When I arrived at the Albright research institute in Muslim East Jerusalem this past January, I quickly discovered there would be a new pattern to my life. At 5 the next morning, at the crack of dawn, I was awakened by the singing of several loud male voices. It went on and on and did not stop. A pillow over the head did not help, so I finally got up and shuffled off to find some coffee.

Although this was not my first experience hearing the Muslim Call to Prayer, it was my first close-range and extended experience with it. Over the ensuing weeks, I discovered it shaped the rhythm of my day. Five times a day, at intervals of roughly three-four hours, the singing would begin. At dawn, I found it woke me and shook the sleep from my eyes. Up I got. Breakfast took place about the time of the second Call to Prayer, 8ish.

The third call took place between 12:30 and 1 p.m. For me, it signaled the moment when my lunch options had just been reduced. Abu Hassan’s falafel store, which made the best local hummus, stopped selling and shut down so its workers could go pray. The bread stand on the corner selling fresh kak (a Palestinian bread that looks like an elongated bagel with lots of sesame seeds) also would close for the same reason. Thank goodness the young men running the shwarma shop were secular and so kept serving without a blip.

The fourth call happened about tea time in the afternoon, about 4ish. Even though the research institute hosting me was American, it had adopted the British notion of tea in the afternoon. The evening prayers received their signal not long after dinner, before 8 p.m., when we were sitting outside in the courtyard relaxing after the day’s heat.

The loud volume of the singing of the muezzin (the Arabic word for the man who sings the Call to Prayer) came from its amplification. After some time, I realized that despite the amplification, the singers sounded pretty good; the sound quality was high, they had good voices, and the tunes (plural!) were melodious. When I heard singers “testing” the microphone a few times, I realized the singing was done live.

The Albright Institute where I lived was equidistant from three mosques, so we heard them at an equal volume. The singers sang in the same key, and so when they all sang, they sang in harmony. This was rather stunning, since they did not hear each other; I only heard them that way because I was in the middle.

This phenomenon of muezzin harmony at the Call to Prayer is a new phenomenon, I think. This is the first time since I first started traveling to the Middle East 30 years ago that the Call to Prayer has sounded musical. Not that past singing was bad, but that the amplification systems were not high quality -- more suited to a train station than to music. And to make matters worse, they all played a canned recording singing the same tune. Over and over and over.

To be sure, in the centuries before amplification and recording, there would have been live singing of the Call to Prayer. But then the singers’ voices would not have reached as far and as loudly, so it would have been less common for multiple singers to have been heard at the same time.

I got a new perspective in March when I took a trip to the Kingdom of Jordan. One night we camped in the desert, near a place the Jordanians call the “Lowest Place on Earth.” (Since it was more than 3,000 feet below sea level, that could be true.)

Given my early rising habits, I woke up early. It was quiet. Still. No mosques; no singing. Just stillness. The desert with its empty sand held almost no sound; it would make a Wyoming mountain forest sound like a traffic jam on a city turnpike. Then, as the sky began to lighten, a cock crowed. One, then two, then three. And more. One for each Bedouin tent camped in the draws scattered around us. Their harsh, grating cacophony sounded over and over. Then, a donkey began to bray, its hee-haw sounding like a fog horn gasping for air. The stillness broken, I longed for my harmonious muezzins.