

Essay

Going Around in Circles

Looking for Palestine in the Jordanian Music Scene

Ahmad Zatari

Published in collaboration with [the river has two banks](#), an independent ongoing project initiated by Shuruq Harb, Samah Hijawi and Toleen Touq, this is an essay and lecture performance by music critic and journalist Ahmad Zatari. It follows Tawfiq Al Nimri's journey, unpacking some of the complex transnational influences that informed his music, and challenging the singular identity enforced on nationalist and patriotic music production in Jordan today. The published essay further expands on the lecture performance by analyzing some of the musical and political influences that gave rise to the emergence of an 'alternative' music scene in Jordan.

Tawfik Al-Nimri in the Jordanian radio station in Amman in 1960 with Salah Abu-Zaid, its director at the time, and the work team.



What would it mean if your name was 'Faduss Al-Saleh' in the year 1930?

Sixty three years ago, at age 32, the Jordanian music pioneer Tawfik Al-Nimri joined the Jordanian radio station which was based in Ramallah (1949-1959). Al-Nimri was not yet known at the time. It was only later, when he actually was no longer able to sing, did the media start paying him attention. He told a journalist from the *Addustour* newspaper how he had been an outcast in his village in Husoun. He used to stick his head inside clay pots used to store cold water and sing.^[1]

Al-Nimri was curious about the echo created by singing into these pots, against the expansive rural nature, asleep beyond any sense of time and place. These pots, are described by the popular term in Arabic, *khabyeh*, a word suggesting hiding and a perfect metaphor for he who wanted to hide his own voice. The talent that had caused his estrangement.

Al-Nimri was born in 1918, two years after the Arab Revolution. Three years later, the Hashemites came to rule Amman, Damascus, and Baghdad. The Emirate of Transjordan was created. This was irrelevant to those born in these conditions in a village located within the social and political landscape of the plains of Houran. Al-Nimri grew up oblivious to the political changes happening around him. This alienation was yet another incentive to hide in clay pots, to keep at a distance from the scene forming on the horizon.

Al-Nimri hid his voice in the clay pots. In school he hid behind the name 'Faduss Al-Saleh' before he took on his new name 'Tawfik Al-Nimri'^[2] to hide behind. In 1936, Al-Nimri was 18 when he started singing at parties and gatherings of friends.^[3]

Faduss Al-Saleh was just a skinny boy from a Christian village called Husoun. The political scene in front of him was too futile to attract his involvement. Palestine was not yet arousing revolutionary excitement, for like the rest of the area, it was under British colonialism.

However, the Balfour Declaration changed everything. The Palestinian identity became connected to the regional memory of futility. Referring to a Jordanian identity, hiding in the 'pot' had become unacceptable. The new rule in Transjordan was forced to accept the settlement of Palestinian refugees in 1948 while simultaneously establishing a local Jordanian identity.

[1] http://www.al-sijill.com/mag/sijill_items/sitem660.htm

[2] <http://alrai.com/article/7330.html>

[3] <http://alrai.com/article/7330.html>

The image of the Palestinian in Jordanian song: the partner, the other, and the new revolutionary on the eve of the 'Arab Spring'

In the popular Jordanian perception, the Palestinian was first seen as a comrade in arms, most sincerely portrayed in folk song. In Maan, a town with a mixed Bedouin and rural heritage that connected to the desert to the east and to the Houran Plains to the north, its most popular song – referred to as the *sahjih* – is repeated in significant occasions such as weddings. It had remained political in flavour. These songs praised the men of Maan and Jordan, lamented the occupation of Palestine by the Jews, stressed Palestine's 'Arabhood' and threatened the occupiers with the force of Jordanian war tanks.

Ironically, the *sahjih* has since mutated. The reference to Jews and tanks were removed. The *sahjih* has now become synonymous to blind loyalty to the regime after it was sabotaged by actors of the regime to celebrate officials visiting Maan. This happened even before the creation of *Maan's Band for Popular Arts*, employed to entertain officials in Amman's theatres and cultural centres, and exporting 'Jordanian Folklore' by participating in Arab and international cultural events.

Of the most famous *sahjih* is *Awalu el-Qawl Thikru Allah (The Talk Starts With Allah)*, often sung to *dabkeh* dances in Syria, Saudi Arabia, Palestine and Jordan.

*The talk starts with Allah. The talk starts with Allah
And the devils be shamed. The devils be shamed
My town is of sweet waters. My town is of sweet waters
How beautiful its towering palaces. How beautiful its towering
palaces
Palestine is Arab. Palestine is Arab
Held hostage by the Jews. Held hostage by the Jews
Palestine is Arab. Palestine is Arab
Gallant are the Arab men. Gallant are the Arab men
Hey young men of Jordan. Hey, young men of Jordan
Hey young men of Maan. Hey, young men of Maan
All of them fierce lions and tigers. All of them fierce lions and
tigers
And the Jordanian tanks. And the Jordanian tanks
By which Israel is defeated. By which Israel defeated
Every proud woman ululates. Every proud woman ululates
Every honourable woman walks free. Every honourable woman
walks free.*

In the area around Maan, the Palestinian identity is defined by the geography west of the river. In a recording by Jordanian musician Tareq Al-Nasser entitled *Yabu Ruddain* (produced by Greater Amman Municipality 2004-2008), recorded in Wadi Rum and following the type of song known as *hidaa*, Nasser Salem Al-Zalabyah sings:

*Oh young woman you've been on my mind / pretty one where
do you come from
Are you from the people of the east / or are you from the west
bank?*

Palestine features in Al-Nimri's songs as a part of the region's heritage. From singing *Wain ala Ramallah (Off to Ramallah?)* to *Ala Beer Al-Tai (Let's Go to Al-Tai Well)*, both considered part of the Palestinian traditional repertoire, Al-Nimri was able to trace an organic link through the region's heritage.

When the need demanded patriotic songs, Al-Nimri wrote and sang many, including *Marha li-Mudarraatina (A Salute to Our Tanks)*, which he wrote in Ramallah, and *Ala Difafik ya Urdun (Along Your Banks River Jordan)* (with Aida Shaheen). He pioneered the composition of lyrics that were locally focused in nature, starting with the song *Darb el-Ratib Wahid w Droob el-Sirga Miyyeh (The Path to a Salary Is One, The Path to Thievery Many)*, written by Wasfi Al-Tal, Prime Minister of Jordan at the time.

Paradoxically, Al-Nimri, through his patriotic songs drawing their tunes from diverse contexts – including the rural, the plains of Houran, of Palestine specifically and Greater Syria at large – has contributed to the shaping of popular Jordanian artistic identity. It is an identity contrary to today's nationalistic songs with their exclusively Bedouin flavour, referring solely to trans-Jordanian origins as part of an exclusionary project at a regional level, which came to life with the slogan 'Jordan First' at the turn of this century.

With this reduction of Jordanian identity, (for it is by no means exclusively Bedouin considering the rural bulk in the north and the urban in Amman and Salt), Al-Nimri's project was pushed aside by the Bedouin focused style occupying centre stage. New singers were manufactured to better suit this project. One of whom was Faris Awad, a descendent of Bani Hameeda, a powerful tribe in the Theeban District in the Madaba area. Coincidentally, it was also the area to produce the first demonstration demanding reform and freedoms at the end of 2010.

In other words, Ramallah was equally important as Daraa^[4] in shaping the Jordanian identity. Without Ramallah, or Daraa, the identity, just as it is in fact today, will remain incomplete.

Al-Nimri's ten years in Ramallah contributed to the forming of a Jordanian identity through songs such as *A Salute to Our Tanks*. With the elimination of this native dimension fed by the 1994 Wadi Araba agreement and further encouraged by present attempts to divide the Palestinian and Jordanian identities both socially and politically, the need for the fabrication of an exclusionary pure Jordanian identity arose. Its personal enemy, as appears in 'patriotic songs', is he who is not Jordanian.

[4] A town in the south of Syria bordering Jordan. (translator's comment)

Seeing that there are singers who present themselves as extensions of this pure Bedouin heritage indicates the success of this project, for the time being. These songs have become fundamental in the song repertoire of weddings, private parties, local radio stations, as well as broadcasts within military camps.

This separation has also led to the estrangement of the singers themselves from their own personalities and the concerns of their own communities. As an example, we find Mutib Al-Saqqar, one of the finest Jordanian voices today who comes from the town of Rumtha in the plains of Houran that borders with Syria, has joined this pack, forcing him to leave behind his Hourani heritage.

In an interview, the members of the Al-Lozyeen Brothersband, who have started to sing at weddings, confessed that in pursuit of fame, they've given up 'sentimental' singing and everyday themes in favour of these new and popular nationalist songs^[5].

In its latest and most contemporary chapter, this separation has led to the prominence of an independent music scene in the capital city of Amman. This scene started and continues as yet another exclusionary project, severing its ties with its organic heritage, and celebrating the hybridity and weakness of the Ammani accent.

Since 2004, several Ammani bands and singers appeared on the scene, tackling Amman's everyday life issues ranging from forbidden love to the emotional and urban voids. With this, the Jordanian music project went back into the clay pot to hide, only to be saved after a number of years by the 'Arab Spring'.

Towards the end of 2010, a quasi-revolutionary hip hop movement came to life, instigated by the band *Torabyeh* (*Earthly*) and sustained by *el-Fir3i*^[6] (meaning 'secondary' is a metaphor for a voice from the margins or sidelines) and *Khotta Ba* (Plan B). This brought issues of public concern and the Palestinian cause back within the structure of Jordanian musical identity.

This movement was limited in its influence, since initially it was disconnected from the scenes beyond Amman, and mainly preoccupied with the class division between eastern Amman: with its poor and neglected, and western Amman: rich and cradling investment. However, Palestine snuck its way back into the lyrics alongside liberation, political corruption, class-struggle, albeit within an exclusively local context.

[5] http://www.addustour.com/ViewTopic.aspx?ac=%5CMiscellany%5C2010%5C01%5CMiscellany_issue823_day11_id203377.htm#.UHm1q2_A-x

[6] 3 is a replacement for a letter in arabic that has no corresponding sound in English, it is often replaced by an ' before the closest corresponding sound, this word reads as *al-Fir'ii* translator's note.

The song *Tirak*^[7] (*Torabyeh* and *el-Fir3i*) criticised the attempts to create antagonism within the Jordanian community after a number of Jordanian protesters, who took part in the 'Third Palestinian Intifada' protests on 15th May 2011, were attacked with gunshots by other civilian groups allegedly from the Karameh tribes, near the Jordanian borders with Palestine. These clashes were followed by an onslaught of reciprocated accusations based on Jordanian versus Palestinian origins between the two parties. This is exactly what had happened earlier during the protests on 24th March of the same year, where the crowds found themselves being categorised as Shiites, Iranians, and Palestinians by other protestors carrying pictures of the king, considered the regime's allies in the crowd. Such psychological and financial rallying had never been witnessed by the capital before, which led to the congregation of large numbers around the Dakhlyyeh Roundabout. A sit-in took place and was taken apart. In an act for the cameras to see, the crowds took down the street name sign reading 'Queen Alia' (of Palestinian origin) and stepped on it.

Tirak, the song, was produced under these circumstances, a moment at which the Ammani music experiment reached a new level in incorporating what had been taking place around it, proving morally responsible for its political and social role. With this new experience, the Ammani song has come out of hiding. It may have possibly been the first time that there was mention of towns and areas outside of the capital, emphasising a unity in regards to a common reality and the national struggle. It also rejected the image of the tribes as representing and harbouring thugs:

*Your failure is clear for you are making a mess
Caught red handed, a policeman in civilian clothes
Your men lurking by the Jordan Valley borders
Have you skipped a constitution article and changed the
specialisation?
(...)
You maybe able to silence Amman with the division between
two people plan
But Aqaba is still upset
(...)
Claiming the provinces do not agree with reform
As if they are cradling corruption
You claim the South owes you favours in distributing flour
A mockery pretending those thugs represent children of the
tribes
Change your corrupt style, fix your image
Your people are anticipating a dangerous time
When you sign the desert away in a deal between you and the
people of the Gulf
Bring the children of Maan and Baqaa a copy of the bill.*

[7] 7 is a replacement for a letter in arabic that has no corresponding sound in English, it is often replaced by an h, this word reads as *Hirak*-translator's note.

Although illogically, the ironic conclusion is that the image of the Palestinian in the Jordanian music scene is better when the quality of the musical product is better. Another article is added to this formula: as the orbit of the concerns approached by the Jordanian music scene expands, the Jordanian identity begins to form while the regional exclusionary project starts to crumble.

Walter Benjamin, in his article entitled 'The Author as Producer', says 'The correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency',^[8] thus pointing to how this literary bias could play a role in enhancing or hindering the literary technique itself.

This applies to the independent Amman music scene. When the pioneers of the new movement (Yaazan Al-Roussan and Aziz Maraqa) that started in 2009 failed to incorporate the societal and political changes and developments and failed to anticipate the 2011 Arab revolutions, this experiment fell into the same hiding pots as Al-Nimri's in his youth.

How would Tawfik Al-Nimri be keeping up with the times with all that is happening today? Would we be assured or in panic if he was called by an official institution, such as the Royal Court, the Ministry of Culture, the army or armed forces and their radio stations to produce a new 'patriotic' song?

In other words, can we address Tawfik Al-Nimri's project? Or can we address the conditions that demanded producing his 'unifying' songs, confirming the unity of a common societal reality and the sole political destiny? The answer is in *Bilif w Bidour* (Going Around and Around) which was probably composed during the time of union between the two banks (1950-1988).

Going Around and Around: Searching for a Palestinian geography in the Jordanian song

There is an unfounded belief that the song *Going Around and Around* was written during the first phase of the unity between the two banks, specifically when Al-Nimri was a resident of Ramallah in the fifties. However, there is no definite information regarding the date and circumstances around writing it, nor can we be certain whether or not it had been commissioned by any official body.

In good faith, the product seems innocent, unassuming and spontaneous in its simple lyrics, almost childlike, the simple rural tune accompanied by the flute, as well as Al-Nimri's unpretentious amateurish performance.

[8] Walter Benjamin http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/theatre_s/post-graduate/maipr/currentstudents/teaching_1112/warwick/st2/kobialka_reading_-_benjamin_w_-_the_author_as_producer.pdf

*Going around and around, crushing and crushed
I go up Al-Ardah, he comes down Naour, hey pious people
And I am going around and around, around and around.*

*Ahead of me and I follow, running I do not catch up
In Irbid I wait, he sneaks to Al-Jafer, hey pious people.
And I am going around and around, around and around.*

*Where I sit and am imprisoned
I ask after him in Nablus, they say he is in Al-Ghour, hey pious
people
And I am going around and around, around and around.*

*I take the car, a midnight trip
I get to Hebron, he remains in Bait Sahour, hey pious people
And I am going around and around, around and around.*

*I drive him to Maan, he returns to Amman
At Um-ElHeeran I honk at him, hey pious people
I honk at him, and I am going around and around, around and
around.*

*I kept trying to find him, I can almost catch up with him
All I have to do is catch him, he is at the throw of a bird hey
pious people
At the throw of a bird and I am going around and around,
around and around.*

*Going around and around, crushing and crushed
I go up Al-Ardah, he comes down Naour, hey pious people
And I am going around and around, around and around.*

Accordingly, naively and with good intentions, the song is directed at the people on both sides of the river. The reasons behind coming to this conclusion are as follows:

1. The song shows a deliberate non-professionalism in the lyrics, performance and tune. This allows for the conclusion that it was not a commissioned work, especially when compared to commissioned songs such as Fairuz's *Urdunn Arda Al-Azm (Jordan, The Land of Determination)*, lyrics by Said Aqel and music composed by Mohamad Abdulwahab, or *Amman* by Najat Al-Sagheera, lyrics by Haidar Mahmoud and music composed by Jameel Alass, or the songs of the play *Barjass*, lyrics by Haidar Mahmoud and composed by Zaki Nassif.
2. The song borrows from the traditional storytelling form. Or at least the theme of a simple folk story: searching for the beloved. Al-Nimri went back to sift through heritage in search of an easy means to move between the towns and cities of both banks, he found the simple reason of looking for the beloved who eludes him for no reason.

3. The mention of the city of Jerusalem was ignored. Jerusalem has always made a presence in the Hashemite literary discourse, as the custodians of this sacred city, it falls under their and Jordan's historic and religious responsibility.
4. The song creates a sense of the shrinking distances between the mentioned towns and cities. Comparing the distance to 'at the throw of a bird' whether the distance here could be explained as the limited space within which birds move, or the short distance from where a bird is caught.

The song saves us from approaching Palestine as the Arab hub of the revolution, or as a virtual space, or even as a country clad in the sanctity of being occupied, or even as a symbol forced onto a song. Al-Nimri deals with the Palestinian landscape as part and parcel of the region, with no privilege but being connected to the beloved whose location is deliberately sabotaged.

But is this a neutral and passive image of Palestine that is under occupation? Has Al-Nimri given up calling for a revolution towards liberating Palestine in return for confirming the unity of a common reality? The answer to such a question may seem pointless. The creation of the Zionist state in 1948 was a threat to the region as a whole, promising state division, occupation and a shared destiny.

Consequently, and to a certain degree, *Going Around and Around* may be considered a purposeful and revolutionary song anticipating the Zionist project into which the governments fell prey, whether in Jordan, Lebanon or Syria, by declaring animosity towards the Palestinian factions and holding the 'Palestinian' responsible for the mistakes of these faction leaders.

If we were to trace the Palestinian landscape in the Jordanian song, we will not find many encouraging examples. Palestine, over the following decades, was reduced to a symbol inhabiting the screens. This was reflected in the bands whose music was dedicated to the Palestinian revolutionary – songs such as *Al-Rayat* and *Baladna*, established by Palestinian refugees in Jordan in the seventies and eighties. *Baladna* continues its activities until today.

Ironically, Palestine resurfaced in *Qadem (I Will Come)* a song by Omar Al-Abdallat, who could be considered the symbol of the regional exclusionary Jordanian song. His song was in reaction to the Israeli attack on Gaza at the end of 2008. Recently urging the Royal Court to force 'censorship on patriotic songs' since he claimed it has allowed people way to much freedom in that any young man can sing about the homeland with no censorship, Al-Abdallat, in his own song *Qadem*, includes an array of Palestinian and Arab cities, Abdallat provided Gaza with an Arab context.

*I swear to you dear Gaza with dignity
 I will come
 The enemy will not stop in our way to Acre, Jaffa, or Haifa
 I will call God's name from on top of the Holy Rock
 From Tangiers, Jeddah, and Meknes
 I will come
 From Constantinople and Aurea
 I will come
 I will come
 I swear to you dear Gaza
 I will come
 The bombs will not separate us from Ufuleh nor Ramallah
 In Fallujah we meet, holding our flag high
 From Al-Juf, Kitti and Attar
 I will come
 From Djerba, Sousse, and Mikthar
 I will come
 I swear to you dear Gaza I will come
 An Arab, a guerilla, dark skinned, wearing my kufyeh
 holding his mighty stone sling
 the stone a burning coal
 From the western mountain of Batnan... I will come
 From Tanta, Sinai, and Aswan... I will come
 I will come
 I come. I swear to you dear Gaza I will come
 We stand strong against the challenge, everyday more stubborn
 We fight with stone in front of a tank
 From Aden, Sanaa, and Ajman
 From Nuba, Kassla, and Port Sudan
 I will come
 I swear to you dear Gaza
 I will come
 Slaughtered, bleeding, hands and tongue cut off
 I try everything, everyday my faith is stronger
 From Homs, Aleppo, and Lebanon
 I will come
 From Busra, Juhra and Amman... I will come
 I will come
 I swear to you dear Gaza I will come
 Above upper Galilee, Bir Assabe, and Tiberias
 The oppressor has taught us the meaning of a proud Arab
 nation
 From Mecca, Jedda, and Zahran
 I will come
 From Doha, Muhraq, and Ajman
 I will come
 I will come.*

Even if it were not a commissioned song, inspired by the lazy mindset of the Jordanian official machine, this song reflects a mutilated desire to provoke a series of situations. The sense of Arab Nationalism naively dominates the theme of this song with the absence of any official Jordanian patron. Even if the mainstream is

inclined to invoke the Arab in its identity, the transformations created by the Arab revolutions seem profound. This is especially the case when dealing with Arabs as the 'others' occupying a country and culturally invading it.

This was the case in regards to the Palestinians in Jordan, later referred to as Jordanians of Palestinian origin, who are objects to regional campaigns demanding that they end their claims for full rights, or at least to stop complaining about the absence of some of these rights. And because the regime's priority was to protect itself, it abandoned the Palestinian dimension, as well as the Syrian and the Lebanese, congratulating itself on Amman's cement, Aqaba's golden sands and the Dead Sea's healing powers.

The Palestinian landscape will only shyly reappear, and through distant symbols, hiding behind poetic language. A good example is *al-Morabba3's* song *Hada Tani (Someone Else)*, written by Tarek Abu-Kwaik, from the record of the same name, which the band produced earlier in 2012. Here, Palestine appears in a distant and faint background in the capacity of 'borders'. Borders that are only relevant to the class differences in Amman. But though the class differences here play as an entry point to analyzing the Palestinian landscape considering the association of the Palestinians-outside of Palestine-to the refugee camps, this is a limited and immature view reflecting an inability to see beyond the Palestinian tragedy. Furthermore, it seems to forget that there are a number of Jordanian villages that have no electricity, running water or services.

*Is this the life you want? people are dying
A big car, and everyone's happy
The car cannot even go through your family's street
Tourism, where to? By the borders?
The car cannot go through.*

This mentality, linking the tragedy to hardship and emptiness, has reduced the Palestinian landscape in the Jordanian song to mere fragments of cities, mentioned as spaces isolating their people: new settlements in the Arab and Jordanian awareness. If we agree on this, then we must agree that the 'Arab Spring' has changed this baseless mentality to a great degree. The proof of this is a balcony in Ramallah launching Tarek Abu-Kwaik's project with a new song entitled *Madina Taditha (A New City)*.

The Compass for an Alternative Jordanian Song After The Arab Spring:

To be free of the oppressive regimes or stand by their side against the occupier?

In February 2011, Tarek Abu-Kwaik produced, as part of the project he calls *el-Fir3i (The Subdivision)*, a song entitled *A New City* and released on Youtube. He sang it from a balcony in Ramallah where he had composed it. This was the first time that we hear of *el-Fir3i*, a

coherent project he describes later as one that 'takes the two banks of the river as its points of origin.'

*In the name of today's generation I write a statement
We go into the public libraries and make something clear
Assign a new shelf behind the history section
dedicated to the wishes of ships and the direction of winds
For, frankly, with a statement like this,
You associate the coloniser with Jesus
No! This is not the nature of this earth
Religion shall not fall wounded in the name of prejudice
Consider this Arabic rap, consider the discourse of Ibn El-
Khattab
Never did the multiplicity of religion cause tension
Where are the scientists? Where are the thinkers?
The Prophet's uncle was a heathen, drop the ancestry
Drop family names, drop the titles
Let us trust this path and understand the reasons
Why the Abbasid misunderstood the Umayyad
Why a rift came between the Fatimid and the Ottoman
Secular global with a few benefits
But I see Arab trap controlling
This time, my targets in front of me, I contemplate history
I focus on what's next just as if I were Captain Majid
I score to shrink the gap between the classes
I consider how I could be of use
When the new shelf in the national library is up
If all goes well, like Mr. Ghannam, Haifa here I come
They've returned my language, they've let me be,
My language is how I wander and lose her I will not
Every morning I water her and at night we talk
My people know better, but in a big room a family
A family is quickly extinct
We pay taxes for stupid products
Go ask America what she was up to in the forties supporting
new borns and failed extremism!
This country has many mountains.. in which cave has he
hidden her... the love of my heart a new city...where has the
hyena taken her
A certain ideology, it worked for a while but now it has expired
it's no longer charged, it has become invalid
There is a new phone in the market everyday
The fashion demands to buy the product if effective
He who has not needs not, he who has gets according to his
intentions
The street is full of hubbub to prove divine
This cocky chap wants to prove he is grand
If only he knew what this talk in essence means
If everything is a blessing, insecurity this is
Despair lives under all this make up
A bank system of helplessness
If our ancestry sees this they sure will feel sour
Disturbing aggravating demoralising*

*Some leave, get smart and never come back
 Countries where the clergyman is proud to be a thief
 We pass the time with rap man but I kid you not
 Give us a song that speaks to the people
 and you can gift my song to the private guards
 I only salute diversity
 Imagine going to a vendor and all that is sold are pears
 Imagine worshipping a god and not individuals
 and with scientific development we prove equal
 to advanced countries I can hear bells ringing
 I can hear the prayer but I also hear confusion
 Is it either or nothing are you talking or blabbering??
 Is it either a cover the face veil or total nudity
 I would like to grow a beard do not mean I am a fundi
 Do not think me shy nor scared
 This is no prophet talk just saying what's on my mind
 The rituals are many and my temperament stable
 I would be happy if my talk goes into your head
 But you misunderstood if personally you consider!*

Abu-Kwaik could be seen, from this balcony, as inventing a path similar to Al-Nimri's 63 years ago. It is from this balcony that he sang about this new city – meaning, Amman with Ramallah on her mind or Ramallah with Amman on her mind. This song might as well be the first successful attempt at breaking through the tense official and economic relations between the two cities, one of the first songs to contribute to drawing a path for a new wave of Jordanian song.

This seems to be an almost reproduction of the experience of young Al-Nimri in Husoun. Just as Al-Nimri hid his voice in the clay pot, Abu-Kwaik wonders about this country with many mountains and 'in which cave has he hidden her'. Abu-Kwaik's wondering hides within it a sense of bitterness more acute than the sense of nationalism. However, he does stay away from the crushing display of anger in the hip hop performance by *Torabyeh* and *Khotta Ba*.

Palestine has found her way back into the songs by these two performers in the shape of a nationalistic symbol as part of a liberation project that started before the members were even born (*Torabyeh* and *Khotta Ba* are both in their early twenties).

Alongside this return, some contemporary formal political jargon has found its way into the song. In the song *Badal Watan* (In place of a Homeland), the 'alternative homeland' project is attacked and described as the result of the Israeli occupation and the peace treaties, thus framing the Arab regimes as flaccid.

*A generation shat on all the peace treaties
 At the end they turned out to be shit
 They tried to plant the idea of "a friendly enemy"
 but no matter what, he for our land hungers
 As long as we breathe, however
 No way will he even taste a bite of it.*

The *Torabyeh* experience, in particular, may seem as if it was soliciting the Jordanian revolutionizing before it began. It cannot be seen as fake if compared to the popular sense on the Jordanian street at the time when this band started in 2009. However, it seems to be an act of fabrication with the intention of provoking its realisation. According to Firas Shihadeh, the founder of the band that has now broken up, 'At first we were met with expected disapproval, considering the radical content of our songs, however, our sincerity came across. We had no intention of faking neither ourselves nor reality.'

The surprising factor is that the band first started to sing as a result of a random get together in a graveyard in Aqaba city. The conversation broached the incident of throwing the port worker, Ahed Alawneh, from a police vehicle during a port-worker sit-in in Aqaba, after which the Jordanian street started to mobilise. This begs us to consider the perfect coincidence corresponding with a street spark.

If we agree that the Jordanian street did mobilise in 2012, then the album entitled *Tatweer Hadari* (Urban Development) produced by *Khotta Ba* earlier that year was in reality an attempt to keep up with the move to correct the political compass of the new Jordanian song, rather than in anticipation of it.

In the song *Muqawameh Sha'abeyeh* (*Popular Resistance*), the rapper points to the magic solution: 'Your city does not progress unless Israel leaves,' and to 'the mythical Laila Khalid,' there is a demand for the stop of normalisation with Israel and the tearing up of Wadi Araba Treaty, as well as 'the destruction of the Israeli embassy in Rabyeh' (a neighbourhood of Amman city), and never giving up on the 'right of return.'

The rhetoric of *Khotta Ba*'s song mobilises the conditions for an ideal liberation revolution, a true leftist discourse, which seems to contradict with Abu-Kwaik's *Muqawameh Madanyeh* (*Civil Resistance*) in his album *Fir3i Al-Madakhil* (*Entry Division*) produced in 2012 alongside *Khotta Ba*'s album *Tatweer Hadari*.

There is an invitation in *el-Fir3i*'s song for popular resistance with no specification of the form of this resistance. This is done by leaving a blank in the sentence 'Did you know that (...) is a form of resistance?' Yet, simultaneously he points out to this 'civil' and unarmed resistance by defining the 'civil fighter' as one who becomes a fighter when they are no longer apathetic, when they no longer throw tissues out of car windows while telling 'pals' how ideal the west is.

The voice of the people is loud, a discharged fighter is suspicious to the occupier and gives me the creeps."

In its mournful sense of the poetic, these lyrics closely resembles the song *Ma Indak Khabar* (*You Have No Clue*) by *al-Morabba3* which was in the 2012 album of the same name:

The gas is becoming more expensive and privatised, and you have no clue. Jerusalem is being freed and purified, and yet you still worship fire.

It is as challenging to analyse the consciousness behind these songs, whether alert or naïve, as it is to challenge the Arab political state of affairs. These songs shed a confusion on Palestine and the Palestinian cause as much as the songs shed light on the official and civil initiative manoeuvres and attitudes on these subjects. Just as the 'Arab Spring' has taken us back to the point of zero in politics and to no freedoms, so we are back at the beginning of a more difficult and brutal path. For it is far easier to deal with a dictator than to sift through interior problems – this new wave arrived after the 'Arab Spring' as a necessary mutilation of everything we ever believed or disbelieved in.

The ethical sorting here, if it was to take place, goes beyond the matter of whether the singing is for the official court and its entourage or for the street. It is based on a political discourse, it is either in compliance or in resistance. This is a controversial matter where the definitions of the individual may be dropped in the interest of the public good, which here resembles an occupied country.

This could seem like an appropriate standard. However, it often boils down to sheer poetic hallucination when placed in front of a cold, divided and mutilated Palestinian political scene. Especially if we take into consideration the attitudes towards the Syrian revolution, where each party accuses the other of either collusion with the imperialist project aiming at dividing the resistance and drying up its resources, or working towards upholding new totalitarian regimes feeding off of the Palestinian cause.

If we were to wonder what the role of music here is to be, it is in surveying the communal memory and purifying it from the contamination of any political discourse. This will not be the case if music was considered a tool to atone for personal or public sins, nor if seen as a free means to narrate events. Its role here, however, is to recreate a popular song instead of an alternative one. This is what Al-Nimri succeeded in doing before he was pushed aside, while Abu-Kwaik and his fellow musicians have failed.

A version of this essay was delivered by Ahmad Zatari on November 10th 2012 in Makan, Amman, and broadcast on Raya Radio (Palestine) on December 11th 2012. This essay was originally published in Arabic on [the river has two banks](#). It has been translated into English by Diala Khasawnih for Ibraaz and re-published with permission from the author.

[*the river has two banks*](#) is an independent ongoing project initiated by Shuruq Harb, Samah Hijawi and Toleen Touq, addressing the growing distance between cultural practitioners living on both sides of the River Jordan by instigating connections and rethinking shared social and political histories of Jordan and Palestine. Our initiative attempts to overcome mobility restrictions imposed by political borders, and the social gaps resulting from them, by encouraging the exchange of ideas through facilitated travel opportunities and organized discussions across both banks of the river, as well as the showcase of artworks, new writing and research online. The first phase of programming took place between September-December of 2012 across different locations in Palestine and Jordan with a series of talks, film screenings, a public interventions and a number of commissioned research and art projects.

About the author

Ahmad Zatari is an independent journalist and writer living in Amman, Jordan. He's published two books and the third is on its way. He's worked as a culture correspondence for the Lebanese newspaper Al-Akhbar. He has also worked as program coordinator for Freemuse foundation in the Middle East and North Africa to support freedom of expression in music. Zatari is one of the founders of Ma3azef, a website dedicated to music.