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Conflicts, Occupation, and Music-Making in Palestine

Chuen-Fung Wong

Music can give something even the Israelis can't encroach on; a chance for the kids to open their minds into a space that isn't filled with fear, uncertainty and a relentlessly building resentment, a space to be inventive, fanciful and free—a space to be kids.

Andrew Kirkman, "Making Music under Occupation," 2004.

If, when they grow up, they decide to turn themselves into bombs, OK, that's up to them; but for now I want to give them a chance to see another possibility, to discover that there are other, more productive things they can turn their minds to.

Yassir, the founder of Karama, a non-governmental organization for children and teenagers in Deheishe Refugee Camp near Bethlehem (as quoted in Kirkman 2004).

*T*his article began as a reflective essay for the Faculty Development International Seminar of Macalester College, Minnesota, entitled, The Israeli-Palestinian Impasse: Dialogic Transformations, in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The seminar involved a semester-long preparation of lectures, colloquia, and readings in St. Paul, Minnesota, leading to a three-week on-site seminar and research in the West Bank cities of Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Bethlehem, in May and June 2008.

As an ethnomusicologist focused primarily on the Central Asian musical traditions of the Uyghur—Turkic-speaking Muslims in north-west China whose problematic relations with the Chinese state have spurred substantial racial/ethnic and sociopolitical conflict—I came to be interested in the topic of the Israel-Palestinian conflict from a comparative standpoint. The Uyghur and Palestinian problems, it seemed to me, share significant similarities in at least three important ways: first, discourses on (anti)terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism form an integral part of the ongoing conflicts; second, prevailing problems

in both cases demonstrate connections to broader ideological ruptures that go beyond geographical boundaries and are transnational in nature; and third, in addition to the fact that Uyghur and Palestinian Arab traditional music share significant similarities in modal-melodic and metrical-rhythmic details, music-making is central to the social life of both the Uyghur and Palestinians, often profoundly connected to ethno-nationalistic sentiments.

With these preliminary ideas and initial connections, I began my excursions into the Palestinian musical world, with particular attention to the roles of music-making in the current conflicts and occupation. Based on both library research and ethnographic inquiry, this essay reflects such musical and scholarly encounters over the last six months, both at home and during the three-week period abroad in the West Bank. More specifically, most of my on-the-ground ethnographic investigation was conducted in the West Bank city of Ramallah during the one-week independent research period.

Located six miles south of Jerusalem, Ramallah assumes the role of capital of the Palestinian National Authority. Economically paralyzed by the Israeli occupation, Ramallah has been home to a large variety of cultural activities, performing groups, and education organizations.

I will begin the essay with a brief overview of Palestinian musical life under occupation in contemporary Middle Eastern history, with particular attention to issues pertinent to music and conflict. I will look at the various attempts and initiatives over the last two decades or so to use music as a means of resistance, relief, and reconciliation in Palestine. Realizing that experiences of conflict and occupation are not only disembodied political events but also deeply ingrained in Palestinian everyday life, this essay attempts to focus on music-making against broader sociopolitical processes without losing sight of the lives of musical individuals through ethnographic inquiries. In this light, I will report on my ethnographic encounter with the musical life, compositions, and performances of Samer Totah (b. 1972), a renowned Ramallah-based Palestinian performer and maker of the Palestinian/Arab instrument, the *'ūd*, a pear-shaped Middle Eastern lute enormously popular among Palestinian and other Arab musicians and audiences. Last but certainly not least, I will explore the implications of Palestine's current bid to enter the Eurovision Song Contest as an attempt for global connections for causes that are decidedly national. Given my exclusive focus on the musical life of the Palestinians, particularly in Ramallah, my account is inevitably one-sided. My purpose is not so

much to evaluate the successfulness of musical attempts in resolving the current conflict as to examine the unique role of music in mediating experiences of occupation in contemporary Palestine.

Music has never been absent in Palestinian nationalism against Israeli occupation since the *Nakba*, or the “catastrophe,” a preferred term by the Palestinians to describe the 1948 war, which led to the establishment of the state of Israel. Musical styles and their sociopolitical connections with other Arab musical centers—notably Cairo and Beirut—have had an important influence on Palestinian music of struggle and resistance. Egyptian popular songs of ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1907–1991) and Umm Kulthūm (1904–1975) in the mid-twentieth century—heavily influenced by European functional harmony, orchestral setting, and other non-indigenous styles and practices—for example, have had a significant impact on the post-1948 political struggle in Palestine, explicitly linked to notions of Arab unity and the liberation of Palestine.¹

Musicologist Christian Poché divides the political music history of modern Palestine into three periods. The first was the period following the Six-Day War in 1967, the Arab-Israeli war that resulted in Israel’s control of the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. It was during this period that we witness the development of the genre of political songs, defined roughly as songs that promote the spirit of resistance and struggle. The second period, which, according to Poché, began with the Lebanese War in 1975, is characterized by the support of Palestine by non-Palestinian musicians. Early works of the Lebanese composer Marcel Khalifé (b. 1950) belong to this period. As Poché observes, for many people, “the celebration of Palestine in song became a symbol of emancipation and commitment, reflecting a modernist state of mind, especially as the movement clearly went beyond the purely Palestinian context, extending to the Arab world and affecting Arab intellectuals.” Songs composed by the prolific Rahbani Brothers—Asi Rahbani (1923–1986) and Mansour Rahbani (b. 1925)—and performed by the legendary singer Fairuz (b. 1935), all from Lebanon, are loaded with blatant nationalistic messages with constant references to Palestinian places and people under occupation. The hugely popular “*Zahrat al-Mada’in*” (The Flower

of Cities) is but one good example.² Most of these songs remain at the heart of the repertoire of Palestinian struggle music today.

The third and last period began in 1985, when there was a turning away from the musical representation of political struggles to compositions that focus on “land and its fertility, romance and dreams.” I would also add to this period the repertoire of songs that are closely associated with the *intifada* uprisings, the violent Palestinian rebellions for national liberation from the Israeli occupation. The first *intifada* began in 1987 and ended with the Oslo Accords in 1993. The second *intifada*, also known as the “al-Aqsa *intifada*” (named after a mosque in Jerusalem), broke out in 2000. Popular songs for political struggle have played an important role in these *intifadas*. Protest songs have been composed to mobilize the Palestinian people for uprisings against the Israeli state, disseminated quickly through audio cassettes and other mass media. The repertoire of *intifada* songs, in the broadest sense, includes a wide range of popular music with themes pertinent to Palestinian struggles, including the aforementioned pan-Arab popular music by Fairūz and other musicians. However, it also refers particularly to revolt songs intended to provoke sentiments of aggressive defiance against the Israelis. Songs belonging to this category are often seen as musical weapons, utilized to celebrate and call for sacrifice by mobilizing violent actions. Such aims are achieved through nationalistic and Islamist discourses in the lyrics. As Oliver and Steinberg observe, “the songs of the *intifada* not only reflected life under occupation and revolt in all its forms, real and fantastic, but also called for commitment and action on the part of their audience.”³ Such a music-as-weapon metaphor is still popular among Palestinian musicians today.

Stern censorship of musical activities before the early 1990s is among the most frequently told stories by Palestinian musicians about musical life under occupation. Composers and performers were arrested for creating music that expressed sentiments of rebellion and resistance. Nationalistic content as expressed in lyrics and musical forms was largely banned in the media. As Morgan, Adileh, and Badley observe, musicians were considered just as dangerous to the occupation forces as the rebels and militiamen.⁴ One good example is the Palestinian singer-songwriter Mustafa al-Kurd. Born in Jerusalem in 1945, Mustafa al-Kurd began composing songs of resistance in the late 1960s and early 1970s, soon after the war in 1967. His songs are characterized by a stylistic traditional vocal timbre creatively blended with Western rock

and pop styles. In addition to political songs, Mustafa al-Kurd also composed music for many films. Hugely popular in the 1970s among Palestinian and other Arab audiences, he was arrested several times in 1976. This led to a subsequent nine-year-long exile, during which he performed extensively in Europe and around the world. Mustafa al-Kurd founded the Jerusalem Center for Arabic Music after his return to Palestine in 1987 and remains the director of the organization.⁵

This brief overview of Palestinian music of struggle and resistance suggests that most of the influential political songs and music have been created with substantial musical borrowings from non-indigenous traditions. These elements range from the European-styled orchestral arrangements of the mid-20th century Egyptian songs, to the rock and pop styles of the 1970s and 1980s, to the avant-garde styles of the 1990s. Such incessant search and struggle for stylistic innovation—a point I will return to shortly—in the Palestinian case, I argue, should not be understood in simple terms that resemble processes of musical modernization and Westernization in other countries throughout the 20th century. Nasser Al-Tae, quoting the contemporary Palestinian music group Sabreen, notes that such stylistic newness is often conceived as a new means for struggle, in which musical features such as imbalanced phrases, unsteady rhythms, and inconstant beats are iconic of the experience of occupation among Palestinians.⁶ Traditional Palestinian/Arab musical idiosyncrasies, in other words, are seldom the only catalysts for substantiating nationalistic sentiments in musical compositions and performances. Musical devices and techniques that are transnational and global in nature are often consciously deployed by Palestinian composers and musicians as artistic weapons for a non-violent means of struggle and resistance.

The music-as-weapon metaphor is seldom accepted without question. To many Palestinian musicians, a more important role of music-making under conflict and occupation lies in the hope that it serves as an outlet for emotional relief and provides an alternative path for children and young adults as a means to direct attention away from everyday life under occupation. The second quotation that began this article (by Yassir, the founder of Karama, a non-governmental organization for children and teenagers in Deheishe Refugee Camp near Bethlehem) speaks for the heart of many music educators in Palestine: at the



Al-Kamandjâti in Ramallah (photo by author, June 2008)

very least, music offers an option for children to consider before they grow up and turn themselves into bombs. For this reason, music has been given a positive and indispensable role in education. A significant number of nongovernmental organizations have been established since the 1980s with the intent to bring music to Palestinian children in the occupied territories; Yassir's Karama is but one example.

Among the most high profile of these organizations is one called al-Kamandjâti (The Violinist), which was founded in 2002 by the Palestinian violinist Ramzi Aburedwan. Born in Bethlehem in 1979 and raised in the al-Amari refugee camp outside Ramallah, Ramzi was one of the stone-throwing boys during the intifada in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He began to learn the viola in the late 1990s in France and founded al-Kamandjâti in 2002, with a mission to provide basic music education to children and young adults in refugee camps and the Occupied Territories. Ramzi Aburedwan and his al-Kamandjâti became more known to the outside world after being featured in the documentary, *It's not a Gun* (2006, directed by Hélène Cotinier and Pierre-Nicolas Durand).⁷

Headquartered in Ramallah, al-Kamandjâti also operates schools in the Gaza Strip and southern Lebanon. According to Céline Dagher, the executive director of the al-Kamandjâti in Ramallah, the school currently has about 300 children; most pay a very small amount of tuition fees and al-Kamandjâti relies heavily on outside donations. The school

in Ramallah is located in a renovated Ottoman-style house—with generous support from Swedish International Development—and has five basic classrooms and a small outdoor area for public concerts. Check-points and other hindrances of the occupation have made it extremely difficult for children to attend. For this reason, al-Kamandjâti sends teachers to refugee camps to teach music to children; the organization currently has about fifteen music instructors.

Apart from music education, al-Kamandjâti sponsors and produces concerts for broader audiences in Palestine. Similar to many other organizations for the performing arts in Palestine, concerts produced by al-Kamandjâti include musical performances that go beyond traditional Arab/Palestinian genres and European classical traditions. A public concert I attended in June 2008, called “Soufi Music in the Old City,” co-organized by al-Kamandjâti, featured Hindustani (North Indian) classical music performed by two Indian musicians, Sagheer Khan on the plucked lute *sitar* and Rashmi Bhat on the paired drum *tabla*. Held at the Center for Jerusalem Studies, in the Old City of Jerusalem, the concert is a part of the Music Days Festival held in commemoration of “60 years of exile.” The whole event includes nearly 100 performances held in a two-week period in mid-June 2008, involving 22 performing groups bringing together musical genres from traditional Arab/Palestinian ensembles and European classical music to jazz, Indian music, and avant-garde compositions. The transnational and global scope of such a music education project that is firmly associated with a nationalistic mission reminds us once again that musical sounds are extremely malleable in transcending boundaries they originally signified, a fact that resists any straightforward understanding of the role of music in carrying nationalistic sentiments as simply coherent, iconic, and reflective.

For many music educators in Palestine, music is certainly not a weapon—“it’s not a gun,” as the title of the documentary nicely declares. At the very least, music assumes a humble role as a relatively safe haven for children to appreciate the world as full of possibilities and see that life offers plenty of alternative paths. As a nonverbal communication medium operating in a different symbolic system from that of language, music can also optimistically be expected to perform roles that are impossible through verbal and linguistic processes, in a space in which nationalism can be understood less in terms of hatred and vengeance and more of social justice and reconciliation.



An Indian traditional music concert organized by al-Kamandjâti in Old City, Jerusalem (photo by author, June 2008)

The National Conservatory of Music is another—probably the largest and most professional—institution for music education in Palestine. Established initially in the late 1980s as a group of about forty music students at the YMCA in Jerusalem, this conservatory became affiliated with Birzeit University in 1993 and currently has branches in Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem, providing professional music education to students ages six to eighteen. The conservatory was renamed “Edward Said National Conservatory of Music” in 2004 in honor of the late Edward Said for his contributions in the Palestinian peace process. With about forty teaching staff, the conservatory currently offers music programs in both traditional Arab music and European classical music to more than 500 students.

Located on the third level of a four-story building near the downtown, the Ramallah branch of the Conservatory was the first among the three branches, currently providing music lessons to more than 200 students in Ramallah and the neighboring city of El Bireh. According to Ibrahim Atari, the Director of the Conservatory in Ramallah, who is himself a very fine performer on the plucked zither (*qânûn*), the Con-

servatory distinguishes itself from other music organizations because it provides high-quality and systematic music education to children and teenagers who are pursuing a professional career in music, either on a full-time or part-time basis. As repeatedly emphasized to me by several instructors, the conservatory has an excellent program in European classical music, with outstanding students performing in their good-quality orchestras and ensembles, a fact that is sometimes considered problematic by instructors of traditional Arab music—or “Oriental music,” as it is usually called—because of the insufficient interest in traditional music among the younger generation. Nevertheless, the strong emphasis on European classical music training at the conservatory further highlights the cosmopolitan ambition of the Palestinian national music project.

One of the instructors of traditional Arab musical instruments at the National Conservatory of Music is Samer Totah, a talented performer on the Middle Eastern plucked lute, the *‘ūd* (alternatively spelled as *oud*). Born in Ramallah in 1972, Samer learned to play the *‘ūd* from the renowned Palestinian performer Khalid Jubran (b.1961)—the founder of the Arab/Oriental music program at the conservatory—and has been teaching at the Conservatory since 1993. Samer also directs a *takht* ensemble, a traditional urban instrumental ensemble. Instruments in such a group normally consist of the plucked lute (*‘ūd*), the plucked trapezoidal zither (*qānūn*), the reed flute (*nāy*), the violin, and the tambourine (*riqq*). Samer’s ensemble is formed mainly by current students and alumni of the conservatory and performs widely in Ramallah. Its repertoire includes the most famous traditional tunes composed by Egyptian and Lebanese composers, as well as new compositions by Samer and other Palestinian composers.

Apart from teaching and performing, Samer is also a well-known instrument maker. He spends most of his weekday mornings and weekends working in his studio—which consists of two small-sized rooms; one for instrument making, one for practicing music—located on the first level of his house in southern Ramallah, in which he stays with his mother. Traces of life under occupation are omnipresent. Despite the geographical proximity, Samer told me that he has not been to Jerusalem for more than five years, even if he is invited to musical performances or lectures. On the wall of his studio there is a photograph of a thirteen-year-old girl, named Kristine, who, Samer passionately explained, was killed by Israeli soldiers in a car with her hearing-impaired father who had failed to follow the Israeli soldiers’



Samer Totah teaching Arab music to Palestinian students at the Edward Said Conservatory of Music in Ramallah (photo by author, June 2008)

instruction to stop. Another black-and-white photo came from Samer's wallet and was shown to me; this time the victim was a very young Palestinian boy, whom Samer called "brother," recently killed in an attack by the Israeli soldiers.

Tragic stories like these abound in conversations with Palestinians. In a downtown Ramallah restaurant, where we dined with a few of his colleagues from the conservatory, Samer emphatically reminded me that every single Palestinian in the restaurant, despite the smile they put on their faces, has at least a few friends or relatives who died because of the conflict and occupation. When asked if there is any way out, he resolutely responded, "no hope" and "no trust."

For Palestinian musicians like Samer, making music and musical instruments often do not come as easily as we tend to assume. Samer revealed to me that the instrument-making equipment in his workshop—most are very basic and yet to be renewed—came from funding of about 2,000 NIS (approximately \$580 in U.S. dollars) several years ago. Learning to make musical instruments is also anything but easy. Other than a brief trip to Turkey many years ago to learn *'ūd* mak-

ing from the master, Faruk Turunz, his instrument-making skills are largely self-taught. After years of hard work, his 'ūd making is increasingly well known. He is now receiving orders from as far away as Canada. Finally, the lack of quality recording studios in Ramallah is also a constant problem.

Samer liked to talk about the musical retreat he joined in Boston in 2002, during which he learned the 'ūd from the internationally renowned Palestinian composer and 'ūd virtuoso Simon Shaheen (b. 1955) and the UCLA ethnomusicologist Ali Jihad Racy, one of the world's leading authorities in Arab music, both living in the United States. Samer revealed that he would like to be as successful as Simon Shaheen, who, for Samer and many Palestinians, is not only an outstanding musician but also a national hero, speaking for Palestine and the Arab world through music overseas. The success and fame of Simon Shaheen, Samer maintained, is not only a personal one, but also a national one for his people and his country.

The music of the Arab 'ūd, as presented by Simon Shaheen, has an impact on Samer's music. On his first and only album, *Ghofran* (2005), he composed all of the ten instrumental pieces with the constant use of traditional Arab musical elements in creative ways. For example, traditional instrumental forms such as *sama'i*—a ritornello form laid out by alternating *khanas* and *taslims* (refrain) mostly composed in a rhythmic cycle that consists of ten beats—are widely used with new melodic materials composed in one of the many traditional melodic modes. Instrumental music has a special meaning to Samer, as he wrote in the liner notes of his first album *Ghofran*: “instrumental music is a system of signs parallel to other systems of sound, much like language itself. In the musical language presented on CD [*Ghofran*], I tried to create an ambience of intertextuality, a layering of memory and self as it was shaped by the experiences of life.” Samer emphasized numerous times to me that emotion and memory are the two most important elements in his compositions and performances. He enthusiastically explained the emotional contents of each instrumental piece on the album, with constant reference to stories, people, and histories that he intentionally wrote into the musical sound.

The composition that he spent the most time explaining is “Shuhadaa' bila ma'wa,” meaning “Martyrs without shelter” (Track 7 of the album). Samer composed this piece to commemorate the Palestinians killed by Israeli soldiers during the curfew in 2003, when tanks of the Israeli army were everywhere on the streets in Ramallah and soldiers



Samer Totah at his instrument workshop in Ramallah
(photo by author, June 2008)

broke into Palestinian houses and shot people. At least 25 Palestinians were killed in the streets and their bodies were laid on the ground without any attention for three continuous days during the curfew, which was eventually lifted briefly for two hours on the third day for people to get food. People in Ramallah spent the two hours digging a big hole and buried the dead Palestinians who, as Samer aptly described, are “martyrs without shelter.”

Music is often considered to play a role beyond being simply an emotional refuge from the suffering of everyday life under occupation. Many individuals believe in the innate power of art to bring about peace and resolve conflicts through community building. Myriad individuals and groups have brought Palestinian and Israeli musicians to collaboratively perform music, an activity that is symbolic of peaceful coexistence for rival groups. Arguably the most high profile of such attempts of musical collaboration is the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra.

Named after a collection of poems by Goethe, *West-östlicher Diwan*, it was co-founded in 1999 by the celebrated Argentine-born Israeli pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim (b. 1942) and the late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said (1935–2003). The Orchestra was formed by young and talented musicians from both Israel and Palestine, with the explicit aim to provide a musical space where political conflicts and ideological ruptures can be bridged through music-making. It has performed widely in the world, including in Israel and Palestine. To further their aim in utilizing music education to promote peace, dialogue, and reconciliation, the Barenboim-Said Foundation was founded in 2004 to organize music education programs and manage the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra.

Notwithstanding the acclaim often received from its Western audience and critics, doubts about the propriety and value of such a musical collaboration have constantly been raised among Palestinian musicians. Samer Totah and a few other musicians in Ramallah, for example, unequivocally revealed to me that it is impossible for them to play music with the Israelis while tanks of the Israeli army are routinely destroying Palestinian houses and killing Palestinians. Quoting from an Egyptian politician, George, another musician in Ramallah, explained that there is a difference between strong peace and weak peace. Without a strong and real peace, George maintained, any musical collaboration is unrealistic. Similar skepticism about the musical collaboration is heard elsewhere, convincingly insisting that, “it is dishonest to gesture towards reconciliation in art before political reconciliation is achieved.”⁸ It comes without too much surprise that most Palestinian musicians I spoke with are highly critical of the current president, Mahmoud Abbas (b. 1935), and the Palestinian National Authority whose excessively compromising negotiations with Israel exemplifies what they called “weak peace.”

For many Palestinian musicians, such musical collaboration signifies little more than a reminder of one failed “peace process” after another, which left the Palestinians with no options but hopelessness and despair. Some musicians resort to alternative and innovative means of music-making, trying to cast a renewed understanding of the role of music in nationalist struggle. One significant force of such musical innovation over the last twenty years or so is a Jerusalem-based contemporary musical group called Sabreen, which has lately become better known to the outside world after its recent bid to enter the Eurovision Song Contest. Founded in the early 1980s, Sabreen presents

to the world a contemporary façade of Palestinian music through creative fusion of musical styles from traditional Arab genres, Palestinian folk, and modern Western traditions like jazz, pop, and rock-and-roll. Themes of Palestinian identity and political struggle, however, remain at the center of their musical compositions and performances. Musicologist Al-Tae considers some of Sabreen's intentionally "distorted" and "eclectic" styles and expressions as a deliberate musical response to Palestinians' harsh economic and political realities.⁹ Nevertheless, Sabreen's artistic innovation and professionalism were considered by many as emblematic of the Palestinian musical future, endorsing the group as the most qualified candidate when Palestinian participation and a musical showcase on the international stage is in demand. As one of the percussionists of the group, Ra'ed Sa'id, explained to me, Sabreen was chosen because it does not play in pure Egyptian (Arab) style; its musical expression is "clear" to the European audience.¹⁰

For many Palestinians, however, the path to the Eurovision Song Contest has not been a smooth one. Created by the European Broadcasting Union in 1956 as an attempt for reconciliation through music after the Second World War, the annual Eurovision Song Contest, whose membership is country-based, has previously included participants outside Europe, including Turkey, Algeria, and notably, Israel. Local committees in member countries—usually the member television station of European Broadcasting Union (EBU)—pick a song by an individual singer or musical group to represent their countries to compete in the annual live-broadcast competition, in which votes will be cast to determine the winners. The Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (PBC) launched a campaign in 2007 to join the Contest, with an explicit aim to present Palestine to the international world through music. The application for the 2008 Contest by the PBC and Sabreen was turned down for the reason that the PBC was not an active member of the EBU. To many Palestinians, the problem is simply a political one: Palestine is not yet an internationally recognized country.

The PBC has recently announced that Palestine will continue to seek entrance into the Eurovision Song Contest of 2009. A national song contest is expected to be held later in 2008 to identify the candidate for Palestine. According to Fadia Daibes, the spokeswoman of the campaign, their purpose is to help "change the perception of Palestinian identity and to present our rich culture...[and] to put Palestine back on the map by showing that we as a nation have many stories to tell."¹¹ Other campaign lobbyists have emphasized that Palestine, apart from

its rich musical heritage, also produces rap, hip-hop, and other contemporary musical genres.

Such desire to make Palestine musically known to the international world, where Israel is notably present, is seldom received without skepticism in Palestine. Omar Barghouti (b. 1964), a founding member of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, is among the most outspoken opponents. As quoted in an interview with the Abu-Dhabi-based newspaper *The National*, Barghouti described the effort to enter the Eurovision Song Contest as “ill conceived and counterproductive.” He contends that it is based on the faulty premise that some sort of symmetry between Israel and Palestine in the international arena should be achieved, which will create a false comparison between the oppressor and the oppressed.¹²

Most Palestinian musicians and audiences, however, remain positive about seeing music as a powerful tool for seeking the overdue international recognition for Palestine. The young percussionist, Ra’ed Sa’id, for example, maintains that successful Palestinian participation in the Eurovision Song Contest will make Palestine better known to the world. Born to a musical family (his father was also a percussionist, teaching music in Hebron, a Palestinian city in the south), Ra’ed now performs frequently in a variety of traditional and modern musical settings. He is also involved in other musical activities, including routine teaching duties and performing for movie soundtracks. He is one of the 250,000 Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, sharing the Palestinian region with its 200,000 Israeli settlers. When asked about the chances of the Palestinian bid for the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest, he responded with a helpless expression. He maintained that the Europeans and the rest of the world simply will not recognize Palestine as an independent country. It is a customary pessimistic sentiment echoing the deep-rooted hopelessness, despair, and distrust of many Palestinian musicians.

In a discussion of the seemingly conflicting concepts of world music and nationalism, ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman notes in an insightful analysis that the Eurovision Song Contest presents an aesthetic dilemma for its contestants, who often find themselves obliged to perform nationalistic expressions in a Contest that promotes and fosters European unity. Bohlman asks, “how can a popular song evoke

the spirit of the nation and yet suppress all traces of nationalism?"¹³ To a certain extent, such dilemma is also one that is constantly faced by Palestinian musicians at home and abroad. Compositions and performances of Palestinian musicians like Simon Shaheen, Samer Totah, Sabreen, and many others, are deeply ingrained in discourses of nationalistic struggle against the Israeli occupation. Yet they have somehow become an integral part of the global circulation of world music. Much of their music, written in explicit response and reference to the suffering in the conflict and occupation, was already a part of the world-music industry in which the well-off audience of the Euro-American world constantly consumes the exotic musical "others," whose otherness, in this case, is further highlighted by a prescribed victimhood that is inseparable from the sentiments of sympathy and guilt of their consumers.

In this article, I have discussed how music has been used and practiced in mediating experiences of conflict and occupation in Palestine. Music is utilized as a weapon to invoke rebellious and even belligerent sentiments, as a safe haven or emotional refuge for people to escape from despair and suffering, as an alternative path for the next generation, and finally, as a preferred medium for dialogue and reconciliation.

For many Palestinians, music-making is also a translation process, through which the deeply-felt and often incomprehensible emotions of distrust and hopelessness can be heard, felt, and understood in the outside world. Such desire to be better known and understood is ubiquitous in my conversations with Palestinian musicians, who constantly asked if my visit to Palestine changed my previous impressions of this nation and its people (assumed to be initially distorted and false). The aspiration to better connect to the outside world—through contemporary musical styles, European musical languages, and modernist techniques and expressions—is always associated with an omnipresent nationalistic cause. Traditional musical elements always necessitate forms and devices that are transnational and global in nature in order to substantiate the nationalistic sentiments as deeply embodied in their compositions and performances, for an audience whose knowledge of its nation and people is always conceived as unfavorable and negative. In this sense, what most Palestinian musicians want to achieve through their incessant search for newer and more successful means of musical expression is not so much to change the status quo of the current conflict (which they have already seen as hopeless) or to effect reconcilia-

tion (which they have already declared as useless) as to negotiate with the outside world an image of Palestine that is not dissimilar from any other regular nation and people in the world. ●

Notes

1. See Massad 2003: 21–38.
2. Nasser Al-Tae'e provides a detailed analysis of the music and lyrics of this song (Al-Tae'e 2002: 41–61).
3. See Oliver and Steinberg 2002: 635–40.
4. Morgan, Adileh, and Badley 2006: 580–88.
5. See more about Mustafa al-Kurd in Morgan, Adileh, and Badley 2006: 580–88; and "Journey in the Palestinian Political Song" (2007).
6. Al-Tae'e 2002: 51.
7. Ramzi Aburedwan is also a performer in the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra (see below). He was forbidden by Israel to leave the West Bank to perform with the Orchestra at a Baroque music festival sponsored by the Barenboim-Said Foundation and the Goethe Institute in Gaza in December 2007. See more about him and the documentary in Murphy (2007) and Eglash and Katz (2007).
8. Higgins 2005.
9. Al-Tae'e 2002: 51.
10. See a more thorough discussion of Sabreen's musical styles and lyrics in Al-Tae'e 2002: 51–52.
11. Daibes, quoted in Constantine 2008.
12. It should be noted that Teapacks, the Israeli musical group that represented Israel in the Eurovision Song Contest of 2007, whose controversial contest song "Push the Button" is allegedly making political reference to Iran and nuclear war, also publicly called for supporting Palestinian participation in the Contest. See Constantine 2008.
13. Bohlman 2002: 88.

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