

# Sonic in t



# Strategies the Palestinian Struggle

A Soundtrack  
of the May 2021  
Uprising in Palestine

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In May 2021, during the uprising that swept through private and public spaces across historic Palestine, people took to the streets to protest the ruthless Israeli colonial practices of invasion, confiscation, and violence. One of the counter-colonial tactics that Palestinians turned to was to fill public spaces – from Jerusalem’s Sheikh Jarrah, Akka’s old town, and Haifa’s Wadi Al-Nisnas, to the village of Beita – with the presence of artists and activists using music, sound, and culture as a tool for fighting oppression.

The acousmatic, or the unseen, is often an overlooked element when analyzing strategies of resistance, yet the sonic context that envelops listeners, citizens, or activists, has both physical and psychological effects on the individual.

Through his analyses of belliphonic<sup>1</sup> sounds in Iraq, J. Martin Daughtry maps the zones of (in)audition into audible inaudible, narrational, tactical, and that of trauma.

Walking in the city, which is where space, time, and encounters mix, the body becomes a vehicle whose rhythmic steps interact with the space, while also moving within it. When Palestinians put their bodies into the historic spaces of Jerusalem, Akka, Bethlehem, or Al-Lydd, they cut through the multiple layers of its history; in the specific moment of the May Uprising, it was imperative to occupy the streets and public spaces, to announce their presence peacefully, yet vigorously. This presence within the boundaries of their land was marked by multiple phenomena which transcended the habitual rhythms of daily life and manifested through an increase in volume and the organisation of voice and sound into singing, music, and noise.

Speaking to my sisters in Bethlehem, I could often hear the sound of gunshots over the phone, taking me into an “audible inaudible”<sup>2</sup>

zone, while my sisters would tell me how they have to avoid the area close to Rachel’s Tomb located north of Bethlehem’s city centre and take a different route home. Their everyday life was hence directly affected by what was audible within the space they inhabit; their actions came as a reaction to those relatively distant sounds which prompted them to navigate their daily life in a specific manner.

When my sister was staying at Dar Jacir, close to Checkpoint 303 in Bethlehem, an internal checkpoint within the city, daily confrontations with the occupation were happening in front of her and she would experience the violence both sonically and visually. Hearing gunfire, teargas, shouts, screams, chants,

flying rocks, burning tires, and then the sound of shattering window glass in her place meant that she had to act rapidly and leave her home to a safer space. Hearing violence means also acting upon it, constructing or reconstructing both memories and events that surround that specific moment.

This state of aural experience is positioned within what Daughtry calls the “tactical zone”, only one step away from the “trauma zone” with all the mental and physical pain that it contains. Within this space, the listener’s experience shifts from hearing to a deep under-the-skin experience: the sound of an explosion could cause temporary or permanent deafness, physical injury, or in severe cases, death.

The May Uprising awakened aural and visual senses from a heightened cultural perspective, as Palestinian civil society within historic Palestine resorted to the implementation of “sonic agency”.<sup>3</sup> By utilizing sonic sensibilities, Palestinians used sound to enact emancipatory practices, countering Israel’s hegemonic and authoritarian practices.

**“Noise is inscribed from the start within the panoply of power. Equivalent to the articulation of a space, it indicates the limits of a territory and the way to make oneself heard within it, how to survive by drawing one’s sustenance from it.”**

**Jacques Attali**



## Sound as a strategy for liberation

Sound can be used to unsettle, create social formations (protests), and to increase the audibility of the unseen or the non-represented, which is what Palestinians realized and began implementing early on. While music is organised noise, music and noise can serve three purposes: making people forget the violence around them, bringing people together in a sense of harmony, and to silence, deafen, or censor other voices<sup>4</sup>.

In the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of Jerusalem in May 2021, Palestinian protesters took to the streets and used their voices against military occupation. The protestors were often seen clapping, singing, crying, and shouting, which included the *takbeer* (the use of the phrase “*Allahu Akbar*”, or “God is great”) to react to the violent soundscape that was enveloping them, countering it with their own human-made sounds.

Through a careful investigation of videos on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, one could also observe the use of instruments like the *tabla* (a handheld goblet shaped drum), loudspeakers, and bins, to create either noise or rhythms. In one moving event on 3 May 2021, which was during the holy month of Ramadan, a group of Palestinian young men tried to access the Al-Aqsa mosque but were prevented from entering from the side of *Bab al-Silsila* (Chain Gate). Facing the Israeli police officers blocking the road, a group of Palestinian children started chanting “I’m at your gates my lord”, while a young Palestinian man began singing a famous *ibtihal* (invocation) from Sufi Egyptian Sheikh Naqshbandi (1920-1974), which was composed by Egyptian composer Baligh Hamdi and was also titled “I’m at your gates my lord” (*Inni bi babika mawlaya*). The powerful voice of the reciter or invocator brought out awe in the

Palestinians unable to access their holy site, which evoked a unifying and uplifting social formation supporting the Palestinian underheard, while creating a “sonic sensibility” that agitated the oppressors, demonstrating what LaBelle describes as emancipatory practices.

Fireworks, which shine brightly but also sound like gunfire, were utilized in many villages and cities to counter the sonic violence that rained onto Palestinian spaces. As the night spread over the village of Beita near Nablus, Israeli settlers would attack the village with artillery and weaponry. As a counter-strategy for this violence, many of its inhabitants chose to resort to the tactics of “night confusion” – firing fireworks into the night skies and filling the darkness with sounds from all directions, in order to confuse the attacking settlers and disorient them. Usually used to express happiness and celebration, fireworks with their forceful punctuating sounds were used as an effective distraction against imminent attacks.

In another contested soundscape in the city of Al-Lydd, Mahmood Jrere, one of the founders of Palestinian hip-hop band DAM, described the situation in Al-Lydd (Lod) during May and June as very difficult<sup>5</sup>. The citizens of one of the so called “mixed cities” emerged from strict lockdown to face aggressive hostilities as busloads of Israeli settlers were driven into the city, wreaking havoc and terrorizing Palestinians. Jrere recalls the use of sound to alarm and protect. During the settler’s night-time raids, negotiating systems of domination made listening an essential tool for self-preservation. Muezzins helped alarm people of upcoming danger and informed citizens of where the settlers were present.

What Jrere and other cultural activists and artists also did was resort to music as a means of encouraging children and families, and to uplift their spirits. By organizing physical events that featured performances, the Palestinian community was conceptualising a public sphere through presence and sound – not only in Lod, but also in other cities such as Haifa, Akka, and Nazareth. The production of music, such as Jrere’s own single “*E7na Mla7*” (“We’re good”) came to document the horrific injustices:

*They came at night with their flags  
and their flags were night  
And their media was covering their terrorism  
They killed Moussa and our hearts were lost  
Many hearts were lost before him*

In this piece, Jrere is documenting the killing of 32-year-old father of three, Moussa Hassouneh, who was shot dead during a protest against Israel’s imminent forced eviction of Palestinians in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood.

In countering hegemonic and authoritarian regimes, music was used as a form of therapy, a source of agency, and – in the case of Gaza – a distraction from pain. After the traumatizing round of Israeli bombings over Gaza, several organisations which included the Palestine Music Expo, helped to organize musical concerts in Gaza, Khan Yunis, and Deir Al-Balah. For the first time in years, there were musical performances “over the rubble” of Gaza’s destroyed sights, but also in many of the hotels and resorts which survived the aggression. Children could be seen dancing and moving to

the comforting and familiar sounds from favourite cartoons or nursery rhymes, producing what Tia De Nora describes as an aesthetic environment of pleasure and security.

## The sonic transmission of struggle

Sonic resistance didn’t manifest in rural or urban spaces alone – it also took a digital form as in the example of the Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Amman based Radio Al-Hara. While it is not within the scope of this text to write extensively about the history of radio in Palestine, the emergence of an independent community radio that aims to unite Palestinians divided across borders in March 2020, as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic, played a prominent role in connecting communities, sharing

knowledge, and in the construction of participatory sonic experiences through radio programming. Founded by five friends, the radio initially served as an outlet for frustrated people during lockdown, by creating listener-driven programming across borders. In this sense, the soundwaves of solidarity extended beyond the physical borders of cities and towns, and the radio's virtual chatroom became a meeting space for audiophiles and cultural activists alike. Galvanizing listeners into action, the radio played an integral role in the Palestinian struggle from the early days of broadcasting. In a space where all means of communication are strictly guarded by authoritative regimes, the creation of an independent, community run radio space provided an alternative universe for knowledge sharing, demarcating a distinct space for new connections, and new experiences of listening.

Sound forces us to listen with deepened attention and this characteristic lent itself as a strategy: on 10 May 2021 Radio Al-Hara protested against the evictions in Sheikh Jarrah with complete silence. While protesters took to the streets, chanting and clapping, all around the world from Cape Town to London, Jerusalem to New Delhi, other community radios joined Radio Al-Hara in their sonic protest and the collective action evolved into an act of global solidarity culminating in the 72 hour continuous stream towards the end of May, under the title "Sonic Liberation Front".

The contribution of musician and sound artist Dirar Kallash is also worth noting. The artist made it his daily mission to "collect" sounds of violence and aggression and produced a piece transforming these sounds into music, which the radio transmitted on its airwaves. The transformation and neutralisation of sounds of violence, and their manipulation to become less harmful to the listening ear, is an implementation of sonic agency by the Palestinian artist – a coping mechanism also for many others.

## Conclusion

The arrangement and organisation of sound is a tool for sculpting society. In the case of the May Uprising, Palestinians drew on their sonic agency to mark territories and boundaries that their bodies occupied within the contested spaces of historic Palestine by the tactics of singing, chanting, screaming, and noise disruption.

Music and sound became a source of daily sustenance – fuelling the will and energy of protestors – while also helping organize protesters into unified communities. Sound became the mass activity used to oppose the occupiers, their aggression, and to silence the violent sounds of military machines and angry mobs.

As the usual sounds of daily rhythms like commuting to work, the calling of street vendors, the hustle and bustle of the city-scape changed under the hostilities that Palestinians faced, they could not remain silent and resorted to the most basic tools of human communication: that of the vocal cords, alongside mobilising the body through movements reverberating with sounds. In the absence of weaponry, it was the use of the unseen and increasing volumes of the soundscape that helped counter the violence of the colonial war machine.

## Endnotes

- 1 The agglomeration of sounds that are generated by weaponry, motorized vehicles, and any sonic material related to spaces of warfare.
- 2 Daughtry, Martin J., *Listening To War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 77.
- 3 LaBelle, Brandon, *Sonic Agency*. London: Goldsmiths Press, 2018.
- 4 Attali, Jacques, *Noise. The Political Economy of Music*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, p. 19.
- 5 Jrere, Mahmood, Author phone interview London- Lod, 14 Decembre 2021.