My Voice Is My Weapon

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Negotiating Power and Resistance in Palestinian Protest Song

“Dawla”

Over Baladna’s history, several of its songs managed to make their way into the popular vernacular of Palestinian resistance music. In some cases, either in lyric or melodic device, songs became so popular that they took on a life of their own. “Laya wa Laya” was an example of a powerful resistance song using the common repertory of Palestinian folklore. “ʿAla Jidaʿ Zaytuna” revived a famous poem by Tawfiq al-Ziyad, giving it new life in popular melody. In other cases, songs touched the community through their engagement with salient sociopolitical issues of the time. “Aghniyat Hubb li-Shahid al-Karak” inscribed itself into the national imaginary through its appeal for bridging Palestinian-Jordanian political difference. It served as a message of reconciliation, cooperation, and collective struggle against colonialism and foreign domination. Of all of the songs in the Baladna catalogue, however, there is one that reached a level of fame and notoriety unlike any other. In melody, text, and sociopolitical content, this song captured the political moment in such a way that it has now taken on new meaning among activists as an anthem of social protest.

Over the years, “Dawla” (State/country) has come to define Baladna as a group and Kamal Khalil as a performer. It is the climax of any performance and routinely elicits multiple ovations and calls for repetition. The text is based on a poem by Tawfiq al-Ziyad, and the melody itself was composed by former Baladna member Ziyad Mazid. In terms of its re-
lationship with the established repertory of Palestinian resistance song, “Dawla” doesn’t seem to fit the mold. Its melody and rhythms are not based on Palestinian folklore. Its text is not particularly well known in comparison to al-Ziyad’s other work, nor does it engage the established discourse of nationalist imagery and metaphor. Likewise its political message is equally difficult to define; it is explicitly neither nationalist, Islamist, nor socialist, nor does it specify exactly who is its primary target. Moreover the popularity of “Dawla” has grown despite the fact that it was not included on either of Baladna’s two studio recordings. Remarkably, over the course of twenty years it has remained famous primarily through popular memory and live performance. By all accounts what sets this song apart from the standard repertory of Palestinian protest song is that it takes aim at a very different target, the Arab state itself.

By definition, the word dawla has several important meanings. First and foremost, it means the state and usually represents the political entity of the state apart from its cultural or national content. Additionally, dawla is a political title often given to prime ministers, presidents, or high-ranking government officials (such as dawla ra’is al-hakūma [His Excellency the Prime Minister]). But as James Scott has written in his work on the subscripts of power discourses, such forms of ceremonial respect and title are easy prey for satirists, dissenters, and resistant voices. In this song, the word dawla carries with it a very different accusative timbre and meaning. In Palestinian dialect the word dawl (from hadawl) is a demonstrative plural pronoun (as in the phrase “these books are heavy” [hadawl kutb thaqīl]). As Kamal repeats over and over the words “Dawla! Dawla! Dawla!” he is in effect saying two very different things. The most obvious meaning, “State! State! State!” (or “His Excellency”), is parlayed by a demonstrative subtext pointing toward state, empire, power, title, and privilege. In subterfuge Khalil points an accusative finger at the state by singing, “These officials! These states! These empires!” He salutes country and state tongue in cheek, impugning the dark side of power, corruption, hypocrisy, and deception. With each utterance, dawla both signifies the state and becomes a powerful epithet hurled at the state, its duplicity, and its privilege.

In performance “Dawla” is sung in call-and-response style by the performer and audience. Following each line the crowd repeatedly answers the accusations with the word dawla! The interaction between singer and audience creates an environment similar to a protest march or demon-
stration and further elicits a commanding participatory sound environment. Kamal begins by singing the refrain solo:

State State State . . . (State!)
State that sold my land . . . (State!)
State that ripped to shreds my dignity . . . (State!)
State State State . . . Oh My Eyes!

The second half of the refrain is a descending melodic sequence sung on the vocable “Ohh.” Throughout this section Kamal strums a block chordal (that is, homophonic) accompaniment on the beat, in quarter notes. Although this is an uncharacteristic method of ʿūd playing in Palestinian song, Kamal routinely uses this technique to fill out the sound, to substitute for a missing percussionist, or to reinforce rhythmic structure. The strict 2/4 meter is carried through the verse with the crowds routinely clapping on the beat (see example 7.1).

State that sold my land . . . (State!)
State that ripped to shreds my dignity . . . (State!)
State that is selling the Arab oil so that they can drink Coca-Cola
They rode in the saddle . . . (State!)
They put their hands in the saddlebag . . . (State!)
They said, “Shut Up! Do not even breathe for the sake of national
security.”

And God provided for them . . . (State!)
And God entitles them . . . (State!)
The tighter the rope is stretched to imprison us, the easier it will be
for that rope to fall on the heads of the State.

For Kamal there is sweet redemption in singing “Dawla” before a
screaming, enthusiastic crowd. With each line he lashes out, denounces,
and attacks Arab governments who have done little to better the lives
of their citizens and who silence voices of popular dissent. He calls out
the hypocrisy of Arab rulers who sell “Arab oil so they can drink Coca
Cola.” “Dawla” gives public voice to a political problem often kept private,
talked of only in hushed tones: the corruption of the state as it steals from
the people. In the lines “They rode in the saddle, and put their hands in
the saddle bag,” “Dawla” refers to a well-known Palestinian proverb that
warns of “the man you allow to ride with you and yet still puts his hands
in the saddle bag to rob you.”

The penultimate stanza of the song further traces the crimes of a cor-
rupt Arab leadership that has sold out their people’s interests for Western
merchandise, stolen from the people’s resources, and silenced their voices
for the sake of national security. The turn of meaning on the word dawla
is extended further in the lines, “They said, ‘Shut Up! Don’t even breathe
for the sake of national security.’” Here the lyrics could equally be trans-
lated as “Don’t even breathe for the sake of His Majesty’s security.” The
constant rub of meaning between the state as structure and the state as
individual propels the satiric irony at the root of this song.

As one who has spent his life singing songs for Palestinian self-
determination, and suffered mightily for it, Kamal Khalil captures a sense
of authenticity among his audience whenever he sings “Dawla.” For the
sake of national security, he has lived his life in fear of the state and its
apparatuses of social control. He has been tortured, beaten, and harassed
for much of his adult life, and in singing “Dawla” he exacts his revenge.
On that stage, at that moment, he is in control, he is in power, able to re-
lease or exorcise his demons in a public display of outrage and shame for
what his government has done to him and his people.
The final stanza provides the harshest and most volatile criticism of the state. In it a warning is given to those in power: although God has granted these rulers their power, they must remember that their ultimate responsibility is to the people, for “the tighter the rope is stretched to imprison us [in a kind of tug of war], the easier it will be for that rope to fall on the heads of the State.” Statements such as these carry with them extreme consequences in the Arab world. Popular dissent and public criticism of government officials, let alone royal families, carry with them steep consequences. Singing such a powerful song in a public performance, demonstration, or other political event sends a very clear message, especially in Jordan, where the monarchy has constructed its legitimacy to lead based on its holy lineage to the Prophet and its self-proclaimed status as protector of the great holy sites in Palestine. To cite holy entitlement here carries a strong association with the Hashemite crown. What is more, when Kamal sings of the rope “falling on the heads” (raʾīs al-dawla) of the state, he explicitly refers to both King Hussein and Yasser Arafat, both of whom adopted the formal title al-raʾīs al-dawla (head of state). This ambiguity is perhaps his saving grace. Remaining unclear, Kamal can get away with singing this song because its primary target is intentionally unspecified.

The popularity of this song among the people can be explained in several ways. First, the energetic call-and-response structure of “Dawla” creates a level of participatory interaction between singer and audience highly conducive to social protest. Second, the lyrics speak to an issue that is rarely broached publicly even in the discourse of Palestinian resistance. As demonstrated in the propagandist work of al-Markaziya, al-ʿAshiqin, and hundreds of other groups, blind nationalist tropes often lose their meaning through continued repetition in song, poetry, and literature. “Dawla” shies away from convention and calls out a new enemy, the state itself. The underlying question posed is: What good is liberation or self-determination when Palestinians have suffered under Arab as well as Israeli domination? In this example, the state in question is unspecified, giving the song a more flexible interpretation, expanding its political reach and insulating its performance from government scrutiny. Third, the catchy melody, pounding rhythms, and acrobatic singing style of “Dawla” give it a power and resonance unlike other political songs. In performance “Dawla” lends itself to protests and demonstrations, by enabling constant and sustained participatory interaction between artists and audience.
Among activists and shabāb (youth) on the streets, Baladna’s second major recording was eagerly anticipated. With Ibrahim Nasrallah the group had composed over seventy different songs and struggled with the decision of what to include on their next cassette. Baladna’s first studio recording had an initial printing of two thousand copies, all of which were sold in a matter of weeks. The group fully understood that once the cassette was released they had little control over its reproduction and dissemination. Kamal had hoped that the cassette would circulate freely and was more content with his music being heard than with profiting from its sale and reproduction. Given that his music circulated outside the formal marketplace, relying on bootlegs and kiosks for distribution, profits from these recordings would have been virtually impossible to collect. Though the songs on the first cassette were never heard via mainstream public media (radio, television), cheap copies of the cassette spread quickly. Passing taxis and buses could be heard blaring the cassette at its captive passengers, and street-side kiosks would play the cassette to attract customers. For Kamal, the cassette had achieved its goal of getting his message out to the people.

The second studio cassette promised to be equally popular. Through sales of the initial printing and private donations Kamal was able to raise enough funds to cover recording and production costs for the second cassette. The tape was made in the fall of 1988, at a time when the ongoing intifada had nearly reached its first anniversary. The first cassette had generated enough interest for Baladna to receive several substantial sponsorships. These local collections allowed Kamal and the rest of the group to quit their day jobs as laborers and to focus completely on composing, rehearsing, and recording their music. Within weeks word began to spread that the cassette was in preproduction, provoking the interest of the secret police.

Once final preparations for the cassette were made, Kamal was called in once again to appear before the director of the mukhabarāt for “questioning.” Having experienced such questioning before, Kamal refused to appear and instead invited the director over to his house for coffee. The following day, while Kamal was rehearsing with the rest of the group, a red sedan pulled up to the gate in front of his home. Four plainclothes agents then took Kamal into custody on charges of illegal political activity.
The agents placed Kamal in handcuffs and confiscated the group’s musical instruments and sound equipment. The laws against participation in non-sanctioned political organizations had been in effect since the mid-1950s. Since that time any political activity, except for the activities of the local chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood or Islamic Action Front (IAF), was illegal. Crimes of participation in any other political organization were used as a blanket charge against virtually any known activist, intellectual, journalist, or subversive daring enough to challenge government policies.

I was prepared for what was coming. I knew that eventually they would come and pick me up. When you go into this [type of work] you know that there will be problems, you know that this could happen. It will not surprise you when it does happen, and this makes it a little easier. . . .

I did one hundred days exactly in a solitary cell in the mukhabarat building and one year in general prison. It was very hard. . . .

After one hundred days in solitary confinement by myself, they called me in to the interrogation room, and told me I had two choices. Either I go to jail for 4 years or go home now on one condition. All they needed was just one thing from me. [They told me,] “You don’t have to come here to tell us about your friends what they say and what they do, just give us a phone call and you are free.” And they wanted from me just one call, not every week, they just wanted one call. I chose the four years.

They told me from the first day, it wasn’t because I was singing, they were accusing me of participating in illegal political parties that were against the government. Parties that wanted to demolish the regime . . . but during the investigation they never mentioned that they wanted me to stop singing, instead they only wanted to control me. . . .

As an example for all the people, they wanted me to work for them. They told me to “just go out and go to your activities, but give us a call . . . tell us what we want.”

They didn’t want the information from me. They only wanted me to call them one time so they could record the call, and tell people that I was working with them. They did this with many other people. They chose me because they knew who I was, and because everybody knew about me and my music. They didn’t get any
information about people from me, because they knew they could get all the information they wanted from their other sources. The only thing they wanted was to demolish my reputation, to destroy me. Then no one would come to hear me sing. But after the courts, and the prison in Swaqa, there were no questions after that. . . .

Here [in Jordan] the only way they can try and stop you is to corrupt you. They put you into a bad situation, and then use that information to control you. This is true everywhere. . . . They want to own you, and so they try to find out how they can get you to make mistakes, then they use that against you. It is the classic approach.

And this is what they tried to do with me when they arrested me. In the first intifada there were people in the streets after our concerts. If Baladna played a concert you were guaranteed to have hundreds, maybe thousands, of chanting people in the streets. Now how could they stop this? Even if they put me in jail they could not stop this. I told you we played in that place that had 1,800 seats, but when I sang there we had 3,000 people show up on a snowy day. When I was in jail and we sang in that same place we had 7,000 people come. So they couldn’t stop the people from hearing my songs even if I was in jail. My wife, my cousin, my brother were singing and they had 7,000 people there. So they cannot stop this by putting me in jail. And they cannot stop this even by killing me. So what can they do?

They have to kill me alive. If they take my reputation, they take my power away. This is your hero.

During the first one hundred days of Kamal’s imprisonment he was subjected to various forms of torture, including rigorous interrogation, sleep deprivation, beatings, starvation, and other means of both physical and psychological abuse. This was the most difficult time in Kamal’s life, and in remembering he often showed visible signs of stress, anger, sadness, and rage. In spite of our friendship, there were many things Kamal refused to talk about. For the sake of his own modesty he would rarely go into specifics about the methods and means of his torture. From testimonies recorded in interviews with other musicians active in protests at this time, it is known that it was common for political prisoners to be tortured for weeks after their initial detainment by a variety of implements.
Electricity, water, fire, mutilation, and blunt force trauma were commonly cited as tools of physical torture, while humiliation, fear, and sensory disorientation were the tools of psychological torture. Several musicians interviewed during this study related similar experiences of mistreatment in both Jordanian and Israeli prisons. For Kamal, however, the worst form of torture he encountered was the betrayal he felt knowing that his captors, his torturers, were not Israeli or American soldiers but instead were Arab Muslims like him.

After the one hundred days I was in the general mukhabarāt prison [Swaqa] for one year. There was a trial. I went to the courts, and they gave the lawyer a copy of the charges. He tried to read it, and the judge said, “there is no need; just give it to us.”

And after one month they came back and told me that I was sentenced to four years. I was ready for that, because when they took me from the house I told my wife, I will see you in four years. I knew from experience that four years was the usual sentence for this kind of thing.

After the first one hundred days, life in Swaqa began to slow down into normal routines. And with so much time spent in solitary confinement, it wasn’t long before Kamal began to feel the need to compose and sing again. He needed something in his life to make the time pass easier. Music had always been his mode of expression and a way to make meaning in his life. Especially while imprisoned he sought to compose songs reflecting his experiences. For a political prisoner like Kamal, however, it was extremely difficult not only to compose but also to get his compositions out to the people.

The political prisoners were aside from the others. We had special treatment because they wanted to spy on us everyday. They didn’t have to do this with the other criminals in the prison. They used to bother our visitors, my wife, our families. They used to search them. They didn’t search for drugs or anything else, but for a piece of paper or information. They didn’t want me to get any songs from outside, but at that time we had the right to read the newspapers. So my friend [Ibrahim Nasrallah] used to put his poetry in the newspaper. And it was very easy for me to get the lyrics. Whenever he would write anything, he used to work as a reporter, he would
put it in the newspaper. And the next day I would see it. And this is what we did with many songs. I wrote more than five songs in prison. One for Tawfiq al-Ziyad, one for Mahmoud Darwish, two for Ibrahim [Nasrallah], and one for another guy who used to be with us in prison. He used to write inside. So there were five songs . . .

Life in Swaqa brought Kamal to his physical and emotional limits. The abuse he suffered at the hands of the mukhabarāt was only one aspect of the prison experience. Living in Swaqa he constantly feared for the safety of his family, never knowing if the government might seek retribution against his children. Furthermore he began to doubt whether spending his life singing in support of Palestinian liberation was worth the consequences. Kamal worried that his efforts would never be enough and that he and his family would never be able to return to Taiba. Throughout his incarceration, however, there was one thought that provided solace.

The reward you get is the message. When you can get your message out to the people, when your message is reaching people you get a great reward. But if you want money or fame, this will make the time in jail very hard. To look for fame in jail is a very hard way to spend the time. I was looking only to get out my message, and I knew that even in prison my message was being heard; this was enough. And it made the time in jail go much easier. . . .

So, the song must be the target. And this is a big difference. If the song is your target, then you will do anything to get it to the people, but if you have targets through the song [fame, money, acclaim], it will not reach the target. In prison it didn't take me too long to find this out.

For Kamal, knowing that Palestinians (both in Jordan and beyond) were singing his melodies on the streets meant that his suffering in prison was not in vain. To write a song carrying a message of liberation was a powerful means for Kamal to situate himself in relation to the nation and the struggle. In song he knew that he mattered and that his work would take on a life of its own, regardless of whatever befell him.
Palestinian Folklore Day 1989

As a well-known musician Kamal found support among many of his fellow inmates. Even in prison these political prisoners tried to maintain many of their usual practices and relationships with the outside world. Political affiliations, village, family, and hamūla ties remained an important means for the prisoners to survive their incarceration. Palestinian food, poetry (shaʿr), stories (ḥakayāt), and songs (aghāniyāt) were shared and traded among the inmates as treasures. National holidays such as al-nakba, al-naksa, or Palestinian Folklore Day were commemorated inside the prison’s walls. At these times Kamal was often called on to sing songs to the other prisoners to lighten their spirits or pass the time. If done quietly and beyond earshot of the prison administration, such songs were tolerated, but if the music drew enough attention there were severe consequences. In July 1989 several prisoners decided to celebrate the annual Palestinian Folklore Day by assembling as many of the inmates as possible to sing songs and to dance the dabke. The singing and dancing caused alarm among the prison staff, and the warden was called in to dispel the crowds. As Kamal was in the center of the dabke line, leading the celebration, he was the first to be taken into the director’s office for questioning.

I was sitting in the office of the director [of the jail], it was July the first, Palestinian Folklore Day, we had arranged a party inside and we started singing folk songs, so they came and took me. And while I was waiting for the director to come in to question me, there was a small television sitting beside his desk. On the TV they were showing some promotional commercials for the upcoming Jerash Festival, they were showing past concerts from the last festivals, it was like an ad. . . . There were about two seconds that I appeared with my ʿūd in that ad.

And then the officer came in and said, “Who is he?”

So someone else told him, “This is the artist from the political group.”

And he was picking on me, he says, “So you are an artist?”

I said, “Yes.”

“Funny, we never see you on TV.”

At that moment I was on TV. And I said, “Oh, that’s me,” pointing at the TV in the director’s office.
He sent me back. I should have gone to the cell [solitary confinement] for at least two weeks, but he sent me back. It was like I spit in his face or something like that. He was picking on me, “oh so you’re an artist, how come we never see you on TV?” And it was just three seconds. But I think God was the director of that TV ad to show me at that exact time. I think if somebody was trying to arrange it, he couldn’t do it. To get it exactly on TV at that moment. . . . They threw me back into my cell without any further punishment, when I knew that I should have been put in solitary for singing those songs. It was incredible. I couldn’t stop thinking about the whole situation . . . laughing.

Meanwhile the remaining members of Baladna continued to perform throughout Kamal’s incarceration. At each performance the crowds would chant for Kamal to be released, and collections were made for his legal defense and future recordings. These events were predominantly sponsored by the local refugee camps and other cultural organizations for whom he had performed before. To this day Kamal is convinced that his time spent in prison did more to help the group than to hurt it. Former members of the ensemble noticed an upsurge in attendance at their performances after Kamal was arrested. “And the result was for them [the Jordanian authorities] the opposite. They tried to stop me from singing. They tried to stop my voice, but they only enlarged it. The people all knew that I was in prison, and they all wanted to help, so they came out to the concerts.”

Riots, Liberalization, and Parliamentary Elections

While Kamal was serving his time in Swaqa, a public debate was raging on the streets of Jordan regarding the king’s recent disengagement from the West Bank, the ongoing intifada, and mass economic and political liberalization policies. Following the outbreak of the intifada in December 1987, regional power dynamics shifted, requiring King Hussein to reevaluate his relationship with the Palestinian issue. Although Jordan had once ruled the West Bank, extending legal, administrative, and financial services to the territories, the intifada had proven that such leadership was no longer tenable. Coupled with intense domestic pressures to “Jordanize” the state, the king took a series of strategic measures to sever all links with the territories, resulting in formal disengagement. At the same
time structural adjustments and a debt-rescheduling program directed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) forced the king to remove several long-standing food and energy subsidies, creating unexpected financial hardships throughout the kingdom. Riots eventually broke out in the southern city of Ma’an, where demonstrators burned down government offices and a local bank. In response to the riots the king opted to take a new course of action. Rather than pursue the traditional model of state repression, curbing free speech, and otherwise limiting public freedoms, the king chose to placate the demonstrating masses through political liberalization and the expansion of civil liberties. It is worth noting that the statewide demonstrations denouncing the king’s structural adjustment projects were predominantly among the native Jordanian community, the king’s traditional power base. For the king to open up a political dialogue with these demonstrators rather than to encourage state repression is quite telling. Historically when Palestinian Jordanians took to the streets to protest state policy, they were met with harsh police brutality. When the banī al-bilād (sons of the nation) did likewise in 1989, the regime had a very different reaction.

In response to the upheaval the king began a widespread process of democratization, including new elections, expanded press freedoms, and the encouragement of active political participation. Analyses of the “1989 Bread Riots” often state that when “the people asked for bread the regime gave them democracy.” Marc Lynch has offered a different, and I believe, more convincing analysis. In taking to the streets in April 1989, Jordanians were making a profound political statement reflecting a national crisis not of economic restructuring but of identity. The restrictions on public freedoms over the previous years had served to virtually sever all ties of communication between the people and the state, creating “the absence of a national public sphere within which new identities could be secured.” Formal disengagement from the West Bank and the ongoing intifada brought a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty. Jordanians desperately needed a viable public sphere from which to negotiate such drastic changes in their national goals and interests. In fact a 1992 survey of popular opinion found that 78 percent of those questioned believed that the riots were a result of the absence of press freedoms, 81 percent cited the absence of a representative parliament, and 89 percent recognized an absence of dialogue between citizens and the government. Economic interests alone, it seems, could not have been solely responsible
for the 1989 riots. However, the subsequent opening of the public sphere to debate and dialogue did not bring about the kind of democracy the people had originally envisioned. Although the state made considerable advances toward liberalization, it retained a tight control over all branches of government and the press. The lasting effect of the riots was felt in its effect on how Jordanians began to conceptualize democracy as an important, if not essential, state interest.

RELEASE FROM PRISON AND A RETURN TO RUSEIFA

With the ongoing project of political liberalization taking place, including the establishment and active fostering of political debate through formal political parties and organizations, the Jordanian public sphere underwent considerable change. Participation in state politics was legalized and encouraged. Parliament was revived, and elections were scheduled for the fall of 1989. Democracy gripped the kingdom, and the cities were practically wallpapered with campaign posters, flyers, and pronouncements of various slogans and ideology. Formal measures of state repression were curbed, and many political prisoners being held for activities that were no longer illegal were given early release or commuted sentences. It made little sense for the king to continue holding political prisoners on crimes of political activities when, following the elections of 1989, such activities were being actively encouraged.

On February 17, 1990, one of Jordan’s daily newspapers announced such an amnesty in a news story on the front page. Buried among the twenty-seven names of those released (on page 18) was one Kamal Khalil Salah Ibrahim. No information was given about the prisoners, save for one prominent Ba’thist leader. Their crimes were described as “those whose work in politics was clear, or whose work was linked to criminal activity.” In fact only one of Jordan’s three daily newspapers, al-Dustūr (the Constitution), even bothered to run the story at all. Such a small insignificant decision by the royal court had an immeasurable effect on the life of at least one of those listed and his family forever.

For Kamal the news of his release was a welcome surprise. Although he had fully expected to serve out the remainder of his four-year sentence, to be told that he was given an early release by royal amnesty was “like a miracle.” Processing his final release papers, Kamal retrieved his original possessions: clothing, wallet, passport, and ḥuwīya (identity card). Weeks later, after inquiring about the status of his confiscated instruments, he
was told that they were available for him to collect from the mukhabarāt headquarters. Still recovering from the ordeal and understandably uneasy about returning to Swaqa, Kamal asked that his instruments be delivered to his house. Within two days a familiar-looking red sedan pulled up, driven by the same agent who had originally arrested Kamal nearly two years prior. For Kamal to see the same agent driving the same car to return his instruments proved a fitting end to his life as a political prisoner. The agent remembered Kamal and told him that his instruments had been held and displayed in the director’s office as a trophy of sorts. Visiting officials or other invited guests were shown the instruments as tokens of the director’s reach and authority. “These are the weapons of the artist Kamal Khalil,” he often boasted. When the agent was instructed to return the instruments to their original owner, he removed them from the office much to the dismay and frustration of the director himself.

Upon his release from Swaqa, Kamal reunited with his family, friends, community, and bandmates as a folk hero. Crowds gathered around his Ruseifa home to welcome him, and offers for performances rolled in for the now-complete Baladna to return to the stage. These first few performances drew crowds the likes of which the group had not yet seen. Venues were filled to capacity while the overflow stood outside trying to get in. Within weeks plans were made for a small tour through Europe and the United States later that fall. From September to December 1990 Baladna toured through Germany and the United States, performing in twenty different cities in eighty days.

People respected me much more when I got out of prison; they treated me very differently because they knew that I could not be bought, that I could not be corrupted. They treated me as a hero. When the election started, whoever wanted to bring people to listen to them to give them his message or program for the elections, he wanted me to sing at his party. Because if I came to his party he would get all of the people coming to see him. And if there was an ad for him, that Baladna is singing at his party, then the people knew that he was a good person or a clean person.

Baladna was in high demand to perform for various Palestinian Jordanian candidates, political parties, and professional organizations campaigning for the upcoming elections. Nightly performances were scheduled throughout the kingdom. Kamal’s reputation for steadfastness and
determination afforded a degree of credibility to whomever he publicly supported. For these reasons Kamal was quite particular about for whom and under what circumstances he would sing. Personally and privately he believed in the PFLP and its locally affiliated institutions. But throughout the election years he was careful not to become formally identified with any political party. He would insist that there be no banners or flags indicating party affiliation on the stage while he performed. For Kamal it was essential that his music stand independently of any one political platform, lest he be dismissed as a mere propagandist.

**Oslo, Wadi ‘Arba, and the Peace Process**

The news of an agreement between the PLO and Israel in September 1993 came as a great shock to King Hussein. At the time, Jordan was in preparations for its next round of elections, and both Jordanian and Palestinian Jordanian nationalists scrambled to assess the ramifications of such an agreement. For the king, however, the signing of the Declaration of Principles (DOP) removed the final roadblock preventing a peace treaty with Israel, and true to form, the following day Jordan and Israel signed a formal agenda outlining the principles and goals of a future peace treaty. On July 25, 1994, Jordan and Israel signed a declaration ending the formal state of war between the two countries on the White House lawn and on October 26, 1994, signed a formal peace treaty at Wadi ‘Arba.

The signing of the DOP and the Wadi ‘Arba treaties greatly affected Palestinian Jordanians. Given that neither agreement made mention of the refugee issue, many interpreted this as the end of any hope for return to their native homes and villages. Palestinian Jordanians were left to wonder what their final status in Jordan would be. Who would formally represent their interests? And what role could or should the refugees play in the newly democratizing Jordanian political sphere? The rift between Palestinian Jordanians and native Jordanians soon began to widen as Palestinian Jordanians demanded that their status be formally resolved by the state. In what capacities would Palestinian Jordanians be allowed access to state resources? Following the treaties, Adnan Abu Odeh, a longtime advisor to the king and representative of the royal court, was sent to meet with a group of refugee camp leaders to assess the situation. In their discussion of the general affairs and concerns of the refugee community, the camp leaders wanted to know specifically what their status would be.
under the new treaty, and in tandem with this issue the group wanted to
know “when and how the refugees would be compensated in terms of the
UN resolution concerning them.”

This shift in ideology from return to compensation is indicative of the
prevailing sentiment within the Palestinian Jordanian community at the
time. Removing the refugee issue from the negotiating table drastically
changed Jordan’s state interests and further refashioned its national iden-
tity. The majority of Palestinian Jordanians predicated their national iden-
tity on the idea that their presence in Jordan was temporary. As home to
the world’s largest population of displaced persons, Jordan, for its part,
had historically constructed its national identity on an active search for
a solution to the Palestinian issue. By signing a formal treaty with Israel
that made no mention of their status, Jordan substantially altered its state
position, finally concluding its long process of disengagement from rep-
resenting Palestinians in their cause for self-determination.

The time immediately following Oslo brought Baladna’s performing
career to an abrupt halt. The intifada had formally ended with the return
of Arafat and the PLO to Gaza in 1994. For a short while Palestinians both
in the Occupied Territories and in diaspora were caught up in the mo-
ment of the “historic handshake” between Arafat and Rabin. After nearly
seven long years of living the intifada, many Palestinian families were
looking forward to resuming their regular daily lives. Men and women
openly celebrated an end to the fighting both in the territories and dias-
pora and began planning what their new lives would be like under the na-
scent Palestinian Authority (PA) (see chapter 5). In Jordan especially, the
end of the intifada and the opening of the public sphere signaled a new
era of stability and reconciliation, but one in which Palestinian hopes for
an eventual repatriation were no longer a priority. Kamal recounts how
audiences once in solidarity with the intifada were suddenly concerned
more with potential compensation for their lost homes than with their
return to Palestine.

Imagine all of these people who were singing along with me about
the need to return and to go back to their nation . . . were now con-
sumed with what they might get from Israel. It was like I found
myself singing in another valley for another people . . . talking
about the ridiculous idea, for refugees and their right to go back.
But the people were all deceived by Oslo. And they deceived them
by telling them they would get money for this. And the people started talking about how much money that would be. Ten thousand, twenty thousand, one hundred thousand for every person, and the people just started talking about money and how much they would get for selling their right to go back to their homeland. You could see it in their eyes. It was all people cared about. We have a saying here in Palestine, “you don’t get honey from the wasp.” This is exactly what they were trying to do, get honey from a wasp.

With the end of the intifada and the cessation of protest activities, musicians like Kamal were forced back into the workforce of day laborers, cab drivers, and street hawkers. With the return of over two hundred thousand Palestinians from Kuwait following the first Gulf War, employment in the sprawling urban labscape of Zarqa and Amman was difficult if not impossible for unskilled workers. Kamal became desperate to find work. The lack of performance opportunities pushed him to return to construction labor. Unable to find lasting employment, however, Kamal sought opportunities elsewhere. Drawing from his previous experiences performing in the United States, he was convinced that he could better support his family by working abroad. Through extended family ties he was able to secure a “family reunification” visa and move to Raleigh, North Carolina, working as a carpenter and contractor in 1996.

*Homecomings and the al-Aqsa Intifada*

For Kamal, the time spent living in his new American exile (*al-manfā al-jadīd*) was one of loneliness and hardship. Although he was able to find work in North Carolina and subsequently support his family through remittances, Kamal desperately wanted to be closer to his family. He had spent too much time away from his children and missed watching them grow. Life was difficult in America, and after six years of struggling to keep working he finally decided it was time for him to return home to Ruseifa and be with his family. His attempts to secure a permanent residence in America had failed, and his work visa was soon to expire. Content to work as a laborer, Kamal had long given up on the idea of one day returning to the stage. Baladna’s time was finished, its songs long left to history, along with a popular movement seemingly transformed by a new generation of Palestinian youth. “Resistance” as he envisioned it had dra-
matically shifted in the years following Oslo, replaced by new forms of Palestinian nationalism in exile.

Upon his return to Jordan Kamal resumed working as a day laborer in Zarqa and struggled to put food on the table. When opportunities arose Kamal would often work fifteen hours a day hauling cement blocks and shoveling concrete. Despite his efforts the family barely survived. In the summer of 2002, while Kamal was working in downtown Amman, the building manager arrived on the job site accompanied by a strange man. Covered in a pungent mixture of dirt, cement, and sweat from the summer heat Kamal introduced himself to the stranger. The man turned to him in disbelief. “Are you really Kamal Khalil?”

“Yeah, I’m Kamal,” he answered inquisitively.

“I can’t believe it is really you!” the stranger said, astounded. “I can’t believe I am face to face with Kamal Khalil. I went to all of your concerts. I know all of your songs. My children now listen to your old cassettes. Where have you been all these years?”

Kamal’s smile broadened in both pride and embarrassment. It had been nearly nine years since his last concert. In this man’s eyes he was still the great intifada singer, the famous political prisoner, and leader of Baladna. Yet looking down at himself he felt slightly embarrassed by his current situation, menial job, and obvious poverty. “I never know what to say to these people. Do I feel proud of my past or ashamed of my present? But it is interesting to see the people, you are doing the same jobs, but you find that this guy knows you and respects you but he doesn’t know that you are a worker. And you find this everywhere you go. This means that you were doing right.”

Chance encounters such as this soon turned into performance opportunities for Kamal at small weddings in al-Wahdat, al-Husseini, and al-Baqa’ refugee camps. Word began to spread that Baladna was active again, and available for hire. Soliciting the talents of his older children, Kamal refashioned the group, performing its standard repertory of songs in small private gatherings. At first many of these performances were what might be termed “sympathy gigs” or “nostalgia gigs.” Fans of the original Baladna songs hired the group to play small weddings and other private parties simply because of their name alone. When the group would arrive at the venue to set up, the hosts would often ask each other, “Which one is Kamal?” Participants in the weddings were shocked, and perhaps a little embarrassed, to find out that the once-great Baladna was now avail-
able to perform for around JOD$100 (US$140) a night. The stares and whispering were not lost on Kamal, who openly admitted to his difficulties in finding work. He found himself accepting offers for concerts that he otherwise might have declined: fund-raisers, birthday parties, and other “money gigs.”

**EIFFORTS TO REVIVE BALADNA AND PROTEST SONG IN JORDAN**

With the growing tides of Palestinian nationalism flooding the streets of Amman and Zarqa, Kamal slowly began to imagine Baladna’s return to prominence in the Palestinian music scene. From 2002 to 2006 performances for the group slowly increased, and with each event Kamal was able to enhance the group’s visibility and supplement his meager income. Soon small family weddings had turned to street events and cultural festivals drawing larger audiences. Yet despite his efforts, Kamal was unable to bring Baladna to the level he had once hoped. For lack of new material Baladna has been unable to effectively sing for the new intifada and hence remains a “nostalgia group,” keeping alive a repertory of songs made famous twenty years earlier. Kamal cites a lack of new poetry as the primary reason for the group’s failures; he notes that the al-Aqsa intifada requires a new lexicon, a new vocabulary, and a new poetry to narrate the struggle. “Resistance” means something very different now, he insists. “My songs were great for their time, but this is no longer their time.” Despite his search for a suitable lyricist Kamal has been unable to find anyone capable of capturing the essence of the new intifada in prose. Without a new voice to collaborate with, Kamal now fears that the group will merely repeat itself, circulating in tired metaphors, clichés, and phrases from times past.

I am trying, I haven’t come back yet. But I am trying to stay alive. So I am trying to participate in anything, when I am asked I go sing. And I am singing my old songs from the 80s and some from the 90s. I haven’t done any new songs because I haven’t seen any new poems. I can’t sing for this intifada because we need a new language now. And what we need I haven’t found yet, and I am not a writer. And when I call Ibrahim [Nasrallah] he is busy writing stories now. Sometimes I see him, sometimes I will see his photograph somewhere in the newspaper or a magazine. But I haven’t found him. I have been pushing him to write new songs. Last time
I saw him was two months ago and we talked, and he said let’s meet, but I am very busy now bringing bread to the table. I don’t have the time to take off from work to go see him. I’m just trying to bring food right now.

I am still trying to find some new blood. Some young writers. They might have something. Whenever I hear about someone I go and see them and what they have, hoping that I will find something good to sing about. I know what I want to sing about, but I need the song to talk about the resistance in the same way [same quality] that I used to have in my old songs. Because I don’t want to make poor quality songs, and let the movement down. I also want to make sure that I don’t repeat myself. Because it is my responsibility to renew myself and my voice. Or the other approach is to just keep singing the same old songs so as to keep them alive for the new generation which wasn’t around the first time.

In an interview with the Jordanian daily newspaper Al-Rai, Kamal spoke very candidly about his efforts to revive Palestinian protest songs of the first intifada. In the interview Kamal calls for a renewal of political song in reaction to the Arab pop culture currently filling the radio airwaves. Labeling such music “songs of the satellites,” Kamal accused pop artists of anesthetizing the Palestinian people to their national cause. He believes that today there are few protest singers because there is little money for it, and because the rich and powerful have attempted to keep political songs off the airwaves. In spite of pressing social and political issues facing the Arab world, and the Palestinians in particular, Kamal believes there has yet to be a full revival of political songs because of a lack of public support and interest. Kamal states, “Despite all of this, political songs will remain strong even if they are covered with dust, because they have roots, and these roots are deep in our Arab heritage, and they have meaning and spirit in depicting reality and our daily life.”

Kamal Khalil’s commentary on the state of Palestinian protest song is quite telling, even if it doesn’t accurately reflect the political moment. Despite his many protestations to the contrary, the public mediascape was, at the time of this interview, inundated with what might be easily recognized as Palestinian protest songs, solidarity songs, or songs on Palestinian issues. However, the fact that Baladna, al-‘Ashiqin, Mustafa al-Kurd, and several other “revival” groups struggled to gain a foothold
during the second intifada reveals how the political mediascape had so dramatically changed between the two historical moments (see chapter 5). The grassroots mobilization of the first intifada, predicated on participatory dynamics, face-to-face interactions, and nonviolent civil disobedience, was supplanted by a “spectacle-based” movement involving presentational acts of violence and bombings sponsored by various quasi-political groups. The essence of the movement, of what “resistance” meant, had changed such that small-scale participatory musics no longer cohered with what was being broadcast daily on satellite television. For Palestinians both under occupation and in exile, there was little one could do to participate in the intifada beyond assuming a militancy of martyrdom and sacrifice outside the mainstream. Suheil Khoury, director of the Edward Said National Music Conservatory of Palestine and influential musician and activist, stated it thusly: “What’s going on today is not intifada, it’s just killing. There are no boycotts, demonstrations, or committees. People used to help each other out on a daily basis; they were active. Today there is none of that. It’s just groups running around [killing each other] trying to make a name for themselves.”

In terms of music production, it would seem that the spectacle-based “songs of the satellites,” based in presentational aesthetics, visuality, and a distinct separation between actors and audiences, were more aligned with what was taking place on the streets of Jenin, Nablus, and Ramallah. The music of the first intifada was specifically designed to mobilize people to action, to uplift spirits, and to elicit feelings of solidarity among disparate and desperate Palestinian communities. In Jordan Kamal’s music offered those in exile unique opportunities to feel as if they were somehow contributing to the intifada. This was no longer possible in the early 2000s. In contrast much of the second intifada was experienced via satellite television and the Internet, among communities under strict twenty-four-hour-a-day curfews in the territories, as well as those in diaspora, watching from afar. As Kamal Khalil attempted to revive his repertory of past hits, he experienced a profound disconnect in the aesthetics of the second intifada in that his was a music that did not effectively articulate with these changes in the national mediascape.
Postscript: Ibrahim Nasrallah

In publishing an interview in one of Jordan’s most widely read daily newspapers, Kamal had several goals: to get some much-needed publicity, to identify new poets with whom he could collaborate, and to bring political songs (of his generation) back into the public consciousness. But above all this interview was a desperate attempt to reach out to his former lyricist and friend, Ibrahim Nasrallah.

The experiences of the first intifada were never shared equally among the members of Baladna. When Kamal was taken into custody, several members of the group immediately quit, fearing for their own safety. Others, close friends and family members, remained committed to the group throughout Kamal’s incarceration. The pressures of writing in support of the intifada became a burden too great for many to carry. Ibrahim Nasrallah fared quite differently. His poetry had become well respected in Arab literary circles, and his journalistic work was equally lauded among the local press. What is more, since political poetry only occupied a small part of his literary output, he was able to avoid being labeled an activist. Although much of his writing dealt with political and nationalist themes (exile, dislocation, and dispossession), Nasrallah maintained a professional profile and non-political reputation for his short stories, novels, and poetry across various thematic lines.

During the first intifada Ibrahim Nasrallah was an active voice for Palestinian liberation. Much like Kamal, he remembers constant harassment from the local police in the form of surveillance, interviews, detention, and other state coercion.

I wrote political poetry for the intifada, but that was not all that I wrote. Politics is only part of my work, not the whole thing. I always had problems back then, in the first intifada. I was never put in prison, but everything I did was closely watched, and whenever I made a public appearance at a reading or something there was always something that had to be done for the police. They were very strict with us, telling us what we could and could not say. I was fired and rehired from so many newspapers. It was always a fight to get heard. I was young and this is what I was consumed with. Afterwards I moved on to write about other things.
In his writings Ibrahim became adept at recognizing and abiding by “the rules” governing what could and could not be said publicly. For many authors these “rules” became a literary field in and of themselves. An imaginative poet such as Ibrahim was pushed to create new phrases, turns of meaning, metaphor, or euphemisms capable of carrying the intended political meanings without offending state censors. Reflecting on the time, Nasrallah recalled with me that he was “consumed with the movement, young, and daring in his belief in the cause.” Once the movement faded from the public sphere, however, he began to write about different things. His work took a new direction, it matured, and changed to the point that today he looks back on his nationalist poetry with a sense of nostalgia—as the creative output of a “young idealist determined to change the world.”

In the years since his work with Baladna, Ibrahim Nasrallah has published thirteen different collections of poetry, three novels, and a large catalogue of columns and articles in the international press. Over the course of his career he has been awarded several international Arab literary prizes, including the Arar Award (1991), the Jordanian Writers’ Association Honorary Prize, the Tayseer Sboul Prize (1994), and the prestigious United Arab Emirates Sultan Oweiss Award (1997). His stature as a prominent figure in the Arab literary world today is unquestioned, and by the time the second intifada had begun in 2000 he had created for himself an astonishingly successful career as poet, journalist, novelist, and literary critic.

In 1995 the Lebanese filmmaker Arab Lufti completed a documentary based on Nasrallah’s semi-autobiographical novel *The Birds of Caution*. The movie chronicles Nasrallah’s early childhood in al-Wahdat, focusing on his family’s expulsion from the village of al-Bruij near Jerusalem. In one very poignant moment Nasrallah speaks of the dispossession refugees often felt living in al-Wahdat: “The distance between the refugee camp and Amman was short, one that a child could walk alone. The distance between the refugee camp residents and the Palestinian dream of returning to their land needs a lifetime.” As a poet and novelist Ibrahim has done much to bridge the distance.

Today he is celebrated as one of the most influential Palestinian writers of the late twentieth century (see figure 7.1). His many books and collections of poetry are widely regarded as among the greatest literary work originating from either Jordan or Palestine. By 2005 Ibrahim was serving as vice president of cultural affairs at the Khalid Shoman Foundation’s
Darat al-Funun (Home for the Arts). In this capacity Ibrahim coordinated and oversaw the foundation’s many art exhibitions, lectures, concerts, and other activities.

Upon meeting Ibrahim Nasrallah for the first time I was at once amazed by how much his life had differed from Kamal’s in the nearly twenty years since they had worked together. What a contrast it was sitting with Ibrahim in his luxurious office at Darat al-Funun talking about his experiences writing for Baladna in the 1980s. Fine works of art and tapestries adorned the office walls. Carved bookshelves filled with leather-bound collections of great Arab literature stretched upward into the reaches of the ten-foot-high ceiling. Classical music softly spilled into the room from the adjacent art gallery, where an exhibition for new progressive Arab painters was currently being held. Sipping his tea, Ibrahim settled into his office chair, completely at home in the refined surround-
ings. His well-manicured appearance, expensive clothing, and sophisticated demeanor made his successes in the Jordanian cultural sphere all the more apparent. As a literary figure he remains active, giving poetry readings and lectures throughout the Arab world and Europe, and he has been featured in several collections of Arab poetry. With all this much-deserved success it came as no surprise to find that Ibrahim had little desire to return to writing in support of the second intifada. His experiences writing in the uprising were part of a past he did not wish to relive.

In hearing about my research on the history of Palestinian protest song in Jordan, Ibrahim was quick to downplay his involvement in the movement and to point out that political writings constituted only a small portion of his creative work. It was apparent that he wanted to distance himself from Baladna, lest I represent him in my research as a purely political lyricist.

Later he went on to describe what he saw as the main differences between the uprising of the 1980s and the current al-Aqsa intifada.

Everything has changed. It has to. Back then the whole world was interested in what was going on in Palestine. They all wanted to help, even in America. People were interested and they were dedicated. We were working together for a great cause against incredible opposition everywhere we went as Palestinians. We could not live freely no matter where we were, and we tried through music and poetry to change things—to get people working together for the cause. Today there isn’t that same feeling. The people are not as interested as they once were. They can only think about what is going on in Palestine for five minutes before they switch the channel. Even here in Jordan things are much different. The mentality here has changed. There aren’t the same problems that we faced back then. And there isn’t the resistance movement here like there used to be.

Ibrahim and Kamal both recognized the political and aesthetic differences between the two intifadas, citing a lack of grassroots mobilization and public support in the second. Though they agreed on certain things, the two men differed markedly in their outlook on the current political situation. While Kamal struggled to revive and refashion a new repertory of protest songs for the next generation, Ibrahim had resigned himself to leaving politics in the past and pursuing other interests. He has moved on
to other literary fields and feels little need to return to a movement he feels is unsupported by the people. Moreover Nasrallah’s various speaking engagements throughout Europe and the Arab world provide a new forum for talking about Palestinian issues before an international audience. His fame as poet and novelist has created a new forum for political activism less enacted by the throwing of stones and more aligned with intellectual discourse. Throughout our conversations, sitting in these luxurious surroundings, it was difficult not to think of Kamal sitting underneath his olive tree talking about how difficult it was to feed his family. For Kamal performing was not only a means of spreading a message of Palestinian liberation, but also his best hope for economic survival.

Unfortunately relations between the two have been difficult over the years. Kamal’s time in prison and subsequent move to America left the once-inseparable friends distant acquaintances. In my conversations with the artists, they both looked back on their time together with a heartfelt sense of nostalgia and friendship. Yet given their very different lifestyles and career goals, it seems the possibility for a future collaboration is remote. Unfortunately, without Ibrahim’s poetry Kamal is reluctant to write any new compositions. Of the approximately seventy songs in the Baladna catalogue, over 60 percent were written by Ibrahim. Having worked so closely with Ibrahim all those years, Kamal feels lost without the words of his old friend and collaborator. On several occasions Kamal remarked to me his apprehension about pursuing any other lyricists. “How could I replace Ibrahim, when his words were so perfect? He was as much a part of Baladna as I was.”

WAHDAT WEDDINGS

Late in the summer of 2004 I joined Baladna in one of its many performances in al-Wahdat refugee camp. This was a wedding performance taking place in an alleyway between two apartment buildings. Colorful carpets were draped across the roofs and sides of the two buildings to create a private enclosure for the festivities. Hundreds of plastic chairs were then squeezed into the tight quarters to seat the approximately two hundred men invited to attend. This wedding celebration was not unlike any other I had experienced in Jordan/Palestine. Intertwining dabke lines of young men made their way through the crowds of seated, coffee-sipping elders. Trays of lemonade, coffee, tea, and various sweets circulated, while the more daring shabāb would slip away behind the buildings to share a
bottle of something more potent. The groom, recently bathed and de- 
crated with henna by his family, was periodically carried on the should-
ers of his young friends, while Kamal led the congregation in singing zaффāt 
(indigenous processional wedding songs). Out of sight of the revelers, the 
bride’s party watched the men through the windows of an adjacent build-
ing, their stomping feet heard from the street below as evidence of their 
own raucous celebrating.

At one moment in the performance, however, my attention was sud-
denly diverted to an elderly woman dressed in a worn Palestinian thawb 
(an ornately embroidered Palestinian gown, the patterns of which often 
identify a woman’s native village or region) making her way up to the stage 
with great difficulty. Her age showed in her face and body as she labored 
to navigate the crowded dance floor on what appeared to be a horribly 
arthritic frame. For any woman to walk so boldly through the crowds of 
young dancing men was certainly an anomaly. As she approached the 
stage Kamal noticed her and signaled for the group to finish the song. 
He then descended from the stage and walked over to the woman as she 
pressed her hands to her face in a traditional gesture of respect. Kamal, 
for his part, kissed her hands and introduced himself (EVIA 14-A4295).19 

“Auntie, are you ok? What is the matter?” Kamal asked.

Immediately the old woman’s eyes widened, revealing a blue-grey 
coloring. “I knew it was you,” she responded. “I heard the music, and I 
heard your voice. I knew you had come back.” She continued, “I told my 
daughters that it was you, and they didn’t believe me. But I just knew that 
it was you, Kamal.” As she spoke her arms repeatedly gesticulated wildly 
over her head in an obvious sign of excitement. Her hands then pressed 
against her cheeks. “I walked two blocks over here to find out if it was 
really you,” no small feat given her condition. “I thought that you were 
still in prison.”

Kamal demurred at the old woman’s astonishment. Shy to the attention 
she was showing him, he replied, “Auntie, I never left, never.”

“Allah maʾchum, Allah maʾchum” (God be with you), she responded, 
motioning to both Kamal and his sons performing onstage.20

Kamal then returned to the stage to begin the next set while the elderly 
woman took a seat along the far wall of the tent. Scribbling as fast as I 
could, I wrote down the brief yet touching conversation on which I had 
shamelessly eavesdropped. Scrambling for my video camera, I was able to 
record only the final moments of their exchange.

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Belief underneath the Olive Tree

For Kamal Khalil, Palestine is a home barely remembered. Exiled from Taiba as a young boy, he cannot fully recall his family’s house or the smells and sounds of the rolling West Bank hills. Yet imaginings and reimaginings of home and homeland exist for him as a dominant marker of his Palestinian identity—an identity born of deep-seated feelings of dispossession and loss. It is through his intense belief in himself as Palestinian, in the Palestinian nation as a people, and in Palestine as a land that Kamal has been driven to compose music and suffer mightily for it.

Indeed it is the belief in nation, in God, in home, and in belonging to someone or something, somewhere, that underlies the struggle for Palestinian self-determination. If we begin to think of nations as the products of a distinct consciousness in which communal identities are imbued with power, trust, and faith, we come closer to understanding the felt, instinctive, and associative allegiances that nations generate. For many Palestinians, the conviction and faith drawn from living in exile have sustained, even defined, the Palestinian nation, causing some to willingly sacrifice their bodies and minds for the perpetuation of this belief. Kamal Khalil’s insistent drive to fight for Palestinian self-determination through music, and to persevere despite its violent consequences, is not solely an act of desperation or of blind nationalism and opportunism, but rather one born of intense faith and belief.

In working with Kamal I attempted to uncover a history of Palestinian music not solely in terms of political ideologies and state relationships, but also in the context of one individual’s struggle to make meaning of the politics and discourses of everyday life in exile. Raised in a poor, predominantly Palestinian industrial village on the outskirts of Amman, he occupied a precarious position vis-à-vis the Jordanian state. He was not a refugee by the UNRWA definition and was thus ineligible for humanitarian aid and education, and never fully indoctrinated into mainstream Jordanian society. Over the years, Kamal developed a very powerful means of both acting on and enduring his feelings of dislocation and dispossession. Music was his platform, and his voice was his weapon for fighting against the state powers responsible for his forced exile and the occupation of his homeland.

Kamal believed that his songs were capable of “reaching the whole nation.” He believed his music created performative social spaces in which
Palestinians could take control of their situation, affirm their national identity, and express counterhegemonic or otherwise dissenting ideologies against the state. In his efforts to do this, Kamal was brought to his physical and emotional threshold, withstanding arrest, violence, harassment, and torture. Throughout his career Kamal has had the precarious honor of dining at the royal palace and the royal prison. He has shaken hands with the king and been beaten by the king’s men. Circulating within this distinct culture of violence and state terror Kamal has had difficulty making sense of the brutality and coercion of the state. Nevertheless, despite all this he has not given up on his intense belief in one day returning to Taiba.

More than a simple biographical sketch, Kamal Khalil’s varying experiences of dislocation, repression, and dissent amplify the many twists and turns of the “resistance” movement as it was imagined within the Jordanian nation-state. It seems incomplete to provide a mere political history of predominant trends and ideas without delving into how these very ideas and forces were lived and experienced. Sudden changes in state interests and policies had lasting and formative effects for those living along the border zones of the Jordanian/Palestinian national imaginary. Jordan’s fluctuating state policies regarding its relationships with the Palestinians (both in Jordan and the West Bank) had a profound effect on the lives of individuals struggling to navigate between and within each national imaginary. As home to the world’s largest population of displaced persons, Jordan has struggled to negotiate national policy, marginalizing Palestinians in identity politics yet depending on them for economic expansion and growth. Moreover the establishment of an autonomous Palestinian representative body has yet to effectively address the needs and rights of its refugee and displaced populations. Negotiations between Israel and the PA now begin from a discursive position wherein the rights of refugees have been all but forfeited. Kamal, for his part, has struggled to make sense of the uncertainty, the ambiguities, of this political situation, in the end finding music to be a powerful modality for articulating these anxieties.

Yet Kamal Khalil’s life story is not simply about music, or resistance. Rather Kamal’s life story illustrates the ambiguous position of displaced Palestinians in Jordan, more generally—the vagaries of their situation, as they are nested between and marginalized from two national imaginaries. Living on the peripheries of the nationalist movement, Palestinian Jord-
nians fashioned new means of “resisting” the occupation in a displaced fashion, performing resistance onstage as a means of active identification and belonging. The essence of resistance in these performances reflects a cultural liminality, a perpetual drive to connect to a homeland under siege and occupation.

Since his return to Jordan in 2002, Kamal has been confronted with new challenges. Underemployment and economic hardship now constitute a new front of struggle. More than at any other time, performance opportunities, when they materialize, are a necessary means to supplement family income. What was once “singing for the nation” has now turned into financial necessity. Regrettably, it would appear that pressures to provide for his wife and six children have become the driving force behind his pursuit to revive past intifada hits. This is the cruel reality for many artists attempting to perform in support of Palestinian causes. Squabbles over money, publicity, and prestige plague performance interactions far more than ideological or religious differences. His inability to revive the protest songs of the past reveals widespread aesthetic changes in the Palestinian soundscape. Performed within a new political moment, such songs do not resonate with the aesthetics of the current generation of Palestinian youth seeking an end to the occupation. In style, sound, and performative dynamics, the songs of the first intifada simply fail to resonate with the media-based spectacle of the new “resistance.” Left to the past, the songs of Baladna are tokens of nostalgia, overmatched by the “songs of the satellites” and the growing trends of new transnational Palestinian pop (hip-hop, punk, metal).

With each passing day of his imprisonment, Kamal was comforted by two things: his belief in nation and his belief in the power of music to overcome. For a man who has dedicated his life to an idea, he has benefited very little. Tortured, abused, bones broken, and his life and those of his loved ones interrupted, Kamal never lost faith that one day he would return to his family and that his family would one day return to Palestine. In the years since his release the dream of returning to Taiba has yet to materialize, and his six children are now reaching the age where they are looking to settle down and raise families of their own. With each passing year it becomes more apparent to Kamal that for him Palestine may exist only in song, and like the olive tree planted in his front courtyard, he, too, must firmly take root in foreign soil.

This beautiful olive tree. Planted at a time of family crisis, loss, and fear,
it has now fully matured, its branches stretching out over the courtyard of the house. Olives come every other year, and with them a deliciously pure oil for dipping breads and *mazzāt*. When planted, Kamal intended this tree to be his hope, his savior. He knew that one day he would return home and carve into its trunk the “chapters of his tragedy.” He would document his history of loss and dispossession, recording the names of all those who had ever broken his body and spirit. They would not go free from their crimes so long as this tree survived.

Today the olive tree is more symbol than savior. His past is a tragedy shared by many Palestinians in diaspora. Often hidden from view, shielded by national pride (or is it national shame?), Kamal goes about his daily life wondering about the choices he has made and the choices that were made for him. Exiled to Jordan, to prison, and to America, Kamal eventually returned to the cramped, crowded, twisted streets of Ruseifa. For him, each was an exile and each a safe haven. It seems ironic that all this time, through all those nights spent talking and singing, Kamal Khalil had accomplished one thing he had set out to do so many years ago. Though he did not carve them with a knife, the chapters of his tragedy were nonetheless recorded, by the hand of a young, overly idealistic American researcher sitting with him underneath the olive tree.