belong fully to either one.

The hardest part to inhabit was the broader story of these two peoples. I have a large family on both sides, and I had heard a lot of stories, but I wanted to have a perspective that my family members didn't have. Growing up the way both sides did, it was almost like there was a black sheet thrown over history and then holes cut in the sheet so that only certain things were visible. I needed to be able to see what was outside, so that I could show the reader their perspectives, but also why they were necessarily narrow. Not that their perspectives weren't true, but that they were limited. It is surprisingly difficult to gain that perspective.

### **How does your work for the UN connect to your novel?**

I have worked in a lot of conflicted environments: Iraq, Kosovo, Pakistan. Lebanon is now very much on the brink. And what I have seen is that all conflicts are the same, even though they are all different. We are all struggling with contested histories, and we all believe that ours is the only perspective. The struggle to define our identities while we are away from the places we came from is a common reality not just for the Arabs and the Jews. That gives me perspective on the work that I do with displaced Syrians in Lebanon as well as on the stories I tell in the novel.

### **Does the neighborhood of the Middle East look more frightening to you now than at any other time in your life?**

I don't think so. As I come to understand the Middle East more, I am moved by the extraordinary resilience of the society. As a woman with a child now, rather than a young girl running away from a heritage she didn't really want, I feel akin to the people here in a way that I did not before.

I don't believe that this is a really defining moment for this region. I don't think that we will be sitting here in ten years' time talking about ISIS. ISIS is an additional product of the post-9/11 era, but it does not represent the huge paradigm shift that 9/11 itself was. ISIS completed what had been inevitable: the disintegration of Iraq and the powder keg of Syria. ISIS survives because of the huge schisms between the regional powers. But those schisms are not unhealable. There has never been such a

strong motivation to heal them. If we did, we could see the end of ISIS.

In Israel, there was a sense after this summer's events in Gaza of a momentary opportunity. I felt a sense that things had gotten as bad as they could possibly get, and that meant there was a desire on many sides to find a resolution between two very beleaguered peoples. I don't exactly know where that sense went, but I don't know that things are actually bleaker there than they were pre-Gaza.

### **Do you see any signs of hope regionally?**

If you mean do I see hope in terms of the political process, I couldn't tell you. The political process has to find its moment, and it hasn't.

What I have been inspired by is that there does seem to be momentum within Jewish society and also within Palestinian society that enough is enough. As many people as there were—many of whom had never even been to the region—screaming for blood on either side, there were people from both communities who stood up and said, "Not in my name." They seemed to know that this was not a war between the Jews and the Palestinians, but very much a war between Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Hamas. Both he and Hamas leaders have to take responsibility for what happened as a result of their baiting each other.

Meanwhile, I have cousins who are Israeli citizens, who speak Hebrew and who live and breathe the drama of being people of Palestinian origin in Israel. But they get on with life. They want to have ordinary lives. I think it is a template for how we might imagine the future, when the political process finds its moment.

### **What would you say to the political leaders if you had the opportunity?**

The political process is so driven in self-interest right now I don't think that anything I or anyone else could say would be very helpful for negotiations to inch forward. But to the people who vote for them, to the people especially who grieved over the summer in the midst of the rage and anger, I wish there could be a pause button between emotion and action.

When you are being bombed, the instinct is to bomb back. And it can seem politically impossible not to do that. The politicians do it to survive. But we the voters, the people who are led by them, we pay. We save their political careers at the expense of our security and the security of our children.

## **Do the religions of the region play any significant roles?**

When it comes to religion, it depends almost entirely on the personalities of the leaders. They can be a great force for good, but in this region, religious leaders have more often taken the route of mayhem and murder. Religion here is an alternative form of politics. It is not about going to church. It is about having your sect and your stake and fighting a political battle. Religion is very good at providing succor to one's own community. But I don't think you would come to the Middle East and say, "Wow, this is a place that really shows the world what religion can be."

God doesn't come into it in the Middle East. I don't think God has been here in a very long time. I am sure some of my Muslim friends would disagree with me. But the conflict here is not about what God enjoins us to do. It is about political stakes for our particular tribe and community. Politics, turf, and contested interests.

## **In the book you quote Anwar Sadat, "Peace is more important than land." Is this a statement that you claim for yourself?**

I think Sadat was a remarkable human being. He went to the Knesset and spoke these words, which were the antithesis of everything that Jewish and Palestinian leaders had been saying up to this point. Everyone else had been saying, "We will die for our land." And he was dead not long after. I wanted to look at the bravery of that statement and to look at what peace could bring.

To bring up your children in these refugee camps with the belief that land is more important than peace, that they must never feel at home where they are, that their true home is elsewhere and that they must carry that rage forward because of a land and home they've never known—to me this is tragic. Whether it is right or wrong, justified or unjustified, is not for me to say. Understandable, sure. But tragic.

## **What is peace for you?**

It is not a signature on a piece of paper, no matter who is signing. It is not the turn of a key in an old lock. It is not being able to live behind high walls and not be assailed by any outsider. Peace will come after a bitter process that leaves people so emotionally drained that they can do nothing but coexist. Which is why the biggest opportunity for resolution comes after the biggest conflict.

What I ultimately hope will happen is that there will be a gradual, inevitable moving toward what I think is the most logical solution, a one-state solution. And then perhaps enough time without violence will pass to make concessions that once seemed impossible seem possible. Economic ties are built that outweigh the need to carry political messages through private companies. When this kind of peace process happens, you can look back and say, “That is inevitable,” whereas before, it looked impossible.

### **Why do you say a one-state solution is most logical?**

To me countries are like lives: best organized around common humanist principles of tolerance and mutual benefit irrespective of differences of faiths and philosophies. Israel will always be blessed with a Jewish character, but whether it can and should be a “Jewish state” is a different question. When I think of how the future should be shaped, the exact arrangement of flags, anthems, and political power bases are the last things on my mind.

### **In your book, Salim, the Palestinian father, says to Judith, the Jewish mother, “You can’t live in two cultures any more than you can have two hearts.” How would you compare Salim’s perspective to your own?**

He says this at a moment when he and his wife have been living between two cultures for many years. They have children who live in two cultures and more. But Salim has heard this idea from his own family. Whenever you are displaced, you romanticize the place that you come from. There is a diaspora drive to remember who you were and to keep that community tight around you and make your children carry it forward. If you don’t do that, you fear you will lose part of yourself.

For Palestinians and Jews, this is more intense because they both have a narrative that feeds on human beings. And every generation of children is offered up to this narrative. There is a feeling that you are betraying your culture if you don’t carry it forward. My mother’s and father’s families are loving families and they would never see it this way: that their children are being sacrificed to their narrative. Nonetheless, this is true.

### **What will you tell your own child about her identity?**

Growing up standing between different cultures—especially cultures divided over many things—will leave you with a lot of unanswered questions and a lot of self-

doubt. But through that self-doubt, you can become a whole person.

Most great religious thinkers have welcomed doubt as a path to becoming an enlightened human being. In this world where so many potential identities are possible—the place where we were born, the place where we grew up, the people we are surrounded by, the people we connect to through these extraordinary new channels—it is not helpful anymore to say, “I am this way ideologically because of how I was born.” It is more difficult and lonelier to shape an identity that is self-formed, but it is essential.

I understand the desperate pain of someone like Salim, who feels that he has a vital legacy to pass on and he is not passing it on as he should. You feel like your life has been a failure. You failed to pass on the ideas that came with your genes. But what a tragedy if your fear destroys your opportunity to create a life for yourself or deprives your children of the opportunity to make something new out of what you have given them.