

## For My Identity I Sing

### When Music Breaks Down Boundaries

By Reem Abdul-Hadi

Gaza is going through hell and deserves all the attention as it suffers under the unjustified brutality and the deliberate genocide of the entire Palestinian people, Gazans in particular. But Gaza has too often been presented as a unique and entirely separate entity from the rest of Palestine. The events (such as protests, continued arrests, and deaths of Palestinians in the West Bank, Jerusalem, or the occupied 1948 lands) have been seen as separate issues by the global media – if and when they were talked about – and not part of a simultaneous experience or shared, lived reality of military occupation and on-going collective oppression.

The Israeli state has not only divided Palestinian communities and led world leaders and media to reinforce these divisions, it has also attempted to divide and isolate the world from the Palestinian experience. This is manifested through biased media coverage or through the complete exclusion of Palestinian voices from the media. Palestinians are constantly being talked about, analysed, critiqued, and judged, but they rarely are given the opportunity to speak for themselves and share their experiences on their own terms.

As members of an organisation that works to address the divisions within Palestinian society, we have been deeply troubled and frustrated by the reinforcement of these divisions over the last couple months. This has reminded us of the importance of our work, as a small step in the process of overcoming the damage that has been created as a result of these divisions. In the middle of this messy and unjust situation, Al-Mada works on transformative projects that aim to overcome the divide. "Min Ajl Hawiati Ughani" ("For My Identity, I Sing!") is a serious attempt to contribute to our Palestinian cause on the public agenda and work closely with the forgotten youth of Jerusalem to find ways to voice their challenges and give them platforms for expressing their opinions. This initiative gives Jerusalem-area youth from 14 to 17 the chance to explore their identity and issues of importance through musical and artistic expression, and an affiliated social media and advocacy campaign. It provides a much-needed platform for youth – who struggle because of a lack of resources and opportunities – to voice their opinions about policies that impact their daily lives.

Importantly, initiatives such as "For My Identity, I Sing!" effectively work to both challenge internal divisions that have been created by Israeli policy and present the experiences of a new generation of Palestinian youth, where they are allowed to speak and create for themselves. Fundamentally, this initiative is about creating space for young Palestinians to express themselves, as a direct challenge to a broader political reality that continually seeks to limit or destroy the spaces in which

they can be themselves, and where they can BE Palestinian, with all the complexity that implies.

It is said that music, the one universal language, can connect and bring together humans across divisions of language, politics, and background. "For My Identity, I Sing!" attempts to do just that, even as it breaks down the stereotype that the creation of art and cultural production, specifically with respect to music, belongs only to the realm of the elite and to those who have access to training. Rather, music making can be seen as essential to popular grassroots resistance and identity building.

On the other hand, social media is a newer tool that allows young people, especially, to connect across borders and be active in the simultaneous creation and consumption of new and alternative forms of media. When used appropriately, social media can be a highly effective tool. It can be argued that the role of social media has greatly changed both the kinds and the amount of news that comes from Palestine, and specifically from Gaza, which has been very much shut off from physical interaction with and free movement to and from the outside world.

Through an entertaining, educational, and dynamic process, the youth, most of whom have never been exposed to any professional music training, have together created eight original songs, which they helped to compose. The social media campaign has started to engage Palestinian youth in different regions. The songs, which will shortly be produced on a CD and presented in future public concerts, reflect different identity challenges that Jerusalemites, in particular, and Palestinian youth, in general, face and suffer from daily.

Despite the barriers that divide us, Al-Mada hopes to make "For My Identity, I Sing!" a national campaign that will



For My Identity.. I Sing

expand to include Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and the diaspora. Now more than ever, we believe that the children of Gaza and Palestinian children everywhere have a right to heal from trauma and to live dignified lives, having the spaces to tell their stories to the world.

Al Mada for Arts-Based Community Development is a development organisation that specialises in the application and proliferation of music and expressive art therapy to support and address the needs of a diverse community. Founded in 2009, it advocates and advances self expression, inclusion, therapy, and social justice in Palestine and the Arab World.

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Reem Abdul-Hadi is the co-founder and executive director of Al-Mada.