

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7k8877d0>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 15(2)

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Publication Date

2024

DOI

10.5070/T815264580

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Forward Excerpt

Coca-Cola, Black Panthers, and Phantom Jets: Israel in the American Orbit, 1967–1973

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Panthers in Black and White

In 1972, a gospel and soul musical revue, *Don't Call Me Black!*, premiered on a Tel Aviv stage. Written by Dan Almagor (music, Benny Nagari) the show dramatized the historical struggles of African Americans, featuring songs such as “Snow-White,” “The Slave,” and “Black and Beautiful.” The second act offered a gospel version of the biblical narrative, casting major protagonists, Adam, Eve, the Snake, and Noah— as Black characters. Two foreign Black entertainers trained the cast in how to be “Black.” Instead of blacking up with tar, the actors put on outlandish outfits, Afros, and heavy jewelry to signify racial difference. This aesthetic likely drew from the hugely successful musical *Hair* rather than any Black performance.

Just a year before *Don't Call Me Black!* opened, a group of poor, young Israelis insisted on calling themselves Black, and “Black Panthers” no less, marking Jews who arrived from Arab countries as oppressed and exploited by an unfeeling, arrogant Ashkenazi elite. They emerged overnight with a series of raucous demonstrations and other public stunts. Their movement claimed to speak for and sought to radicalize poor Mizrahi (Eastern, Oriental, or Sephardic) Jews who had immigrated from North Africa and the Middle East in the 1950s and still occupied the lowest echelons of Israeli society. Ostensibly committed to Jewish immigration, “absorption,” and integration, the Israeli elite often considered the Mizrahi predicament in terms of a failure to modernize or an endemic resistance to change.

Protest Movement

The Black Panthers began as a street gang in the impoverished neighborhood of Musrara—just a fifteen-minute walk from downtown Jerusalem—where a quarter of families lived on welfare and 60 percent of the buildings were deemed unfit for habitation. Members of the rather small group were young, first-or second-generation immigrants from Morocco, with only partial elementary school education and numerous confrontations with the law, including stints in jails and reformatories for juvenile delinquents. Musrara had been an established Arab neighborhood, but, following the 1948 war, it deteriorated into a dilapidated slum on the frontier. After the Six-Day War, Musrara turned into a lively venue for illicit transactions, from drugs to prostitution, between Arab and Jewish Jerusalem.

By late 1970, the protracted War of Attrition with Egypt had ended. The Israeli economy was faring better, and the state offered new immigrants from the Soviet Union generous benefits, cheap housing, and tax-free cars. In contrast, most of the Musrara youngsters drifted in and out of low-paying jobs. That year, some joined a city-run club, the Cellar, where a new breed of community workers encouraged them to organize and to express their frustrations publicly. A few of them, most notably Sa'adia Marciano and Charlie Biton, also cultivated friendships with Ashkenazi students and leftist politicians, chiefly members of a radical New Left group known as Matzpen (compass). These much-storied meetings took place in downtown Bohemian hangouts. Selling and procuring hashish occasioned the initial contact, but these encounters soon bred mutual fascination and even imitation, in addition to long conversations about society and politics. When the kids from Musrara complained that the police were relentlessly harassing and humiliating them, their interlocutors explained that the policeman is a front for a larger edifice of power.

In early January 1971, journalists covering the city beat reported that a group of street youth was planning to organize against the Ashkenazi government under the slogan, "We will not keep quiet! Violence will shake the establishment." The young men declared, moreover, their intention to become the Black Panthers of the State of Israel. One of them informed a reporter he was seeking help to travel to America to learn the Panthers' methods firsthand. The papers described fear of an impending crisis among city officials, but the mayor, Teddy Kollek, dismissed these reports, insisting, "Here, among us, no such thing could ever happen."

Shortly thereafter, the Musrara youngsters applied for a permit to demonstrate in front of city hall. Titled "ENOUGH," their leaflet declared, "Enough of no work, Enough of sleeping ten to a room, Enough of looking at the apartments for new immigrants, Enough of prison and beatings every Monday and Thursday, Enough of unfulfilled government promises, Enough of deprivation, Enough of discrimination." Meanwhile, the police received a report about a clandestine meeting in Musrara at which a Matzpen activist lectured the Panthers about their American namesakes and

then instructed them to prepare black flags and spike their poles with nails to use against policemen during the demonstration.

What followed was truly astonishing. This permit request from a few unknown youths was sent all the way to the prime minister's office, where Golda Meir, meeting with the minister of police, the police commissioner, and the mayor, decided not to authorize the rally on the pretext that a few of the applicants were "hardened criminals" now operating under the tutelage of the extreme Left. In the name of public peace, police vans were dispatched throughout the city to round up and detain both the group's leaders and members of Matzpen. The police even brought one of the neighborhood rabbis to persuade the detainees to abandon their scheme, but, instead, they began a hunger strike.

Even without the permit, the demonstration took place in early March 1971, attracting roughly five hundred people. The government's harsh measures prompted a public outcry, and most demonstrators, including writers Amos Kenan and Dahn Ben-Amotz, came mainly to protest the detentions and to defend the freedom of speech. At one point, the portly mayor, Teddy Kollek, peered from a window and thundered at the rather subdued demonstrators, "Don't step on the grass! Get off the grass!" At subsequent events, the Panthers would wave a sign, "Teddy, we won't get off the grass." (In the water-thirsty Middle East, lush, manicured lawns signify both affluence and a distinctly European sensibility.)

This is how the Black Panthers of Israel came to be. In retrospect, it seems that Israeli society, more than half of whom had emigrated from Arab countries—had been waiting for their arrival. For almost two decades, the ruling Labor Party had toiled hard to identify and court "authentic" Mizrahi leadership. Now it was caught off guard. A senior police officer would explain that the youth did not initially present any specific demand but instead raised the ethnic issue expansively, couching it as "the problem of the oppressed Blacks." The incongruity between the actual threat and official overreaction, which Tali Lev and Yehuda Shenhav labeled "moral panic," was derived from the prospects of a budding alliance between frustrated, economically marginal youth and the left-wing Matzpen, an axis whose disruptive potential was encapsulated in an exceedingly menacing moniker, "Black Panthers."

Maligned as serving the enemy's interests, the pro-Palestinian Matzpen was incredibly small, but the population of poor Mizrahi Jews was substantial, and memories of the last outburst of the so-called "ethnic genie"—the Wadi Salib (Haifa) riots of 1959—lingered. A press report from Beirut published only a few weeks before the Panthers' first demonstration featured a Fatah operative stating ominously that the Palestinians expect little of Matzpen but hang great hopes on "our Jewish Arab brothers." Another spokesperson would later declare that the organization regards the Israeli Panthers an integral part in its war against the occupation.

Official overreaction catapulted the Panthers to the center of public attention. The events of the weeks following the modest city hall demonstration were as remarkable as the initial campaign to suppress the protest. Attempts to intimidate and

delegitimize the Panthers continued, but a new approach also emerged: to co-opt and disarm the disgruntled Panthers by personalizing their grievances and offering individual remedies such as jobs and work training. Leaders of all the major political parties, Right and Left, as well as a multitude of civic organizations, sought to meet with the Panthers, solicit their views, and find a way to placate them. The press could not get enough. Only three days after the first demonstration, the cabinet agreed on supplementary funds of 80 million liras to cover urgent social needs such as daycare programs. The headline in *Ma'ariv* read, "The 'Panthers' Helped the Cabinet 'Find' the Budget."

The government's contradictory actions typified a rather claustrophobic insistence on national unity. The prime minister and others among the country's leadership were already preoccupied with emerging cracks in the national consensus. A year earlier, fifty-eight students from an elite high school in Jerusalem, led by a son of a cabinet member, ignited a public uproar by sending Meir an open letter questioning the government's commitment to making peace and raising doubts about their own participation in a purposeless war. It became a national pastime to listen to the younger generation and monitor its mood. The Musrara gang, however, was not comprised of future soldiers but of social dropouts, many of whom the army had declared unfit for military service.

A delegation of five Panthers soon met with Meir. She offered them cigarettes from her own pack, but her gesture did little to ease the atmosphere. The tension reached a boiling point when Reuven Aberjil, who had joined the Panthers after the first demonstration and now claimed leadership, charged, "You're a liar" at Meir in response to her assertion that the government was doing its utmost to mitigate social inequality. The Panthers presented her with a list of thirty-three demands, including the elimination of slums, free education from kindergarten through university, free housing for the needy, increased salaries for large families, and full representation of Mizrahim in all institutions. Her questions, however, focused on their life stories and personal distress, not on their social grievances.

On May 18, 1971, the group led a large demonstration known as the "Night of the Panthers" in downtown Jerusalem's Davidka Square. Clashes with the police broke out when demonstrators began marching toward another major site, Zion Square. A police water cannon sprayed rioters with jets of water dyed green, only increasing the panic on the street. More than a hundred people were arrested, many just onlookers, with several instances of police brutality recorded. Arrests continued into the following day. Close to midnight, demonstrators threw three Molotov cocktails.

Railing against the "poison of disunity," Prime Minister Meir said of the Panthers, "They were good boys once. I hope some of them still will be, but some, I'm afraid, won't change.... How can a Jewish hand be raised in the State of Israel to throw Molotov cocktails at a Jew?" These remarks were delivered in a public gathering only two days after the riot. When Shaul Ben Simhon, a leader of the mainstream Alliance

of Moroccan Immigrants, sought to repair the rift, suggesting that all in all the Panthers were a bunch of nice youths, she shot back, “They are not nice!”

In their first year of operation, the Panthers initiated roughly a dozen mostly small demonstrations in the capital and elsewhere. Sporadic Panther protests continued for several years. Activists and leaders came in and out of detention centers. The main event, in August 1971, had some seven thousand participants. Placards declared, “Golda—We are nice,” “Away with spiritual oppression,” and “Where half the people are kings and the other half exploited slaves.” Marchers carried and then burned black coffins as well as a caricature of Golda Meir naked with a pair of wings on her back. The caption read, “Golda fly away.” The demonstration, one of the largest the city had ever witnessed, paralyzed downtown Jerusalem for several hours. Policemen used force to disperse the crowd, prompting demonstrators to hurl stones at them. Many were injured, including twenty-one policemen.

The police first viewed the Panthers dismissively as a band of thieves, burglars, and pimps in need of an aggressive counterresponse. It did not hesitate to raid their premises, confiscate publications, rough up demonstrators, and engage in what amounted to political surveillance. The police infiltrated the movement early on, recruiting one of its leaders, Ya’akov Elbaz, as an informant. An older man, he had the reputation among the Panthers as a proponent of violent action. Now in the Israel State Archives, police records feature details about the group’s meetings with members of the Knesset as well as their conversation with the prime minister. When protests continued, however, police headquarters proposed that officers sit down with their subordinates, most of whom were Mizrahi, and explain to them that poverty in Israel was a social not an ethnic problem, and that the Panthers were far too volatile and unreliable to address this serious issue.