

The Past and the Current in the Palestinian Music-Making Scene

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While the story of the Palestinian songs and the lyricists and musicians who wrote them on Palestinian and non-Palestinian lands remains untold, Palestinian music-making evidently has gone through intense fazes of development each came with its own features and characteristics that distinguished it from the rest; each with its own set of criteria; influences, necessities, agendas and aesthetics. This in ways makes the pursuit of the task of understanding it not an easy one, especially since primarily the Palestinian national identity started to develop more intensively since *al-nakba*, the Israeli occupation that started in 1948. Collectively, the arts continue to respond pivotally to this condition. So the specific question that comes to mind is how important music has been to the Palestinian struggle and to which extent the struggle itself influenced Palestinian musical landscape? To answer this question we must first understand the importance of music as an artistic tool of expression within a given culture and to Palestinians specifically.

Cultures in general respond to changes using the various tools of expression that are available to them. Whether cultural transformations take place gradually or rapidly, embedded tools of expression within a given culture continue to being merely practices that are carried by the people as a whole and may not be at times interpreted as conscious artistic efforts of making art, rather downright social practices. Although mostly the outcome of these social practices appears in specific contexts and/or occasions, in essence, they can also be considered to be practices that display general cultural values, help promoting and maintaining customs, and place emphasis on enforcing common cultural traditions and beliefs. The Palestinian situation is essentially a condition that forged cultural response, regardless of medium. In this case and due to its mobilizing nature and accessibility, music particularly had an exceptional role to play in highlighting the Palestinian situation. In many ways, it helped bringing the Palestinian people under a unified goal while setting up their views of certain national and regional issues, including political and social ones. Meanwhile, it also helped them setting up their new sense of identity while highlighting cultural values that are relevant to their specific condition.

Introduction

In his *The Land and the Book*, the American missionary William Thompson provided an account of Palestinian urban music (classical) in the last quarter of the 19th century. Music was played in cafés, sung to the accompaniment of the *qānūn* (plucked zither), *kamanja* (violin), *ūd* (short-necked lute), *daf* (frame drum) and *nāy* (rim-blown flute). This classic set of instruments making up the *takht* chamber ensemble is the basis of

Near Eastern art music though to a lesser extent of Palestinian music today. At the folkloric level, most of the working musicians at that time played folkloric wind and string instruments such as the *rabāba*, *shabbābah*, *yarghūl*, *mijwiz*, *buzuq*, *tabla*, *daf* and *ūd*. This folkloric repertoire is mostly vocal; however, instrumental manifestations¹ are quite prominent and dominantly associated with various forms of dance.

At the turn of the 20th century, the musical culture of Greater Syria² continued to portray congeniality, differences, and variations as part of the whole socioeconomic structure and make up of each of the regions within. These characteristics are reflected in musical forms, *maqām*³, melodic structures, rhythms, social function, lyrics and venues. Vocal musical practices were the most dominant and were so in all regions of Greater Syria, urban and rural, and in almost all social venues. Collectively, musical practices throughout Greater Syria at the turn of the 20th century were of immense social significance due to their function in society and aesthetic content. They carried and celebrated various time-tested cultural codes including traditions, customs, and beliefs while reinforcing a strong sense of a broad regional identity and unity. Its appeal to the common taste, direct relevancy to the time, and artistic flexibility—especially in lyrics—were factors that contributed to its status and added a dynamic element of creativity to its structure. At the same time, other more versatile musical practices were also popular in Greater Syria but rather restricted to urban settings, namely the art music⁴ genres. Those had been for the most part particular to circles of a higher social and/or economic caliber found in major cities such as Aleppo, Beirut, Damascus, Cairo, Jerusalem and Haifa. When compared to the musically more complex urban repertoire, the musical practices of rural Greater Syria that are universally defined as *mawrūth* (folklore), continued to be orally transmitted traditions. The practitioners of *al-mawrūth* arts were the poet/composers, or *al-zajjālīn*. They were the ones who indirectly carried beliefs, myths, tales, and practices of the Palestinian people across the 20th century.

Despite all the circumstances that lead to the establishment of other new urban musical trends, these individuals managed to maintain a somewhat compromised but reasonably coherent and dynamic dimension to their art, maybe to this day. Palestinian musical practices share these aspects with that of Greater Syria, and go beyond to including influences of the southern region bordering the *naqab* desert⁵, which is dominated by the music and dances of the nomadic Bedouin tribes as part of the wider and somewhat different musical culture of the North Arabian Peninsula.

¹ Instrumental music in folkloric setting is based on vocal repertoire; some variations on the original theme are produced on instruments, including metric improvisations.

² A term that denotes a region in the Near East bordering the Eastern Mediterranean Sea or the Levant "Greater Syria" is not always precisely synonymous with Levant, since Greater Syria can refer to a smaller region, while the Levant can refer to a larger region.

³ A musical system that defines the pitches, patterns, and development of music and it's unique to the Middle East.

⁴ Art music (Classical music), produced in, or rooted in, the traditions of liturgical and secular maqam traditions of the Ottoman Empire. It encompassed a broad period and regions from Andalusian *Muwashshahāt*, through Ottoman courts in 18th century Istanbul, to mid 20th century Cairo.

⁵ The desert region of southern Palestine.

The Palestinians confronted the 20th century with all the changes that it brought to them, and *al-mawrūth* music continued to be one of the most essential tools through which they were able to express themselves, articulate their sense of reality and identity. The later transformation of Palestinian music during the 20th century has been strongly associated with the political changes and their geographic ramifications that took place in the Middle East as a whole and in Greater Syria in particular early in the century. Namely, World War I, the end of Ottoman rule in 1917, the British Mandate (1922-1948) in Palestine, the rise of Pan-Arabism, Zionism, the Israeli occupation and the uprooting and dislocation of the Palestinian people in 1948 and later in 1967. While Palestinians took refuge in neighboring countries, especially in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, the resulting war and exodus slowly forged a new concept of cultural and musical thought from that time onwards and evolved in its own way.

In the Diaspora

Although Palestinians lived in several countries while adjusting to new living conditions, they were able to carry out their traditional musical practices and articulate common means of expression. This continued to be the case after the rise of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, which played a crucial role in connecting the Palestinian Diaspora to Palestine as its main constituency and brought the struggle for Palestine to the forefront of World issues. Not yet though playing a role in music-making, the PLO rather left it to advocates of Pan-Arabism in the rest of the Arab World particularly those of Egypt and Syria to actually utilize vocal music and address the Palestine question. During that time, music was already being used as a tool to mobilize the masses, but even more so since the liberation of Palestine was presented to be a Pan-Arab issue. This particular type of vocal music highlighted popularly consumed musical forms, trends and expressions that would collectively serve the purpose of mobilizing the masses and bring them together under one roof. Many of these songs resembled military marches, and that's in terms of form, tempo, scales used, instrumentation, arrangements, and sonorities. These practices became elaborate musical productions and part of a machine that gradually forged standards and unified approaches to music-making in terms of structure (ABA form) and function of music in society. Thereafter, they set the bases for the further development and transformation of other neighboring musical cultures, including that of the Palestinians.

Distant from the aesthetics of the Palestinian *mawrūth* repertoire with regard to the role of *al-zajjāl* (plural, *al-zajjālīn*) and the social condition of its creation, this Pan-Arab repertoire became dominant not only as a way of making music, but also as mindset and model for musicians and artists who identified themselves with the general objectives of Pan-Arabism. The question that remains is that if the mobilizing role of music was equally vital for Palestinians and Arabs in the struggle against Zionism's colonization of Palestine, in what ways have this role influenced both the Palestinian artist in terms of expression and the Palestinian masses in terms of the general Pan-Arab identity and more particularly their own?

In this paper, I will attempt to explore the nature of musical transformation in the context of the Palestinian musician as individual artists and members of society, while

examining the challenges that faced *al-zajjālīn*, and the issues of revival and preservation of Palestinian traditional musical arts. While most academic engagements deal with the overall history of Arab music and the role of patriotic, nationalist, and revolutionary songs in the modern Arab world, this approach aims to fill the gap with regard to the history of music in the struggle for Palestine from the perspective of its creators, and those who practiced it in both rural and urban settings.

History

The stories of Palestinian working musicians writing songs dealing with the Palestinian struggle, provides an informal history of the Palestinian struggle itself. Although these musicians, including *al-zajjālīn*, produced a magnitude of songs that dealt directly with their own experiences as ordinary Palestinians under occupation or in the Diaspora, their works remained non-popularized either because of the lack of production means or because of how confined these practices were to a local village, community or town. The administration of the Israeli occupation forces prohibited by law such activities to be taken place anywhere in the occupied territories and banned their production and consumption and violators were punished, imprisoned and/or deported. While mostly non-Palestinian musicians and poets wrote songs supporting Palestinian liberation starting in the 1950s through the 1970s, they maintained a comfortable line with the major political players and ideologies of the day, particularly Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir’s Pan-Arabism. The production of such songs took a peak during the 1960s and thus becoming the ultimate Pan-Arab voice symbolizing the struggle for liberty including that of Palestine. The composers of these songs maintained a comfortable relationship with the musical traditions of the West -which in many ways the ideals of Pan-Arabism embraced indirectly- and reflected on the transformation of their communities from rural to urban ones. The influence of Pan-Arab (nationalistic) music was augmented by the mass availability of transistor radios in the 1950s and the mass availability of television sets beginning in the 1960s and of cassette players in the 1970s. In the post-1967 era, and following the defeat of Arab armies in the 1967 war, the same songs started to express despair and defeat. However, in conjunction with the emerging Palestinian guerrilla movement after *al-karāmah*⁶ battle in 1968 in Jordan, the Palestinians claimed victory and accordingly some Pan-Arab songs started to reluctantly display some elements of hope. Still, for over two decades up until the early 1970s, mostly non-Palestinian Arab singers, composers, poets, song writers and lyricists continued to dominate music-making that is relevant to the Palestinian struggle, those include Fairūz and the Raḥbāni brothers, Um Kulthūm, al-Shāikh Imām, and later Aḥmad Qa‘būr and Marcel Khalīfai. At various levels, the repertoire associated with these productions dealt with Palestinian issues from a Pan-Arab perspective. In addition, musically speaking, in almost all cases these songs were still alien to Palestinians in terms of the way the lyrics were setup, and in terms of musical sonorities, performance practices, composition and structure, rhythms, and the sort of venues and mediums that were associated with their presentation and/or broadcast.

⁶ A town in Jordan, near the Allenby Bridge which spans the Jordan River.

This in many ways initiated aspects of marginalization amongst certain musical communities in the Arab World and utilized simplistic treatments towards all Arab musical and cultural diversities. This was especially the case when advocates of Pan-Arabism were promoting a specific type of Arab identity that carried certain features and characteristics that seemed to be the right one for every individual to pursue, including musical ones. For some Palestinian artists, the lyrics used in this Pan-Arab repertoire for example weren't entirely down to the point, especially for Palestinians who were actually going through the experience of exile and/or occupation. For the most part, these songs carried general emotional statements about the conflict and often lacked both musical and poetic artistry; the music at times sounded more like European military marches rather than Arab folk airs. Some Palestinian musicians and artists, even those who have had a different take on how Palestinian music and arts should be pursued while expressing the issues at stake, had to adhere to the Pan-Arab approach in pursuing what they wanted to say and how to say it; few went beyond and took a stab at doing things their own way, those include al-Barā'im (Jerusalem), Mustafa al-Kurd (Jerusalem), and al-Tarīq (Iraq).

Palestine

In the early 1970s and as urbanization was sweeping the whole Middle East; the socioeconomic conditions in Palestine were changing rapidly and many communities started looking for jobs in neighboring towns. At the same time, the Israeli occupation launched an ambitious campaign to confiscating Palestinian agricultural lands and build Israeli Settlements. These factors essentially forged a wave of rural migration into urban centers which is still going to this day. As a result of this and combination of other factors that I will come to later, several of the traditional musical genres were either influenced and/or became increasingly less viable as tools for expression in urban settings.

By the early 1980s, *al-zajjālīn* found themselves competing with and an emerging wave of well-produced and promoted popular and commercial genres, but also confronted with an emerging urban folk scene which in many ways transformed a great deal of how music is made. Essentially, *al-zajjālīn* were forced to either go with the flow and modify certain popular genres so they can cope with the changes and still appeal to their communities, or restrict themselves to the genres that are dear to their hearts and deal on their own with the issues of marginalization and alienation by restricting themselves to venues that embrace their own legacy and status in society. During that time, traditional practitioners, including *al-zajjālīn*, were becoming increasingly categorized and labeled according to their loyalty or faithlessness to the struggle for Palestine; which was becoming an issue in all art forms. Gradually, *al-zajjālīn* were valued based on what they sang, wrote and performed in the context of their commitment (*iltizām*) to the national cause and/or based on how much mobilization they can achieve. They were identified as patriotic artists (singular, *fannān multazim*) when their work is consistent with what's being addressed at the national level, thus they were supported and promoted. On the other hand, if some chose to present themselves in the context of cultural ceremony, customs and social occasions, they were often identified as non-patriotic (singular, *fannān ghair multazim*), passive, and even disloyal. Many were

accordingly ignored, labeled and essentially alienated.⁷ This was also true in most art forms.

As the nationalized musical repertoire provided artistic tools of expression and a tool of mobilization, it prompted various other political machines to do the same thing locally and attempt to identify specific political commitments and popular sentiment and responds to them musically.

Although using tools of expression for mobilization is a historically typical cultural defense mechanism and a natural reaction to events, the overall changes to the socioeconomic conditions played a crucial role in marginalizing the role of *al-zajjālīn* and challenged the reason for their existence and function in society. While *al-zajjālīn* didn't have access to urban production machines that are needed to spread their word through the different mediums and venues of the time, they couldn't correspond or compete. At the same time, their strictly cultural ideals with regards to making music didn't match those of Pan-Arabism, and were not as popular. It was becoming increasingly delicate to emerging Palestinian political machines that utilizing indigenously Palestinian human resources would require recruiting only young individuals who have the energy, commitment and will to deliver certain tasks at the national level. In addition, careful selection of what's to be represented at the artistic level and determining production means, were all factors that determined much of what happened to Palestinian music-making in the following decades.

Al-‘Ashiqin

It was in the early 1970s when some Palestinian musicians, who were also refugees since 1948, became more visible at their local refugee camps in Jordan and later in Syria. They offered a familiar and a more relevant alternative to the Palestinian taste and issues while adhering still to the most common musical Greater Syrian genres, and delicately avoiding the Pan-Arab approach. However, still operating underground at least for one more decade, it wasn't until the summer of 1977 when Hussain Nazik, a musically educated Palestinian composer originally from Jerusalem, added a new perspective on Palestinian music-making with the establishment of the group *aghāni al-‘āshiqīn*. The story started when Aḥmad Daḥbūr, a Palestinian folk poet who lived in Cairo at the time wrote a song titled “*walla la azra‘ak bi al-dār*,” which Hussain Nāzik picked up and set the music for.⁸ The song became an instant hit which prompted ‘Abdallah al-Ḥūrānī office, the Head Manager of the PLO's Department of Culture and Broadcast, to invite both Ḥusāin Nāzik and Aḥmad Daḥbūr to his office and celebrate

⁷ Mḥarib Thīb is amongst those who chose to continue presenting his work the way his ancestors taught him and he was viewed as one who practices obsolete genres.

⁸ In her book *al-funūn al-sha‘bīyah fī filasṭīn* published in 1968, Yusrā Jawharīyah ‘Arniṭah takes a note of a song that carries the same title of the hit song “*walla la azra‘ak bi al-dār*”. She found it in *shu‘fat*, a refugee camp and a town north of Jerusalem and it seemed to have mostly different lyrics and a totally different melody in 5/4 meter. At this point we're still not sure which came first, the lyrics or the music.

the ultimate success of *walla la azra'ak bi al-dār*.⁹ During the meeting, al-Ḥūrānī initiated a suggestion to establish a performance group and give it the name of *aghāni al-‘āshiqīn*. Al-Ḥūrānī asked Ḥusāin Nāzik to write the music, Aḥmad Daḥbūr the lyrics, and Aḥmad al-Jamal (al-Ḥūrānī’s deputy) for administration. Since they were all affiliated with *fatīḥ* since its early days, and employed by the Department of Culture and Broadcast in the PLO, al-Ḥūrānī request was somewhat perceived as an assignment, (*taklīf*) in PLO terms. However, their work in the group was considered voluntary and was still pursued after their formal working hours. Essentially, that day al-‘āshiqīn came about and somehow ended up becoming the ultimate representative of the Palestinian struggle for at least a decade. But their influences went indeed beyond.

During that time, several generations of Palestinians were born in the Diaspora and in refugee camps. Since they haven’t been to their homeland since 1948, the things that they knew about Palestine were its songs, stories, customs, traditions, memories, etc. In addition, a new generation was emerging out of the second wave of refugees (*naziḥīn*) and was once more filling refugee camps throughout the Arab World and establishing new ones. All Palestinians in the Diaspora were confronting the fact that they have become refugees once more, and while attempting to keep alive the memories of Palestine after *al-nakba*, the immediate emotional magnitude that surrounded these events after the 1967 war, *al-naksa*, constituted and renewed the idea of Palestine as a physical place in addition to being also a nostalgic entity. Romantic at times, the idea of Palestine in the minds of Palestinians in the Diaspora has become a diverse homeland on its own. While the process is dynamic in its own way, Palestine was quite different from one refugee camp to another. *Al-‘āshiqīn* addressed the Palestinian situation in their songs and presented Palestinians as people with strong and clear sense of national identity, and made strong references to an emerging and quite popular resistance movement.

Al-‘āshiqīn approached folklore as a dynamic repertoire that can be used to reflect the most current conditions and sentiments of Palestinians while maintaining Greater Syrian musical and aesthetic values. The overall content of *al-‘āshiqīn* songs offered a more musically-authentic aspect in comparison to the one promoted by the Arab nationalist movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Essentially, the Pan-Arab repertoire essentially covered wider objectives and goals from a strictly Pan-Arab perspective, where the emerging Palestinian one was covering the issues from an Arab/Palestinian perspective. *Al-‘āshiqīn*’s repertoire consisted of songs about Palestine, and was primarily telling the stories of ordinary people. This repertoire was indeed used for recruitment and mobilization of all Arabs, especially Palestinians, and *al-‘āshiqīn* gained ultimate popularity in the following few years among Palestinian, regardless of where they were. Palestinian expressed anger for the failures of all Arab regimes in the past wars, and demanding the Arab League to give formal recognition to the PLO as the sole representatives of Palestinians and give them the right to determine their own

⁹ The song that was written as an opening for a play produced by the PLO’s Department of Culture and Broadcast, al-Ḥūrānī’s Department. It was produced as part of soup opera that a Syrian director was commissioned to work on for the Department.

destiny, and make their own decisions concerning the conflict. Palestinians were in fact telling their own stories at least at the musical level this level rather than having someone else doing it for them. In 1974, in al-Ribāṭ, Morocco, the Arab League recognized the PLO as the official representative of the Palestinian people. This encouraged Palestinians to formally represent themselves and form their own take on how their future should look like. This was probably one of the most crucial moments where cells of national Palestinian thought started to get more particular and articulate when addressing the Palestinian agenda. During the later 1970's, *al-‘āshiqīn* was prolific in terms of the number of songs they wrote and in terms of the number of performances they delivered throughout the Arab World, and later in Europe and the Americas.

Al-‘āshiqīn continued to rely on Palestinian traditional arts as main resource for inspiration while incorporating a more complex treatment of its musical forms, types of instruments used, orchestration, *maqam*, arrangements and above all subject matter. In other words, melodies, musical forms, lyrics, dances, dialects and the Palestinian subject were carried through all of their works while attempting to express from the perspective of the contemporary Palestinian musician the ways through which Arab classical instruments in conjunction with folkloric and Western ones can be used in modernizing traditional musical practices and accommodating change while maintaining the main elements of traditional Palestinian musical thought. This approach to music-making differs from that of the poet/composers. In a way, this time around the idea of having both poetry and melody created by one person was becoming more of two people, a poet, and a composer delivering the job of one. We don't have a full view of how the role of the poet/composer transformed in the Palestinian Diaspora¹⁰, but as this research continues, an examination of the ways of the poet/composers in the Diaspora will be explored.

In the Occupied Territories

Since the success of *al-‘āshiqīn* transcended itself at many different levels in Palestinian culture, having non-Palestinian songs reminiscent of those of the 1950s and 1960s that were relevant to the Palestinian struggle but not necessarily to Palestinian culture started to fade, including those that were considered the songs of the revolution, *aghāni al-thawra*. This encouraged several individuals and groups in the Diaspora and the occupied territories to express themselves as individuals and communities and attempt to speak to their constituencies. Those include George Qirmiz, Sabrīn, Rīm al-Banna, and Jamīl al-Sayih. Later capitalization on this movement came about in the late 1970s - early 1980s in the occupied territories where some Palestinian intellectuals who were for the most part politically committed - *multazimīn* - to one of the main active political parties started to formally establish folkloric dance groups that are supported by specific political parties. These groups started exploring folklore and looked for means for its preservation and maintenance. Although they never had a formal platform for discussing

¹⁰ The only strong reference that we have of Abu ‘Arab is that he is a Palestinian from ‘Ain al-Ḥilwa refugee camp in Lebanon. His role reflects the go-with-the-flow approach that many poet/composers in the Palestinians territories ended up pursuing.

such strategies, some presented the argument or justification that the only way to preserve folklore is to institutionalize and/or canonize its practices and provide patronage and production facilities, and pursue local venues to present these traditions. This essentially constituted the birth of several *dabkah* groups such as *al-Funūn al-Sha‘biyyah*, *Sirriyat Ramallah al-Ufa*, *Jafra* and *Sharaf al-Ṭībi*. While realizing how influential of a tool it may become, they soon attempted to capitalize on the past experiences and successes of *al-‘āshiqīn* and the model they created, and started to present a repertoire that is parallel to that of *al-‘āshiqīn*, subsequently playing a role in mobilizing the masses and in recruiting more individuals to their own parties.

The Poet Composers

For centuries, the role of the poet/composer was an essential and dynamic part of how Palestinian musical culture functioned as a whole. They were the main guardian of these traditions in terms of how these practices are carried, or in how they are taught and carried to the next generation. While the newly established groups defended their vision of Palestinian folklore, the role of the poet/composer started to shift, and they eventually became more of practitioners of certain desired forms or genres that were considered more familiar to the general population thus serve better in mobilization and delivering the message. Several of these masters and their practices gradually faded and gave pathway to a newer urbanized generation that was about to replace them with a much different version of the art form and one that ended up marginalizing their mastery of art form.

Before going deeper into how this whole story unfolds, it’s important to understand that very few of these masters depended entirely on practicing these arts as their main livelihood, but in all cases, and because of these changes and other socioeconomic reasons that I discussed earlier, many ended making their living otherwise. Just like most of the rural population that was heading towards the cities seeking employment, the impact of these conditions on their participation as poet/composers in occasions and gatherings is that it began to diminish. Some even stayed out of the whole scene and lead a different life all together. As their role as creators and guardians of traditional music arts has obviously for good changed, the ultimate authority that they have had over these traditions and the way they carried their practice in society was also jeopardized by urbanization and politicization. On the one hand, the new urban generation had modest knowledge or experience in carrying these traditions and even though they presented it to the best of their knowledge; which often came short when compared to the original works of the masters and the variety of genres that they presented. They were also politically more inclined to commit themselves to a specific political goal or even entity. On the other hand, political parties thus indirectly entrusted this heritage to these motivated groups and individuals based on both their political commitment to the struggle for Palestine - regardless of their talent and mastery of the art - and on their need to collectively express themselves as people suffering under occupation. During that time, in the early 1980s, the migration from the country to urban centers has reached its peak and it also had its piece on how traditional music is generally perceived in urban settings. Musical practices that have been associated with rural settings such as the harvest, olive picking season, etc., started to

gradually fade out of fashion as the economy was also changing rapidly and these practices became less important to their livelihoods and lifestyles.

Arab Pop

Various musical forms and genres became quite popular in urban centers, namely the so called Franco Arab, which was a Lebanese genre that incorporated primarily Western musical instruments, and the Egyptian genre *aghāni al-shabāb*. Musical instrument were becoming much more affordable to purchase through several newly established music shops in the West Bank and a magnificent number of local groups were established to perform this music and other Western repertoire. These groups performed regularly in hotels, restaurants, banquet halls and suitable spaces like auditoriums, schools and concert halls. The number of venues that based their business idea on putting together daily and weekly parties was so high to the level that it wasn't at all unfamiliar to hear live music coming out from a building or a backyard that was transformed into an outdoor restaurant or at any major street whenever and wherever you wander around any of the major cities, particularly Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Nablus and Jericho. It wasn't long when several of these urban musical groups started to travel to villages to perform in weddings and other celebration. The same repertoire that was common in the cities would also be partially carried in rural setting but in addition to it other more traditional-sounding repertoire was also performed. This more traditional-sounding repertoire wasn't quite popular in cities and maintained its appeal almost exclusively to rural areas or urban communities that maintained their rural values. Although the vast majority of these groups used primarily Western instruments, including new and affordable *sharqi* keyboards¹¹, they all managed to make of the 1980s quite a musically vivid scene. For example, in any of the weekly parties that take place at any banquet hall you would hear a repertoire that covers Michael Jackson, Fairuz, Modern Talking, Atāba and Mījanā, Qudūd, Um Kulthūm, Farīd al-Aṭrash, Abd al-Ḥalīm, Sāmi Clārk, Adonīs Aqil, Miḥim Barakāt, Ghassān Ṣalībā, Amrū Diāb, Warda, Rāghib 'Alāma, Wafīd Tawfīq, Air Supply, Foreigner, Madonna, and many others. These trends flourished and appealed particularly among middle class Palestinians. Some musical groups restricted themselves to Western instruments and to Arab pop genres and American pop, which appealed mostly to urban middle and upper middle class youth. Other groups incorporated some elements of traditional repertoire that may even included traditional instruments particularly the 'ūd, these groups appealed primarily to audiences with some taste for modern music but also lean towards traditional repertoire especially towards the end of the evening where requests for *tarab* start to emerge. Essentially, they all wanted to appeal to audiences that can hire them again. The vast majority of these groups attempted to target middle class constituencies, that's were the money was. The second largest were groups that targeted the rural areas and its parallels in urban centers, in result somewhat bridging the gap between the traditional repertoire and the modern one.

The Urban Folk Scene

Towards the end of the 1980s, folklore was mostly carried by those who have

¹¹ A keyboard that plays Arab quarter tones.

established themselves as guardians of all traditional arts. And those were for the most part maintained by political factions. At that point, despite the new lyrics that were infused into it, folklore was becoming more of a canonized repertoire both at the musical and poetic levels versus its dynamic past. At the musical levels, folkloric presentations from that moment on gave the impression that the artistic pool that was attached to what's being presented is limited. Given that preservation was the main argument that these groups provided in defense of these presentations, these presentations also gave the impression that authenticity with regards to the general approach is also being implemented and conserved. In these urban settings where most people didn't precisely know how authentic Palestinian folkloric genres varied from each other in terms of musicality and function and even how they actually sounded like, what they heard from these groups on urban stages became their main and only point of reference. Although those who presented this argument of preservation later presented a contradictory claim the need for experimentation and modernization – in ways bouncing back to the original rural aesthetics of these musical arts- , the later repertoire that came out of these groups was for the most part lacking both, authenticity and creativity, see *Zagharīd by al-Funūn al-Sha'biyya*ih.

In addition to all the rapid changes that were taking place in terms of the economic transformations and reconfiguration of who does what in society, the convincing but deceiving view of preservation imposed itself on the general population and mostly alienated the rural population and those who were expressing themselves through these art forms as a dynamic tool that was still alive and healthy. While the same urban intellectualized preservation argument on a tradition that was very much alive at the moment was bearing no fruit, these groups insisted on presenting themselves as guardians of Palestinian folklore, to this day. This authoritarian approach was indeed self-declared and supported by some circles of political and/or literary affiliation and interest in the approach. While the music scene was exploding in terms of the number of musicians and venues, the traditional groups were for the most part concerned with the politics of the day and hoping to bring more people to listen to what they have to say and hope to expand their popular base and bring more resources towards the struggle for Palestine while maintaining certain features of Palestinian musical heritage. So to them, it was a win-win situation, at least that's how it seemed to be. In general, the arts play a role in highlighting the objectives and goals of any given political party. This is true everywhere and it manifests itself through various mediums, including audio-visual media. At that time however, the arts in general as mobilization tools were strictly monitored by the Israelis, even those that were displayed in demonstrations as leaflets or those hanging in some art gallery as abstract art. To Israelis, all of these arts were considered potential tools of incitement; especially when they allegedly lead in some shape or form to resisting occupation and to the establishment of political and armed cells. The urban folklorists thus operated under underground names or attempted to portray a sense of symbolism to their work. The later though was much more of a problematic approach since the intended message to be delivered to the public could not be explored and clarified to the fullest. Across the board though, the vast majority of lyrics used in their musical presentation were adjusted in ways that reflected either their own most current political agendas or the general political situation as a whole and

reinforced the message of resisting the occupation. While these groups were also monitored closely by the Israeli authorities, some affiliated themselves with some politicized and/or independent institutions that helped them gain some legal cover from the Israeli authorities and even provided them with space, venues, and often acted as a production facilitator.

Despite urbanization and migration and all the factors that lead to this decline in the role of the poet/composers, the consumable remains of this type of music were still commonly practiced throughout the Palestinian territories especially in rural setting in weddings and other social and cultural events, away from stages and the urban emerging venues. They were also practiced among villagers who came to the cities to settle but wanted to embrace their own rural traditions, practices and values. The main venue for practicing these musical arts used to be an agreed-upon open space in the village or neighborhood where these performances can be pursued for the participation and pleasure of all the people. In the case of the Urban Folk, it was practiced on stage, and away from its social context. These shows appeared mostly as musicals where the performance as a whole seemed to have some pre-determined elements or organization, canonization, and apparently urban. The later had features that are especially apparent in the design of customs, decoration, lighting, dances, and the interaction between males and females on stage. It was then clear that a new genre was born, the Palestinian Urban Folk. Audiences watched these shows for the most part silently, participated or sang along when seemed right. This music has become urbanized in terms of the instruments used, performance practices, dialects, and features of its original traditional manifestations by the poet/composers started to fade out. The Urban Folk genre was becoming the most known of all Palestinian genres, it's basically the pop version of the hardcore *zajal* forms carried by the poet/composers for centuries.

As I mentioned before, traditionally, those who carried these musical practices were all considered poet/composers and masters of the art and had authority and knowledge with regard to Palestinian poetic and musical folkloric arts; some of them depended on this for their livelihood. While these masters were mostly needed to enhance the newly emerging trend of urbanization, although under the umbrella of preservation, they were for the most part left aside as they mostly worked for hire and not as volunteers. Since most of these Urban Folk groups had no financial resources to cover these expenses or even had a moral issue with a master not volunteering to do this for free for the cause, this in turn further affirmed the new alternative system which consists of recruiting under talented and volunteering individuals who had prominent commitment to the political agendas of the time and often to a given political party. Once more, despite the fact that they were for the most part not quite knowledgeable of the traditions they wanted to present and/or preserve nor to what these traditions entailed, the role of the poet-composer thus switched from the role of the creator, to becoming merely a commodity and an occasional point of reference. The cultural justification of the existence of the poet/composers was already compromised by all the factors I mentioned before, and thus the poet/composers were marginalized.

In comparison to *al-‘āshiqīn*, although contradictory to each other, most of these Urban Folk groups used the same musical forms that were available to them at the folkloric level however lacking the musical knowledge that was evident in *al-‘āshiqīn*'s work. Collectively, and in result, those examples provided a rather simplistic view of Palestinian music and offered little perspective on how music being made and by whom in addition to contributing to causing further alienation to the general rural population which started to ignore its own traditional ways of expression sentiment through artistic means while leaning towards the musical exports of Palestinian urban centers, and those of Lebanon and Egypt, as if realizing that what they have been doing for hundreds of years in fact belongs in a museum. This resulted in a freeze on the dynamic and evolutionary nature of the poet/composers literature. This in part led to the beginning of the end of folklore as we know it, though a new beginning of another alternative Palestinian urban music.

The Urban Alternative Genre

During this period, Palestinian music remained for the most part based on simplified folkloric elements that have been throughout history aesthetically quite flexible to accommodate changes. Some individuals and independent groups from the West Bank and abroad have managed to however offer a different take on Palestinian-music-making as many were partially responding to the limitations of the Urban Folklorists and seeking contemporary methods in displaying their artistic views. Since under the Israeli occupation, direct rhetoric in any medium was punishable by law, this in ways drew a parallel towards the mystic and metaphorical elements in both Arab and Palestinian poetry and encouraged several of these individuals and group to set them to music. Some poets and musically trained composers and musicians attempted to explore this aspect and in result offered an alternative genre to both traditional-rural and urban groups and managed to reach different audiences particularly the then well established middle class, independents, intellectuals and university students. Those songs covered a more personalized aspect of the Palestinian condition and thus gathered a very loyal following around them. *Ṣabrīn*, a group based in East Jerusalem is one of those groups that became a haven for independent writers and musicians and hence became quite influential in terms of what Palestinian music has become today. The group became notable in the discussion of the role of music in the Palestinian struggle as it offered a much more intellectual and philosophical take on the function of music in society and the way it facilitates change. Despite the fact that the vast majority of individuals and groups worked underground, many were known quite well-known in their own regions as individuals even when they operated under various “undercover” names. The advantage that *Ṣabrīn* had over the other emerging groups that were following the same path is that they were all Jerusalemites (except for Kamilya Jubrān who came from al-Ramaih in northern Israel), which gave them relative protection when it comes down to freedom of expression as Jerusalemites were protected by Israeli law. Between 1987 and 1993, the Israeli Intelligent Services aggressively pursued all the groups and individuals

operating in the West Bank and administrative detentions were taken against some of them.¹²

As cultural and political tools, the Palestinian Urban Folk and traditional music (poet/composers) and the Urban Alternative started to decline after the first Intifada. This gradual decline deepened even further the lack of a music production scene. Aside from what's considered a political leaflet or message to the people, PLO institutions after Oslo didn't offer formal support towards the musical arts. It seems that it was approached still as a tool for mobilization and as if this role has come to an end. Palestinian alternative music, on the other hand was still undiscovered by the general population and didn't fully mature in terms of forms, poetry and lyrics, production, and objectives and goals. By the second Intifada, the role of mobilizing the masses was either taken once more by other composers from the Arab world or by local composers and singers. Some attempted to once more use music as a tool of political expression, or capitalize on a public sentiment.

Conclusion

Traditions are dynamic reflections of beliefs and/or belief systems and time-tested practices that exist in the context of geography, language, religion, aspirations and common interests. In order for these traditions to be maintained a system has to be in place, which could be defined as tribal, nationalistic, regional or political. National Palestinian traditions have been articulated in conjunction with the process of struggling for free Palestine. The PLO as a cluster of active institutions have played a crucial role in highlighting Palestinian values and traditions through various ways including music, embroidery, poetry, and dance. The current role of the PLO however has changed dramatically since Oslo. At the time when relative peace was in place after Oslo, the PA didn't see fit to continue with the campaign of using music as a tool nor attempted to properly support Palestinian musical arts. The PA's role pragmatically shifted towards embracing Arab Pop and pooling a great deal of resources towards bringing in Arab Pop icons and organizing festivals that tended to parallel themselves with the general music scene in the Arab World. Except for few independent festival organizers such as the Palestinian Festival for Music and Dance established by the Popular Arts Center and the Jerusalem Music Festival organized by *Yabus*, alternative approach to music-making was almost absent from how the PA viewed itself regarding its role in preserving traditional musical arts and/or promoting new ones. Some individuals in the Palestinian Ministry of Culture, namely Nadir Jalal, however attempted to utilize their position in the Ministry as Coordinator for Music and Dance and pursue such alternatives and approaches but these attempts did not collect the proper support or intimate attention of the PA as a whole. Essentially, Palestinian music is currently in a position where it needs to find its own way once more. That's in the way it appears in the culture, by the people, from the people, and to the people. As several Palestinian musicians are still

¹² This type of music flourished from the mid 1980s all the way to the late 1990s. Several groups made their way to becoming influential in their own way though this was destined for later retreat especially after the Oslo Accord, which I will come to in detail in my subsequent research.

trying to choose a topic that means something to them as individuals, that topic however is still in the making to being totally and subjectively personal in ways that shed the light on the different perspective on music making that Palestinians have thrived to articulate in the context of humanity, not by being identified by the “other” as most of what’s been done is actually portraying.

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