Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

Background:

The area that today comprises Israel and the Palestinian Territories (combined) is about the size of the state of Maryland. Two peoples inhabit this area: Israelis (Hebrew-speaking, Jewish) and Palestinians (Arabic-speaking, Muslim or Christian). Both have long-held claims to the land. In ancient times, the Jews established a kingdom in the area. They were driven out by the Romans in the first century CE. Other people moved in and became known as Palestinians (after the Latin name for the place, Palaestina). A small Jewish population continued to live in the area; before the early 20th century, they numbered only about 3% of the population.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2012/11/21/9-questions-about-israel-gaza-you-were-too-embarrassed-to-ask/
World War I and the decades that followed led to dramatic political, ideological, and demographic changes in Palestine. The Ottoman Empire, which had ruled Palestine for centuries, was defeated, and the area was placed under a British mandate. During the war, the British had courted Jewish support by issuing the Balfour Declaration (1917), indicating acceptance of the idea of creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Jews began to move into the area in greater numbers. The trickle became a flood as Jewish refugees poured into Palestine during and just after the Holocaust.

As Jews, Palestinians, and British struggled for control of the land, the newly formed United Nations decided in 1948 to partition it between the Jews (now called Israelis) and the Palestinians. The state of Israel was formed. Civil war immediately ensued, followed by invasions from neighboring countries. At the end of this conflict, called “The War of Independence” by Israelis and “The Catastrophe” by Palestinians, Israel was in possession of 30% more territory than it had been granted by the U.N., and more than 700,000 Palestinians were refugees, having fled or been driven from their homes. Those Palestinians that remained in Israel – and who today comprise 21% of Israel’s population – refer to themselves and their home as “48” (referring to 1948). Over the next two decades, Israel expanded in size so that it is now several times larger than the territory originally granted to it by the U.N. Following the Six Day War of 1967, Israel took over the West Bank (from Jordan) and Gaza (from Egypt) – and gained control of the entire city of Jerusalem. These territories – and the people in them – are sometimes referred to by Palestinians as “67.” (You will hear references to 48 and 67 in the movie.) Palestinians consider the West Bank and Gaza to be “occupied territories” as according to international law, the territories were not to become a permanent part of Israel. Israelis call them Judea and Samaria.

Eight major issues divide Israelis from Palestinians (and also cause disagreements within each community).

1. Security: Israelis, in particular, consider security to be their #1 issue both within the country (fearing suicide attacks, ambushes, or bombings) and in international affairs (fearing attacks by other countries). To get security, Israel has erected walls (“security fences”), sent troops into Palestinian territories, and launched pre-emptive strikes. Palestinians too are concerned with lack of security, as Israeli troops enter their homes unannounced or even bulldoze those homes to make room for security walls and settlements or in retaliation for attacks in Israel.

2. Right of return for Palestinian refugees: A fundamental human rights issue in the world today is the status of millions of Palestinians living in refugee camps for generation after generation. The refugees often hold onto their house keys as a symbol of the homes to which they hope to return. (Note the references to keys in the movie.) However, Israelis, many of whom immigrated to Israel fleeing persecution in other countries, have now been living there for more than 60 years. Would it be fair to turn them out? Further, Israelis argue, it is a question of mathematics: if the 4 million descendants of the original refugees returned to Israeli territories and combined with the 1 million Arabs already there, that would equal 5 million Palestinians and 5 million Jewish Israelis. Then, the state would no longer be a “Jewish state,” created to provide security for Jews.
3. Control of the city of Jerusalem: Jerusalem is a holy city for Jews, Christians, and Muslims – therefore, holy to both Israelis and Palestinians. Who should rule it? Or should it be shared somehow?

4. Israeli settlers in Palestinian territories: A huge problem for Palestinians in the West Bank is the issue of fundamentalist Jewish settlers coming in and taking up residence in Palestinian lands. In addition to taking land from the current residents, the settlers have roads (which Palestinians are not allowed to access) connecting them to Israeli cities, are allowed to carry weapons (which they can use to assert control over unarmed Palestinians), and have control of scarce water resources. Much of the violence in the West Bank is related to conflict between settlers and Palestinians.

5. Israeli troops in the West Bank and Gaza: Israelis say these troops are needed to ensure their country’s and their people’s security; Palestinians say that the troops violate their rights and harass or even kill Palestinian civilians.

6. Movement of people and goods within the West Bank and Gaza: Checkpoints and walls hinder Palestinian movement so that a journey of 15 miles can take 7 hours. This makes getting to work, school, or family events terribly hard for Palestinians. Israelis, however, feel these measures are necessary to ensure their security.

7. Control of scarce water resources: How can all people be guaranteed access to water for personal use and crop irrigation?

8. Propaganda and the language of hate: Both Israeli and Palestinian extremists portray people from the other side as less than human. This inflames fears and hatred that undermine the mutual respect needed to compromise.

The difficulties of the situation have led to outbreaks of violence and to attempts at peace. Palestinian frustration with the hardships in the West Bank and Gaza has led to several spontaneous revolts. The first “intifada” (meaning an attempt to “shake off” Israeli rule) lasted from 1987 to 1991, the second from 2000 to 2005. Boys threw rocks at Israeli tanks and troops; the latter responded with a well-equipped military arsenal. In addition, Palestinians have killed Israeli civilians through suicide bombings and missile attacks, while Israeli troops and weapons have killed Palestinian and Lebanese civilians. Moderate voices on both sides have called for peace talks, but the eight issues described above – and extremists on both sides – have made progress slow and frustrating.

In the U.S., people often hold two contradictory views of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: that it is an age-old conflict that can never be resolved or that the problem could be easily resolved if “people would just get along.” As we have seen, neither view is really true: Although the conflict is quite recent in origin, the issues it encompasses are extremely complicated and not easily resolved. The conflict is so controversial that some teachers try to avoid talking about it. However, it does students a disservice not to learn something of the complexities of an issue that has had such an important impact on international affairs and on U.S. foreign policy.

To look for in the movie:

- the challenges in Palestinian life and why these challenges help young people relate to rap and hip hop
the factors that keep Palestinians living in Israel (“48”), Gaza, and the West Bank separate from each other: both physical and political barriers. (The filmmakers portray hip hop artists in all three of these areas; pay attention when they say where each artist is from or the performance is located.)

- the internal barriers within Palestinian society that affect the musicians (generational attitudes, gender norms)

- the universal theme of music and poetry as constructive ways of dealing with life’s difficulties and expressing outrage at life’s injustices - how music is seen as a positive outlet for anger and depression (Point out the emphasis on the positive – the fact that, unlike some American rap music, Palestinian hip hop does not promote drug use or violence.)

- how music is a force that transcends barriers: physical, political, and social

- what NOT to look for: The film is about Palestinian rappers, NOT Palestinian and Israeli ones. There is no attempt to present a multi-faceted discussion of the conflict between the two peoples, only a multi-faceted discussion of Palestinian life. Teachers will want to discuss the movie’s focus and perspective with students before they view it.

A few accessible (short, clear, online) resources:

--About the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict:

“Overview of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict” (a 6-page summary):
http://cmes.arizona.edu/sites/cmes.arizona.edu/files/Overview%20of%20the%20Palestinian-Israeli%20Conflict.pdf

--About Palestinian life:

“Occupation 101” (full video 1.5 hours):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGogkbjpw&t=350&list=PLD6D247076445907C
Despite a confusing beginning which compares Palestinian issues with anti-apartheid protests in South Africa and the U.S. civil rights movement, this video soon becomes riveting – and thought-provoking. **Note: It is one-sided: focusing only on Palestinian issues, not Israeli-Palestinian ones. Use only if you explain this clearly to the students or if you pair it with a video on Israeli issues.

--About Palestinian hip hop:

- DAM website: http://www.damrap.com


- Teacher Betsey Coleman’s website “Arts and Identity: Teaching about Palestinian and Israeli Identity through the Arts”: https://sites.google.com/site/artsandidentity/  
(It is especially interesting to young people because she writes about and films everyone from graphic novelists to skateboarders to jewelry makers.)

**Lesson plans:**

- There are a number of different lesson plans on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the CMES website: http://cmes.arizona.edu/outreach/lessons  
Click on the index by subject/country, find the titles of interesting lessons, and then scroll down alphabetically to find the materials.