Revivals and New Arrivals

Al-Aqsa Intifada: Popular Culture and a Return to Conflict

On the morning of September 28, 2000, Likud Party leader Ariel Sharon, closely escorted by a thousand Israeli security officers with another three thousand Israeli police strategically stationed in surrounding neighborhoods, entered Jerusalem’s Temple Mount and Haram al-Sharif, home to two of Islam’s most revered mosques, al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock. According to Sharon, he visited the holy compound “with a message of peace.” Sharon and his entourage toured the Temple Mount for less than two hours and left. As he began to leave, however, crowds of angry Palestinians attempted to rush security barricades and hurl stones down onto the security forces from atop the compound. The Israeli police promptly responded with batons, tear gas, and rubber bullets, resulting in over thirty Israeli police and twenty demonstrators injured. The fighting soon spilled out onto the streets of East Jerusalem, where cars were overturned, businesses vandalized, and tires set ablaze. Immediately afterward similar demonstrations broke out in Gaza, Ramallah, and Nablus, where Israeli police were called on to quell stone- and firebomb-throwing demonstrators with armored vehicles, Apache helicopters, and riot police. Fighting continued well into the next day with Israeli police firing live ammunition into the crowds, killing seven Palestinians.

In Gaza City, two days after Sharon entered the holy sites, several hundred protestors marched from a local university to the gates of the heavily guarded Israeli settlement of Netzarim. Amidst the demonstra-
tors. Israeli police reportedly heard gunfire and immediately retaliated by firing live ammunition down onto the protestors from the armored stone walls guarding the settlement. Caught in the crossfire were Jamal al-Durra and his twelve-year-old son, Mohammad al-Durra. While hiding behind a concrete water duct, Jamal was shot eight times trying to shield his son from the gunfire. Mohammad was shot four times and soon died in his unconscious father’s arms. An ambulance rushed into the fray to save them. But as the medic approached he, too, was shot and killed by Israeli snipers. A French television crew captured the scene in its entirety and broadcast the horrific images of al-Durra’s death throughout the Arab world, the United States, and Europe.

Within a week of Sharon’s visit and the death of Mohammad al-Durra, Israel and the Occupied Territories had fallen into open conflict with a reported sixty Palestinians dead and over one thousand injured. Heavily armed Israeli forces were deployed throughout Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank to combat demonstrators (both Palestinian and Palestinian Israeli). In Gaza similar clashes left nearly twenty dead and more than two hundred wounded. Jewish worshippers at the Wailing Wall, the site of Sharon’s visit seven days prior, were evacuated numerous times to avoid stoning while army helicopters patrolled Jerusalem’s riot-streicken streets. Points of entry into Israel were closed, and borders were strictly enforced, keeping close to one hundred fifty thousand Palestinian laborers from reaching their jobs inside Israel. A study conducted by the Israeli newspaper Ma’ariv found that “in the first few days of the intifada, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) fired about 700,000 bullets and other projectiles in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] and about 300,000 in Gaza. All told, about one million bullets and projectiles were used.”

Demonstrations soon began to take place outside of Israel and the territories as well. Throughout the Arab world thousands of Palestinian refugees and sympathizers protested Ariel Sharon’s provocation and the disproportionate reactions of the Israeli army. In Lebanon over one thousand marched through ‘Ayn al-Hilwa, Lebanon’s largest refugee camp, carrying pictures of al-Aqsa and Mohammad al-Durra. Several protestors were seen tearing up posters of Yasser Arafat and burning effigies of Sharon. The characteristic chants of the first intifada, “By spirit, by blood, I will sacrifice myself for Palestine!”, returned en masse. Similar protests took place in Jordan, where on October 24, twenty-five thousand staged a “march of return” to the Allenby Bridge connecting Jordan with the West
Bank. Likewise, an estimated two hundred thousand Palestinian refugees observed a general strike and day of mourning for the victims of Israeli state terror. Al-Durra was quickly deemed a martyr for Jerusalem, and various politico-religious organizations vowed vengeance against those responsible for his murder.

These two events, Ariel Sharon visiting the Temple Mount and the televised killing of Mohammad al-Durra, were the flashpoints for the end of the Oslo peace process and the beginning of a new popular uprising against the Israeli occupation. Pictures of al-Durra huddled behind his father became emblematic of the new uprising (see figures 5.1 and 5.2). Popularly called the al-Aqsa intifada, this newest round of riots and demonstrations quickly escalated such that within a matter of weeks, more casualties, wounded, and arrests were recorded than in the entire first intifada combined. However, despite these initial flashpoints, the structural antecedents of this new uprising had been in place since the mid-1990s, with the failures of Oslo to produce any improvements in the lives of Palestinians still living under a harsh occupation and the unrivaled expansion of government support for the settler movement.

With the beginning of the second al-Aqsa intifada in spring 2000, and its subsequent escalation in 2002, Palestinian society collapsed under the
weight of extreme occupation. Checkpoints, curfews, raids, and targeted assassinations only provoked more open calls for violence in the territories. Support for the intifada, as represented in the many different sociopolitical organizations (Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, PFLP), reemerged, with each competing for popular support through terrorist operations against Israeli targets. Posters depicting young martyrs wallpapered the streets of Ramallah, Gaza, and Nablus (see figure 5.1). Children memorized their names and openly pledged to follow in their footsteps. With each passing month, Palestinians both “inside” and “outside” the territories sought to revive the intifada culture of the 1980s. Street-side kiosks and shops in downtown Ramallah and Amman, for example, were filled with flags, kūfiyāt, posters, music, and videos in support of the new intifada.4 Key chains, headbands, plaques, and other Palestinian-inspired products were commonly seen on the streets and in houses of the exiled. However, under the banners of the second al-Aqṣa intifada, “resistance” was framed quite differently. Gone were the peaceful mass demonstrations, withholding of taxes, and public displays of nonviolent civil disobedience, and in their place came open calls for violence and terrorist attacks on Israeli targets, both civilian and military.
At first the music of the new intifada was dominated by transnational Arab pop stars singing ballads commemorating Palestinian suffering. For example, two years earlier in the fall of 1998, following a disturbing escalation of violence surrounding increased settlement activity in Jerusalem and several retaliatory suicide operations, twenty-three pop stars from across the Arab world joined forces to record “Al-Hilm al-ʿArabi” (The Arab dream), the first of several mega collaborations calling for Arab unity and the end to Palestinian suffering. Directed by Ahmad al-Arian and composed by Hilmi Bakr, this star production was the first attempt to revive the pan-Arabist poetics of the 1960s through the lens of Palestinian suffering. Throughout “Al-Hilm al-ʿArabi” strategic musical and textual signs advocated for pan-Arab solidarity by alternating between solo verses, sung in native dialects, and ensemble choruses, where local accents blended into a unison whole. Indices of place and locality, articulated predominantly through language (accent) and vocal tessitura, fluidly shifted from the national identity of the soloist to the international pan-Arab identity of the ensemble. Excerpts from the seventeen-minute pop ballad attempted to reinforce the solidarity of the pan-Arab nation in fighting for Palestinian self-determination.

From anywhere on earth we speak with an opposing tongue
[Arabic],
With the loudest voice we have, we say unity.
Our children everywhere are the light of our nation.
Right, love, good is our message throughout time.

A song cancels national borders,
And its homeland is the heart.
As long as we live we will sing,
As long as we are able we will love.

Our dream has always been,
The unity of all nations.
All disagreements will disappear.
It is enough that you are a human being.

Although juxtaposed with poignant (and graphic) footage documenting fifty years of the Arab-Israeli conflict, stylistically “Al-Hilm al-ʿArabi” continues with the theme of unity through very abstract depictions of place. Thick synthesized orchestrations, heavy bass, and simple pop
rhythms signify a much larger domain of transnational Arab pop rather than more common musical elements of nationalist intifada song. What is more, although “Al-Hilm al-ʿArabi” was explicitly recorded as a testament to the tragedies of Palestinian suffering, nowhere in it are Palestinians ever mentioned. Nor are there any actual Palestinians included in the recording. Only one reference is made, in the lines “The world is reorganized by children with rocks in their hands.” As a whole the lyrics focus on the redemption of the (unnamed) Palestinian people through love, perseverance, unity, and hope for a better tomorrow. It is the “dream of peace” that brings these artists (and their respective countries) together in solidarity to end the violence. As a unique moment of transition, “Al-Hilm al-ʿArabi” articulates the poetics of collaboration, peace, and reconciliation, idiomatic of the post-Oslo honeymoon, within a performative frame of escalating violence and instability.

Two years later, following the violent outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000, a similar type of production hit the airwaves, featuring a new collection of pop artists singing for Palestine. “Al-Quds Hatarjaʿ Lina” (Jerusalem will return to us) went into production less than two weeks after the televised martyrdom of Mohammad al-Durra and the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada. This pop ballad featured the combined talents of thirty-six Arab pop stars, actors, and other celebrities representing virtually every Arab country (except Palestine). Once again the contrasting themes of Arab unity and diversity were performed as each singer took turns alternating between solo verses and ensemble choruses. In contrast to “Al-Hilm al-ʿArabi,” however, “Al-Quds Hatarjaʿ Lina” was far more graphic in its lyrical detail. Lyrics spoke of violence and terror, and the accompanying video depicted far more explicit images of Palestinian suffering, beatings, and funeral processions marching through the streets. Presenting a message of mourning, the large collection of artists stood together on a stage set covered in barbed wire surrounding a large picture of the Dome of the Rock mosque.

He was carrying his crayons, he was going to school.
Dreaming of his horse, his toys, his plane.
And when the treachery occurred, it killed his innocence.
His pure blood was spilled across his notebook.

A fearful father reached with his arms,
Protecting the life of his child.
And when the child’s body twitched,  
He became in God’s hands.  

We all say our land.  
Our land, Our blood, Our nation.  
And even if millions die,  
Jerusalem will return to us.

In the widely played video the assembled artists and actors stand defiantly, dressed in black, singing with power and conviction about the young Mohammad al-Durra, killed while walking home from school carrying his “crayons and his notebook.” While several of the pop stars openly weep during the production, or angrily gesticulate during their solo lines, a small collection of young children is positioned at the center of the stage. The children, wearing white blouses and shirts, stand out against the pervasive black clothing of the singers and the background of the soundstage. Coupled with the white head coverings of two of the featured singers, this articulation of white and black clearly signifies both the innocence of the children as well as the purity of Islam, against the black darkness of occupation. The message of collective outrage, lost innocence, and suffering is further articulated with graphic imagery of violence set amidst the holy sites of Jerusalem.

Not unlike the pan-Arab songs emanating from Egypt in the late 1950s, these two productions of “Al-Hilm al-ʿArabi” and “Al-Quds Hatarjaʿ Lina” drew from the same stock repertory of signs of Arab unity and a shared cultural-religious identity. The juxtaposition of diversity and unity played out in the transcendence of cultural difference around a common Arab (and Islamic) cause. More importantly both songs grew to become widely marketable hits. The videos for these songs were broadcast on satellite television throughout the Arab world, and performers were quick to capitalize on the success via overly marketed tours throughout the region.

The marketing successes of “Al-Quds Hatarjaʿ Lina” in October 2000 inspired Arab superstars such as Kathim al-Saheer, ʿAmru Diab, Najwa Karam, Nagham, Zakra, and many others to record pop songs dedicated to the memory of the twelve-year-old martyr Mohammad al-Durra, the atrocities of the occupation, or the siege on Jerusalem’s holy sites. Egyptian superstar ʿAmru Diab’s “Al-Quds di Ardina” (Jerusalem is our land) eulogizes the memory of Mohammad al-Durra as a pan-Arab martyr for liberation, “son to all Arabs.”6 Nagham (Egypt) and Zakra’s (Tunisia) pop
ballad “Nahlam Ayh?” (We dream of what?) depicts Palestinian history through historical imagery of British colonialism and Jewish settlement, asking, “what are we left to dream?” Throughout the video, historical footage of Zionist expansion and the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes is shown in the background while the two pop stars sing of great loss and sadness, tears in their eyes.

While at first these pop songs, CDs, cassettes, T-shirts, bumper stickers, and other paraphernalia were popular throughout the region, it was clear that this new wave of political song did not have the same sociocultural impact as the nationalist song of the 1980s. Missing from this culture of “pop intifadiana” was a sense of authenticity that these artists were suffering and struggling alongside those they were singing about. Clearly, this was music for Palestine, but not necessarily music of Palestine. The transnational Arab pop stars of the early 2000s were largely unable to capture the hearts of Palestinians simply because they could not reconcile their obvious fame and wealth with the daily suffering of those under occupation. Recording their songs in Cairo or Beirut wearing a token kufiya around their neck, these pop stars had little actual connection with the people most affected by the violence.

As the demonstrations continued to escalate, international pop songs soon faded as empty commodities. Ballads like “Nahlam Ayh?,” “Al-Hilm al-ʿArabi,” and “Al-Quds di Ardina,” with their soft idealist rhetoric, catchy melodies, and empty lyrics, did not adequately capture the severity of violence taking place on the streets of Jenin, Gaza, and Nablus. In neither form nor content were they especially political, nor did they attempt to capture a particularly Palestinian poetics of resistance. Slogans of peace, understanding, and an end to the violence held little meaning for the many Palestinian communities forced to survive the occupation on a daily basis. Yet if the lyrics did not resonate with Palestinian audiences, they did elicit and reflect a widespread sympathy for Palestinian issues throughout the Arab world at large. Moreover the speed with which this new collection of songs made it into the Arab marketplace, and their constant performance on satellite television, reflected the immediacy of newly developed communication networks and technology. These new technologies, served to bring the realities of the occupation into Arabic-speaking homes throughout the world, creating a new sense of Arab solidarity. With the rise of Arab satellite television, al-Jazeera in particular, these collective notions of Arab unity became possible in dramatic ways.
On a different level, the fact that these songs were all written, produced, and performed by pop stars living and working in cosmopolitan centers like Cairo, Beirut, or Paris meant that they were sung from a social, political, and aesthetic formation where peace and understanding were possible, thinkable, or tangible ideas. As testaments to peace and understanding, these songs found considerably more traction among Arab consumers within transnational music markets. For these audiences, such pop songs were a means of connecting with a humanitarian crisis played out on satellite television. Hence songs of unity, peace, and love resonated more easily among Arab communities not forced to deal with the humiliation of checkpoints, curfews, searches, and constant threats of violence.

Ultimately, however, these pop songs failed to have a lasting impact on Palestinian communities simply because audiences were unable to reconcile popular support for Palestinian issues with the overtly cosmopolitan lifestyles and aesthetics of the artists themselves. Medhat Salah’s participation in the collaboration “Al-Quds Hatarja‘ Lina” caught many by surprise, to say the least. For several years before he had been an outspoken advocate for normalization with Israel. Salah also publicly criticized Palestinian musicians like Marcel Khalife for taking a hard-line stance on Palestinian rights. To suddenly lend his voice to a song memorializing Palestinian suffering struck many as hypocritical. Similarly Kathim al-Saher’s widely played duet with Sarah Brightman, “The War Is Over” (2004), served only to anger a community of Palestinians very much embroiled in a daily struggle with perceived “Western” occupation and imperialism. Although the two artists intended this song as an homage to John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s 1971 release, as an intervention in the ongoing Iraq war, for Palestinians the war was far from over. Given that Kathim al-Saher is one of Iraq’s most famous pop stars, and that “The War Is Over” was played ad nauseam on the American-funded radio station Radio Sawa after its release, the song took on a very different meaning. For many Palestinians “The War Is Over” became a testament to the continued American occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. By extension it became easy to conflate the Israeli and American occupations within a larger complex of Western imperialism in the greater Arab world. This complex of American/Israeli occupation stretched beyond politics into the realms of popular culture, movies, products, fashion, and so on. ‘Amru Diab and Najwa Karam, for example, could not be taken seriously
in their empathetic songs for Palestinians while their faces were plastered on billboards all over the Arab world advertising Pepsi-Cola. Their music, image, videos, and pop lifestyle celebrated and in many ways imitated Western aesthetics deemed antithetical to the struggle against the perceived Israeli and American imperialism in the Arab world.

**REVIVALS: BALADNA, AL-ʿASHIQIN, ABU ARAB, AND SAMIH SHAQIR**

In response to these transnational Arab recordings, many Palestinians sought out the protest songs and singers of the first intifada. By the fall of 2003 the revival of intifada music and culture had strengthened to the extent that many protest singers of the 1980s had been lured back into the public soundscape. Samih Shaqir found supportive audiences for his repertory of shaʿbī nationalist folk songs at music festivals in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. Kamal Khalil was literally pulled off a construction site to sing at a political demonstration in 2004. Covered in dirt, sweat, and cement from a day laying concrete blocks, Khalil borrowed an ʿūd from an audience member and performed a set of his famous intifada tunes from the 1980s. A sense of nostalgia for the uprising of 1987 drove the crowds into a frenzy, leading to several commitments for new concerts at weddings, political rallies, and demonstrations. Likewise Mustapha al-Kurd was brought to Amman to perform at a symposium for Palestinian arts in the summer of 2004. His twenty-year-old political ballads resurfaced in Jordan amidst rejuvenated nationalist sentiment and nostalgia for the intifada.

Led by its founding vocalist Hussein Munther (Abu Ali), al-ʿAshiqin began performing once again their famous catalogue of resistance songs in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. Over the years, however, many of the group’s original members had left to form their own groups, been arrested, or simply disappeared. Teaming up with ʿūd player Adnan Odeh, the two envisioned a triumphant return to the forefront of Palestinian resistance song and hurriedly put together a collection of young musicians for a small regional tour. These musicians, too young to have ever heard al-ʿAshiqin perform live, were each given a copy of the twenty-year-old cassettes two weeks prior to the first performance. Originally the plan was for al-ʿAshiqin to perform five concerts in Jordan and the United Arab Emirates before returning to Damascus. After the first two concerts in Amman, however, the tour was abruptly cancelled when the production
company posted a net loss of over JD$28,000 (approximately US$40,320). Difficulties publicizing the events, constant police harassment, and an overestimation of local interest resulted in the remaining performances being called off and the members of the group sent home without promised wages.

The initial failures of al-ʿAshiqin to make a significant impact in their “reunion tour” resulted largely from a poor marketing strategy and an overemphasis on the commercial, money-making potential of the group. Unlike Kamal Khalil, who rarely sought remuneration for his performances and preferred smaller venues, al-ʿAshiqin was determined to capitalize on the new waves of Palestinian nationalism by booking large ten-thousand-seat arenas for their shows. In order to streamline profits, the two leaders of the group decided to leave in place the Syrian-based ensemble for future performances but, in addition, form a second ensemble made up of local Palestinian musicians in Jordan. The plan was to create a local al-ʿAshiqin chapter in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon and then bring in group leaders Abu Ali, Ali Munther, and Adnan Odeh for each set of concerts, thus minimizing travel expenditures and the hassles of crossing borders with Palestinian papers.

Members of the group were clearly promised wages from the outset of auditions, yet in the first nine months of production few received payment. Frustrated, many decided to leave, forcing Odeh to continually re-stock the ensemble with less experienced artists willing to perform for free. Many of these younger musicians were content to join the group just to get valuable performance experience and to be associated with the famed ensemble. The quality of the group suffered considerably as musicians came and went. Despite problems in production and rehearsals, performances for the group were well supported by the local Palestinian communities in Amman and Damascus. With little variation, a loyal contingent of activists and other young nationalists turned out to sing and dance the famous intifada songs. Several young dabke groups were brought in to perform alongside al-ʿAshiqin, and future concerts were planned with other famous Palestinian musicians including Samih Shaqir and Mais Shalash. Although there were always difficulties navigating the local bureaucracies prohibiting explicitly political events, al-ʿAshiqin nonetheless performed periodically in various outdoor venues, hotels, and social clubs between 2003 and 2010. At each of these events
it would seem that the same cohort of young activists would show, with little noticeable impact among the general Palestinian community.

NEW ARRIVALS: “THE VOICE OF FREEDOM,” MAIS SHALASH

The new intifada was also not without its own coterie of younger singers. ‘Abd al-Fatah ‘Auynat, Samih Zariqat, Ayman Ramadan, and Omar al-Sayyed recorded Islamic inspired anashīd in support of the intifada. Abu Ahmad, Khalil ‘Abid, Abu Ratib, and Abdullah Kiwan also released newly composed protest songs under the al-Fursan recording label in Amman and Damascus. Among several others Hani Shaker, Fadil Shaker, and Mustapha al-Ja‘fri appeared on many bootlegged intifada CDs sold on the streets of Ramallah. Foremost among these new singers, however, was Palestinian Jordanian Mais Shalash. Colloquially known as al-tifl (the child) or sawt al-ḥurrīya (the voice of freedom), Shalash began her career at the young age of eleven, singing newly composed anashīd in refugee camps, hospitals, and universities in Jordan (see figure 5.3). As she became better known among activists in Jordan, Shalash started performing across the region at various political events and music festivals. Between 2002 and 2006, she recorded two very popular albums, Sawt al-Hurriya (The voice of freedom) and Istura al-Jenin (The legend of Jenin), and collaborated on several others. Each album made an important contribution to the established repertory of resistance song and further propelled her reputation as a young singer for Palestinian self-determination.

Mais Shalash’s contribution to the field of Palestinian protest song lies in her blending of traditionally distinct repertories of music. Although anashīd and other Islamic-inspired musics have had a profound, yet often neglected, impact on the nationalist movement, Sawt al-Hurriya marked the arrival of a new style of protest song conceptualized as a hybridization of shaʿbi rhythms, Islamic poetry, and contemporary sound drama. The combination of shaʿbi folk song and religious poetry transgressed performative and political boundaries in new ways, combining into a unique new form of protest song illustrative of contemporary poetics, political debates, and ideology. Especially among disgruntled communities seeking a new direction in the entrenched nationalist leadership, Mais Shalash gave voice to an alternative national identity formation aligned with Islamist doctrine. She offered a performative space within which audiences could imagine a new path to self-determination beyond the stale...
politics of the PLO, advocating a return to local grassroots activism based in core religious values, simultaneously nationalist and Islamist.

Due to local laws governing Islamist activities in Jordan, Mais Shalash performed primarily at informal community meetings, for labor syndicates, on university campuses, and at other cultural events beyond the gaze of government censors. In contrast to al-ʿAshiqin, Mais preferred to perform before smaller, more intimate audiences. Nested between political speeches, religious sermons, and reports from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Mais would take the stage armed with a binder of songs directly linked to the immediacy of the occupation. As first-hand reports of the Jenin invasion emerged, for example, she would incorporate those testimonials into her lyrics, emphasizing the voices and experiences of those currently under siege. Among her audiences this gave her music a profound sense of immediacy and authenticity to the struggle, locality in experience, and loyalty to cultural-religious jurisprudence. According to Saud Shalash, Mais’s father and principal composer, her music has an aesthetic quality unlike that of any other political singer. People are more affected and inspired by her youth and innocence. “You always feel something more deeply when it comes from a child,” Saud explained to me.
“The fact that her voice is so beautiful, and that she sings with such power, makes her even more popular among our people. Plus, the fact that this occupation has had its greatest impact on children makes Mais’s voice even more illustrative of the nation” (personal communication 2002). In her publicity posters and CD liner notes Mais is strategically marketed as, “the child,” drawing many accusations of pandering and exploitation from several of her contemporaries.

Given that local Palestinian and Jordanian media representations of the intifada focused primarily on human suffering, often imagined through the lenses of children and dominated by images of Mohammad al-Durra, Mais’s stature as a young child was an essential element to her music and public image. Her public persona effectively articulated with a discourse of humanitarian suffering and martyrdom central to the nationalist movement. Yet to fully understand her impact within the field of Palestinian music it is equally important to emphasize the ways her persona creatively played on established discourses of gender and the nation. Onstage she would strategically perform the core religious principles espoused in her music. Wearing a beautifully ornamented thawb (Islamic gown) and hijāb (headscarf), standing motionless onstage, the adolescent Mais put forth the engendered image of the innocent, pure, vulnerable Palestinian nation in need of defense and collective sacrifice. In performance her body and child-like voice simultaneously called forth cultural imperatives of protection and steadfastness to core Islamic principles (modesty, justice, integrity). A similar phenomenon has been discussed regarding Qur’anic recitation practices in Egypt. Michael Frishkopf has suggested that vocal purity and a “child-like tessitura” are new Islamic emphases signifying an “unmediated directness (the straight path) and spiritual innocence.” Much like the propagandized posters of child martyrs papering the streets of Jerusalem, onstage, Mais Shalash emphatically articulates an imagining of resistance and sacrifice in “defense of the defenseless.” And while such a strategically motivated stage persona caused a considerable amount of controversy among competing musicians, it proved highly effective among mainstream Palestinian audiences. Amidst a field of cosmopolitan pop stars selling their bodies and products on billboards, and a dysfunctional national leadership bending to international will, for her audiences Mais Shalash presented an alternative Palestinian identity formation rooted in an uncompromising devotion to Islamic values and ideals. She offered a counterbalance to the dominant
“pop intifadiana” on satellite television, advocating a new direction in the performative politics of the nationalist movement more aligned with the growing tides of Islamism.

Interestingly Mais’s stature as a young Palestinian girl living in exile was only rarely a point of criticism among her contemporaries performing in the West Bank. Many were simply unaware that she was living in Jordan. Two Ramallah-based performers, Mohammad Yaqub and Nader Jalal, while impressed with the quality of her voice and the production of her recordings, were openly critical of the fact that Mais was not “struggling” under occupation. In essence her singing about “stone-throwing youth” from the safety of Amman, where no active “resistance” was taking place, became a marker of dislocation and therefore inauthenticity in her work. Reflecting further, Nader Jalal continued, “But I guess she is trying to do her part, then, singing about the intifada from Jordan, trying to increase support over there.” When approached about this issue Mais responded to me defiantly, “If I could go to Palestine I would.” “In fact, that’s the whole point of why I am singing . . . to one day return to Palestine.” “This is how I can join the struggle/movement (ḥarakāt)” (personal communication 2005).

Drawing from the established repertory of religious song, her performances typically began with a series of extemporized religious chants, sparsely accompanied by single frame drum (daff), reed flute (nai), and male chorus. This initial performance of religious poetry typically led to more rhythmic sets of folk, wedding, or dabke songs reinscribed with politico-religious lyrics. In text, metaphor, and musical device she freely and strategically navigated between secular nationalist and religious frames. Traditional dabke tunes were tempered so as to deaccentuate dancing and the body. Presentational poetic genres such as ʿātābā and shurūqī were given more strategic weight in her performances, indexing Palestinian indigenous music and practice without allowing such performances to be burdened with unbridled rhythmic dancing. During several of her performances it was clear that songs were often chosen based on the negotiation of religious and secular frames. Audience members attempting to form a raucous set of dabke lines would often find the next song fluidly shift into an unmetered extemporization of religious poetry attesting to the need for religious purity in meeting nationalist goals. The combination of her young adolescent voice and her appearance
as a *muḥajjaba* (one who wears a headscarf) was performatively used to signify an innocent purity, reinforced by the Islamist poetics of her performances. “Min Rahm al-Ard” (From the womb of the earth) captures many of the most important poetic components of Shalash’s repertory.

From the womb of the earth we will come out
To fight with stones.
Let the angry earth give birth to the free people.
Spawn weapons that challenge the occupying army.
No humiliation for my people, I vow!
And my people will never quit.

In this first stanza the eternal relationship between the land and the people is further signified with the imagery of the “angry earth” giving birth to the resistance, spawning weapons (stones) to “challenge the occupying army.” A common trope in the repertory of shaʿbī nationalist protest song, the earth has given birth to the Palestinian people to fight for the nation. Significantly the weapons of resistance (stones) and the people themselves are born of the same mother, products of the same womb, siblings to the nation, intrinsically linked in the symbiotic act of resistance (throwing). Further, by employing imagery of the “womb,” the nation is depicted as the engendered mother of the Palestinian people. Palestinians are hence born from the earth’s womb and in their sacrifice (death) return to their mother’s embrace. In the following verses Shalash sings about the methodology of resistance itself.

Run from one alley to another,
Teach them to throw stones.
From one refugee camp to another,
The lion cubs are coming out.
Carrying in his hand a stone and a slingshot,
In the right hand a banner and
With the left assist the people of the alleyways.
Throw stones, shoot, give them fire.

Come and draw them out.
The blood of the martyr is never in vain.
From one town to another a unity of free people,
From the water to the water raise the banner!
In these verses the ideational construct of the stone-throwing youth (\textit{aṭfāl al-hijāra}) is resurrected with the common reference to “the lion cubs” (\textit{ashba}). Youth trained for armed resistance during the first intifada were given this name by Fatah. Their role in popular media representations of the intifada was incredibly important, indexing a power differential between sides and sacralizing the resistance in the defense of the nation and its holy sites. With the left hand the youth offer assistance to the “people of the alleyways,” while the right hand carries the green banners of Islam, proclaiming the \textit{shahāda}, “There is no God, but God.” In a conglomeration of nationalist and Islamist poetics the “blood of the martyr” unites the free people in the lands between “the water to the water” (the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea). While blood is an extremely common trope in secular nationalist protest song, referencing the primordial linkages to history, the land, and the people, the repeated references to raising the banners of Islam between the waters of the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea fulfill an Islamist poetics’ reclamation of the holy land.

In another major hit, “Sadayna al-Shawari” (We blocked the streets), Shalash presents a history of the Palestinian experience of exile and further comments on the politics of \textit{al-‘awda} (the right of return). At a time when refugee rights were the subject of intense debate “Sadayna al-Shawari” resonated forcefully among Palestinian nationalists living in exile. In the fall of 2003, as Shalash was performing this song at various political events in Amman, the debate over whether Palestinians would or should be allowed to return to their ancestral lands was boiling. The Declaration of Principles outlined in the Oslo Accords was intentionally ambiguous on final status issues, and with the swelling of violence in the al-Aqsa intifada, hope for a just resolution to refugee issues was growing increasingly remote. Singing at a political demonstration against the Geneva Accords in 2003, Mais Shalash performed “Sadayna al-Shawari” for an enthusiastic crowd of intellectuals, students, and local authorities. Given the anxieties of potentially losing all claims of repatriation to pre-1948 Palestine, the themes and issues raised in this song were particularly meaningful (\textit{EVIA} 14-S7686).

\begin{quote}
We blocked the streets. We never forgot our life in the tents, No shelter, shivering in the cold. We slept in exile away from home.
\end{quote}
Reminding us of home, we left the tents young men.  
The eyes swear we were free and people witnessed.

We blocked the streets, and came out to throw our ration cards. 
We carried the guns and left, declaring, no, no to naturalization. 
If you gave us the world with its treasures and millions,
It is not worth a grain of the dust of Palestine.

We blocked the streets and declared children and adults,
The right of return and the right to decide the future.

This performance of “Sadayna al-Shawariʿ” was an excellent example of Islamist anashīd. The song began with Mais Shalash rendering the initial verses of poetry unaccompanied in an unmetered melismatic line. After each line of text a unison male chorus, singing in a deep chest voice, responded with a repetition of the cadential words (lazama). The timbre of the voice, ornamentation, and placement of the text were derived from Qur’anic recitation (tajwīd) and other religious songs and chants. To further index religious poetics, the voice was amplified using a pronounced reverb or “echo effect” commonly heard in Islamic sermons and commercial recordings of tajwīd. As an aesthetic choice the addition of reverb to a recording or performance is said to index a sense of the sacred, via its associations with the acoustical reverberations heard in the vast spaces of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina (Haramayn). Following this introductory unmetered rendering of the text, a single goblet drum (darbuka) outlined the rhythmic pattern ayūb. Situated on this rhythmic structure, the song was then repeated ʿalā wahda (on the beat) in unison by a soloist and male chorus. Despite the pounding rhythm, participants in this performance (and in every performance I witnessed) largely refrained from any outward bodily movement (dancing), preserving the religious character of the event.

After thunderous applause, it was clear that “Sadayna al-Shawariʿ” eloquently espoused a refugee position on the issue of al-ʿawda in support of the right of return. To block the streets speaks to the common tactic of burning tires and creating makeshift roadblocks, thus preventing Israeli patrols from gaining free access into the refugee camps. Extending the camp experience further, the song testifies to early life in the tents, the cold, and the loss of home, memorializing and commemorating the catastrophe of al-nakba. As the camps became more solidified in the city-
scape, young men threw away their UNRWA ration cards (indices of dependency on the international community), left the tents, and formed the Palestinian resistance. Empowered, carrying guns through the streets, the youth denounced naturalization and assimilation. For them, “the world and its treasures . . . were not worth a grain of the dust of Palestine.” This line comments on the various proposals of potential compensation offered in exchange for the right to return. As Shalash sang out the final line of the chorus, “The right of return and the right to decide the future,” the crowd erupted in ovations of support and agreement. For those attending this political rally against the Geneva Accords, “Sadayna al-Shawari’” epitomized the very heart of the issue. Who ultimately has the right to decide the future for the millions of Palestinian refugees and their descendants? For many of the participants at this rally with whom I spoke, the loss of al-ʿawda implied the renouncement of national identity. To give up one’s right of return is to forsake the nation. Regardless of how many Palestinian refugees would actually seek repatriation if given the opportunity, it was the right to freely decide for oneself that was at issue. Indeed for these Palestinians the right of return was all that was left of their Palestinian identity. Without it they were simply “Jordanians of Palestinian ancestry.” As one member of the audience said to me, “Even if I decide not to return, shouldn’t my son be able to make the same decision for himself when he is older? Is he any less Palestinian than me?”

The issue of al-ʿawda came up on several occasions in my interviews with Mais Shalash and her father, Saud. Interestingly during our conversations the then twelve-year-old singer would often describe with amazing detail her family’s ancestral estate in Jaffa and proudly boast of her many cousins still living in the West Bank. Music was her way of reaching out to them and sharing in their struggles. Distanced from a home and homeland that she has been raised to covet, and yet has never experienced, Mais Shalash assumed that she would one day marry and raise a family in Palestine. Over the course of our initial interviews I would often ask her, “What do you plan to do if and when you are ever able to return to Jaffa?” Without variation she would answer unequivocally, “I’ll sing, of course!”