

Subjects for Discussion and Research

1. The subject of Israel and Palestinians might be the most divisive in much of the modern world. The United States has long been a supporter of Israel and its right to claim the territory it won in the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict. Since the rise of what is called Islamic Extremism and the bombing of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, many Americans have felt vindicated in their support of Israel and condemnation of the Palestinian fight against Israel. Others in the world, including Americans, have long felt sympathy, if not support, for Palestinians who had to leave their homes in what became Israel in 1949. After Israel claimed the West Bank and Gaza Strip at the end of the Six-Day War in 1967, some of Israel's righteousness tarnished, especially when Jewish settlements were established. What Israel claimed was a defense of their security was argued by others to be a disenfranchisement and occupation of the Palestinian people. Those who express support for the Palestinians may face accusations of anti-Semitism, while those who maintain support for Israel may be faced with questions about the morality of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians.

Arna's Children gives little history or background on the conflict. The filmmakers assume the audience knows the context and choose to present the situation in very personal terms. Juliano Mer Khamis met the young men of 2002 when they were little boys, and he clearly sympathizes with the children and people of Jenin. Yet he unflinchingly shows the choices each boy makes in the conflict and their consequences. Yusef and Nidal especially, Juliano tells the audience, killed Israelis who were not soldiers in their suicide attack.

Did you feel sympathy, or even empathy, for the children/young men in the film, knowing how some of them died? Did it make a difference how they died?

If the story had been told by a traditional documentary filmmaker—so that what appeared on the screen was objective reporting, with no narrative voice—would you have felt sympathy for the children/young men?

2. Juliano Mer Khamis enjoyed a vital career as an actor in Israel until he expressed his support for the children he knew in Jenin at a poetry reading and in published articles (see <http://cosmos.ucc.ie/cs1064/jabowen/IPSC/php/authors.php?auid=2249>, <http://cosmos.ucc.ie/cs1064/jabowen/IPSC/php/cs.php?byauid=2249>, www.imdb.com/name/nm1637576/, and www.imdb.com/name/nm0451131/). After this, he did not act in another film until 2006. Do you feel that Juliano knew what the fallout from his open support of Palestinians could do to his career? If he knew, why do you think he chose to speak out anyway? If there were a situation in which your future career and livelihood could be crippled, could you act publicly as a matter of conscience or out of love?

3. The proportion of inhabitants in Jenin who are children is much greater than in American cities and towns. In Oakland, for example, 25 percent of the population is under the age of 18, compared to 44 percent of the West Bank's population being under age 14. Add to this Jenin's poverty and unemployment rates, and this creates a very hard situation for children. Discuss what life might be like in the Bay Area with such a high percentage of children, especially children who live in poverty.

4. Read the article “Palestinian Children Bear the Brunt of Violence and Occupation” at <http://www.counterpunch.org/pmcmamara1.html>. Note the statement: “Of the 826 Palestinians killed by the Israeli Defense Forces in the current intifada [the al-Aqsa Intifada, begun in September 2000] approximately 26 percent were children under age 18.” As McNamara describes the situation, Palestinian children suffer from poverty, lack of adequate medical care, and constant violence. Put yourself in the place of a child who has never known peace and who has been taught since birth that he is the subject of an occupying force in his land. Could you, at your age, join a fight like the Intifada?

5. Operation Defensive Shield was precipitated by an escalation of Palestinian suicide bombings and attacks, such as the one by Yusef and Nidal. Young men like them—born and raised in refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza Strip—were involved in most of these bombings and attacks. Does knowing this affect your opinion of these kinds of actions? How and why?

6. Jenin’s children and their parents learned from Arna and Juliano that all Jews are not their enemies. If someone like Arna had established schools and theaters all over the occupied areas, with the same kind of consistent contact and breaking of stereotypes, do you think it would have made a difference to those children as they grew older. Do you think some of them would have chosen not to fight and kill Israelis?

7. Israel maintains that its actions in 2002, as well as constructing the barrier, are in the name of security to Israel. Some Israelis argue that without these efforts, Israel’s very existence is in jeopardy. Based on what you’ve learned about life in Jenin from this source and from *Arna’s Children*, do you agree with Israel’s position? Why or why not?

8. Read the entire text of Arna’s speech in Stockholm (www.arna.info/Arna/herstory.php, making allowances for some irregularities in the transcription, please). Her message is one of peace, but she is clear in her condemnation of how the Palestinian people—especially children—have suffered under what she terms the “Israeli occupation.” Yet Arna was Jewish, born in what was then Palestine. She fought for establishing a Jewish state in 1948, when she was only 18.

Can you understand from what the film presents why Arna changed direction and worked to achieve independence for the Palestinian people? If not, does learning more about the history of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples since 1949 make it clearer?

9. Arna was born to a Jewish family in Palestine and grew up in what she called a “Jewish ‘Moshava.’” She spoke of that time in an interview (www.arna.info/Arna/articles.php?id=5), saying, “Before 1948, Arabs and Jews were living together in harmony and fraternity. However, in a span of a few months the creation of the state of Israel caused racism and contempt towards the ‘Arab,’ an attitude that did not exist before. Arabs and Jews should live together. This is possible, as not only is there no other alternative, but it occurred in the past.”

Based on the material in the Appendix **Israel and Palestine: Historical Background**, and what you have learned about Arab-Israeli relations from the film and

the material in this guide, is Arna's statement a view of something that can be achieved or an impossible dream? Why?

10. On their way to Jenin for a last visit before she died, Arna told Juliano about her time in the Jewish Brigade in 1948. She is blunt in describing her activities at the time, including chasing people into the streets in Tel Aviv. At the time, Arna reveled in the "courage, beauty, and power," and acknowledges that it was because she was young and wild. How do you think age is relevant as Arna recounts the events? Does age mitigate her actions then, and if so, does age mitigate the actions of the young men in Jenin?

11. Read the articles at www.counterpunch.org/sunil1.html and www.jcpa.org/jl/vp441.htm, which give vastly different perspectives on children and their role in the conflicts between the Israeli army and Palestinian militants. Do you find one argument more persuasive than the other? Why? What are the strengths and weaknesses in each of the articles.

12. Juliano Mer Khamis returned to Jenin to establish the Freedom Theater in 2006. He had been contacted by a nurse in the West Bank, Jonatan Stanczak, whom Zakaria Zubaidi, the leader of the al Aqsa Intifada in Jenin, had approached regarding reestablishing ties to the Jewish peace movement. It was Zakaria's family that had originally provided a space for the theater, donating the top floor of their house. It was also Zakaria of whom Ala implied cowardice, when Zakaria remained in hiding under the ruins of a house for five days during the battle while Ala continued fighting. Is the Zakaria who inspired the Freedom Theater in 2006 consistent with the Zakaria we see as a young adult in 2002? If yes, why, and if not, why not?

13. In 2000, following reports that more than 40 Palestinian children were killed by Israeli forces, with allegations that the soldiers targeted the children, other reports surfaced that Palestinian children were being taught to hate and kill Jews in a "Sesame Street"-like program called the "Children's Club" (see www.teachkidspeace.org/doc146.php and www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=17707, and watch www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAHHjfUxERY). Discuss the effects of teaching children to hate before they arguably can understand the concept. Even if the children in *Arna's Children* were not exposed to the "Children's Club," how likely is it that they could have grown up without learning hatred toward Jews and Israel?