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Leftist Militant Songs and War of Position in Lebanon (1975-1977)

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LEFTIST MILITANT SONGS AND WAR OF POSITION
IN LEBANON (1975-1977)

By
Mohamad J. Hodeib

A Master’s Thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Middle East Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York
2017
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Middle East Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Leftist Militant Songs and War of Position in Lebanon (1975-1977)

By
Mohamad J. Hodeib

Advisor: Samira Haj

This essay looks at the emergence of a generation of leftist militant songwriters against the backdrop of a revolutionary moment that influenced political and cultural landscapes in Beirut during the 1970s. After the Arab military defeat against Israel in 1967, the conjuncture of the Lebanese and Palestinian revolutionary movements in Lebanon fostered a revolutionary moment that manifested itself on different levels, including art and cultural expression. I look at the development of leftist militant songs, a genre, attitude, and approach to song production and performance that came to be at the intersection of radical theatre, poetry, and music. Productions by leftist militant artists were spontaneous organic representations of the revolutionary discourse that influenced them as well as instrumental tools to reproduce radical ideas in mass culture. Following Raymond Williams’ approach, I provide ‘active readings’ of their productions, contextualizing them in the broader revolutionary discourse for self-redefinition. Through their texts, music, performance, and attitude, they dissented against dominant ideas and modes of cultural production in Lebanon, all the while projecting a new identity rooted in the plights of subaltern communities and their struggle to overcome their plights through revolutionary violence.
For my mother,

Hala Toufayli

To whom I owe all that I am.
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Leftist Songs and War of Position in Lebanon (1975-1977)

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**Leftist Militant songs and War of Position in Lebanon (1975-1977)**

Mohamad J Hodeib

**Induction**

Normative accounts of Lebanon’s civil war often denote it as an era of cultural stagnation. Contesting such a claim, this essay focuses on leftist militant songs, a genre that developed during the 1970s and became a major component of the war’s culture. Productions by leftist artists like Ahmad Kaabour, Khaled Habre, Marcel Khalife, and Ziad Rahbani during the 1970s are often dismissed for their militancy and association with the violent memory of the war.\(^1\) This negative depiction disregards their cultural contributions, excluding them from cultural analysis in post-war Lebanon. Moreover, their reduction into mere expressions of violence comes at the expense of obscuring the relationship between leftist songwriters and a revolutionary leftist moment that influenced Beirut’s political and cultural landscape since the early 1970s.

The intersection of Lebanese and Palestinian revolutionary movements fostered a radical leftist revolutionary moment in Lebanon during the early 1970s. It culminated in the military-political alliance of the leftist Lebanese National Movement (LNM) and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). This essay contextualizes leftist militant songs and their development as processes emerging in confluence with this leftist revolutionary moment. I look at the emergence of a generation of leftist militant songwriters as part of a radical artistic scene that circumscribed diverse endeavors in music, literature, theatre, and film. Their work was in many ways a cultural embodiment of this overarching revolutionary discourse. It echoed a generation-specific conception of the world rooted in the revolutionary leftist discourse.

Following Williams’ approach to cultural analysis, I aim to provide an ‘active reading’ of leftist militant songs and their development as processes inherently linked to this newly
emerging radical leftist consciousness. The songs’ content and esthetics, as well as different aspects of production and performance that leftist militant artists undertook challenged Lebanon’s hegemonic cultural constructs, propagating a radical movement for self-redefinition. Moreover, their development converges with the political and military conditions that eventually led to civil strife. As the situation in Lebanon aggravated into military insurgency in April 1975, the revolutionary potential became tangible and within reach. For many intellectuals, the early rounds of the civil war signified a revolutionary dream leading to a democratic socialist state in Lebanon. They sought to create a practical-scientific framework for their ideals, engaging in grassroots organization that is inspired by this ideological struggle for a new identity. Leftist militant songwriters embraced this revolutionary potential projecting it as an opportunity for intersectional struggle among the different subjugated communities towards liberation and emancipation.

In cultural realms, leftist militant songwriters positioned themselves as a revolutionary countercultural movement. Their artistic experimentation engaged with ‘orthodox’ in the artistic, cultural, and political spheres not merely in contestation, but also as a revolutionary alternative. Their productions contested dominant cultural figures and their productions, especially those embraced by the Lebanese establishment. They rejected the establishment’s isolationist policies its quasi-nationalist notions of identity. Moreover, they contested the general direction of Arab politics towards the provincialization of the Palestinian question, rejecting the singling out of the Palestinian people in their struggle for liberation. In opposition, leftist militant artists challenged the constraints of national belonging by endorsing Arab identity as a shared banner for the Palestinian and Lebanese revolutionary movements, and the intersectional nature of their struggle for liberation as a unifying scope.

Beyond mere dissidence, however, they expressed a practical consciousness specific to the leftist generation of the 1970s. Their representations of reality and identity
were happening in tandem with a radical movement for self-redefinition. Leftist militant songwriters articulated alternative notions of the self in that related to the present, to the past, and a future. Leftist militant artists sketched an image of Lebanon as a field of struggle in which different subaltern communities were fighting for liberation. Their songs alluded to the lived experiences of disenfranchised communities like farmers, fishermen, and the working class population. For leftist militants, such subaltern communities were united in their hardships and suppression by Lebanon’s capitalist and sectarian political-cultural establishment.

Leftist militant songwriters could be seen in the light of what Gramsci denotes as *organic intellectuals* in the context of the leftist revolutionary movement. Their productions, initially spontaneous expressions of the revolutionary consciousness, develop into instruments for ideological contestation on the terrain of popular culture, as part of a broader leftist struggle to achieve cultural hegemony. After military and political conditions aggravated leading to the breakdown of the state authority and the segregation of Beirut and Lebanon, leftist militant songs maintained a prominent status in culture. They became an instrumental tool for disseminating leftist discourse in mass media, especially through the radio channels owned by militias and political parties.

**Methodology**

In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams refutes analyzing forms of social through, and cultural activity, as static and finished products without pertaining them to the processes through which they manifested. Especially in what pertains to works of art, Williams proposes active ‘readings’ that underline the formative processes from which they emerge. This includes contextualization within specific historical givens, including the formation and rise of new social classes. Williams refers to ‘structures of feeling’ as early
indicators for an emerging consciousness of a new generation or social movement. For Williams, they signify this new consciousness, in its inarticulate pre-stage. Before they are fully developed and articulated, he argues, those thoughts and feelings are “often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating.” ‘Feelings’ in their ‘embryonic’ phase could be seen as shifts in the ‘style’ of cultural expression between two generations, often detectable in works of literature and other cultural texts. Williams’ work builds on the work of Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, problematizing the notion of hegemony in order to understand the inner power dynamics that impact the production of culture. Hegemony is the state of domination, through an intertwining of force and consent, of a particular way of perceiving the world and human relationships that is expressed, maintained, and reproduced “over a range of institutions to relationships to consciousness.”

For Gramsci, there is an intrinsic relationship between the power position of any historical bloc and the hegemonic presence of its worldview in cultural realms. Society, he notes, is a heterogeneous platform on which different worldviews contest for primacy. A regime primarily maintains its domination by securing the cultural superiority of its worldview: hegemony. This involves “‘practical activity’, and the social relations that produce inequality, as well as the ideas by which that inequality is justified, explained, and normalized.”

For Gramsci, a revolutionary movement should be primarily concerned with producing a coherent conception of the world and engaging in cultural contestations so as to articulate it in popular culture and achieve hegemonic presence. This struggle for hegemony, referred to as a *war of position*, is the decisive factor for any real radical change in the society. Challenging the hegemonic social order involves articulating a coherent conception of the world that unifies subcultures of subordinated communities in a society. He writes:

An historical act (revolution) can only be performed by ‘collective man’ and this presupposes the attainment of a ‘cultural-social’ unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the
world, both general and particular, operating in transitory bursts (in emotional ways) or permanently (where the intellectual base is so well rooted, assimilated and experienced that it becomes passion). For Gramsci, moreover, this new conception of the world materializes through organic intellectuals who articulate its spontaneous expressions and transform them from spontaneous bursts, or dispersed manifestations, into coherent ideas; a conception of the world. The role of intellectuals is crucial inasmuch as they assume the functions as producers and disseminators of knowledge in society, including those involved in realms of culture and ‘common sense’. In this context, artists and cultural producers affiliated with this new social movement become the driving cultural force to project this new consciousness in popular culture. Their art is not merely ideological expression but rather a “spontaneous lived experience of ideology in its peculiar relationship to the real,” following Althusser’s approach. As such, organic intellectuals engage with dominant ideas in order to challenge their impact on popular thought, and introduce a new scope of conceiving the world on the basis of their new ideology. But ideology here, however, is not meant as a set of organized thought. This paper builds on Hall’s analysis of ideology being the overall system of representation and signification through which the world is perceived – a conception of the world.

Historically, the emergence of intellectuals with new conceptions of the world is a process happening in confluence with the rise of new social movements. In the domain of popular culture, their expressions and representations in songs and other cultural productions is illuminating in order to understand the process through which a social movement arises, forges its conception of the world, and engages in cultural realms with other ideas and conceptions of the world.

Hegemony in Lebanon’s Cultural Realms

In the early years of the Lebanese Republic, the ruling elites strived to promote an identity for Lebanon rooted in Lebanism; a quasi-nationalist doctrine that stresses Lebanon’s
particularism as a consociational democracy based on a sectarian power-sharing formula that guaranteed Maronite Christian prerogatives. Culturally, this involved endorsing artifacts that reflect this specific identity, and that would help distinguish Lebanon’s cultural field from genres that carried Arab nationalist underpinnings, coming mainly from Nasserist Egypt. Lebanese radio and festival committees granted a prominent status, if not even endorsement, to artists employing Lebanese dialect in their productions. As such, the folkloric endeavors of Fairouz and the Rahbani’s, among other cultural producers like Wadi’ al-Safi, and Zaki Nassif, dominated Lebanon’s cultural field since the 1960s. Their influence extended to the level that the colloquial Lebanese accent from their songs was generalized as the ‘normal’ Lebanese dialect. Underlining the impact of Fairouz and the Rahbani’s, Kamal Deeb argues that it was the most effective policy for identity-formation; “It was being transmitted into every house for free,” he argues, “no book or political speech was as widespread or repeatedly broadcasted (on a daily basis) as much as the art of the Rahbani’s and Fairouz.”

1967 Implications on Palestinian Struggle and Lebanon

The 1967 Arab military defeat against Israel had drastic implications on Arab politics and the question of Palestine. In the aftermath of the war, leadership in the Arab world was moving towards the conservative Arab regimes in the Gulf, signifying a transition away from the progressive leftist front spearheaded by Nasser’s pan-Arabism. Moreover, the emergence of the Palestine Liberation Organization as a populist Palestinian movement for national liberation marked a shift towards the provincialization of the question of Palestine. The “Palestinian Revolution” placed the liberationist struggle in the hands of the Palestinian people themselves rather than the grip of collective Arab regimes. In leftist circles, growing disappointment from the war’s outcome triggered a wave of skeptical critique regarding the “progressive front” and the Arab leaderships in general. The defeat propelled a radical leftist
current critical of Arab leaderships and their policies towards the Palestinian question. Radical leftist class-analysis denounced the functions of Arab bourgeoisie leaderships as local functionaries of imperialism and colonization, and safeguards for backwardness and regression. Moreover, discourse on the “Revolutionary War of the Arab Peoples” promoted by the PLO highlighted the role of the ‘people’ as an agent for historical change and liberation against regressive regimes as well as colonialism and imperialism. Rejecting the partition of the struggle, Leftist discourse endorsed the Palestinian revolution under the banner of the shared Arab identity, and the general struggle for overcoming Arab ‘impotency’. The Palestinian plight was depicted as the embodiment of revolutionary struggle denoting the liberation of Palestine as the historical pretext leading to collective Arab emancipation.

In Lebanon, the 1967 defeat intensified the debate on the state’s role and position regarding its Arab milieu and the Arab-Israel conflict. Radical intellectuals reviled Lebanon’s official dissociation from the war as an “isolationist” strategy, advocating for a more engaged role for Lebanon both politically and militarily. Moreover, leftist thinkers advanced critical standpoints against the cultural and political narratives embraced by the Lebanese establishment. They questioned Lebanon's history and identity, its relationship with the Arab world, and its position in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Contesting notions of Lebanese particularism, they argued that the romantic discourse of the “Lebanese idea” excluded a wide spectrum of the population. Leftist intellectuals like Mahdi Amel contested the capitalist nature of the Lebanese establishment in which traditional Zu’ama maintained hegemonic control through complex apparatuses of sectarian-political clientelism. He asserted that this system alienated the mass population and exploited the nation’s resources.

What is more, leftist discourse in Lebanon rejected the provincialization of the Palestinian question, promoting instead intersectional notions of the struggle as a collective battle for emancipation under the banner of shared Arab Identity. After the PLO emerged as a
Palestinian movement for national liberation, leftist organizations in Lebanon began to gradually push for the freedom of Palestinians to carry out guerilla operations against Israel from Lebanese territories. They advocated for the freedom of Palestinian activism in Lebanon, renouncing the state’s repressive policies towards refugee camps, and organizing campaigns in defense of the Palestinian Revolution. Leftist advocacy for the Palestinian cause—which was already a constitutive element of Lebanon’s popular culture—amplified further their popularity and support.

Internally, leftist activism in Lebanon had been expanding since the late 1960s. It manifested through different mediums including new modes of political organization and participation and radical cultural expressions. Under President Fouad Shehab’s modernist administration, changes in the educational and socioeconomic conditions, alongside urbanization and its subsequent demographic impact nurtured new economic and cultural classes, especially in Beirut. This social mobility allowed for new ideas to be introduced, mainly by the newly urbanized youth. This also facilitated the expansion of ideologically-inclined parties like the right-wing Kata’eb Party [Phalanges] and the leftist Progressive Socialist Party (PSP). Such modernist political organizations attracted newly urbanized youth, challenging the Zu’ama sociopolitical system and the provincial dominions of its traditional leaderships. Moreover, unaddressed socioeconomic setbacks in the agricultural, financial, education, public utilities, and public transportation sectors sparked public discontent with the Lebanese establishment in the late 1960s. All these factors propagated leftist discourse among the socioeconomically disenfranchised portions of the population in rural areas and cities. New forms of organization and mobilization reshaped the nature of political activism in Lebanon: street protests and public rallies, including labor unions and student movement strikes and farmer upheavals. The expanding influence of leftist discourse gained an institutional cover in 1970, when PSP leader Kamal Jumblat, then acting as minister of
interior affairs, legitimized the establishment of political organizations with constitutive transnational ideologies, like the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP). Furthermore, leftist groups congregated under the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), a leftist umbrella organization led by Jumblat, in 1973. The LNM’s political agenda proposed progressive secularist reforms to the electoral law, governmental allocations, and personal status laws. Critical of the Lebanese sectarian establishment’s political undertakings and its reservations regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, the LNM openly allied itself to “The Palestinian Revolution.” Through this alliance, the Lebanese left positioned itself in a transnational network of movements based on radical political and ideological commitment, aggravating several Arab leaderships and regimes.

This interlinkage between the LNM and the PLO tightened after the 1969 Cairo Agreement authorized the PLO’s activities in Lebanon, and the relocation of the PLO’s leadership to Lebanon in the aftermath of Black September in 1970. Under the banner of the Palestinian Revolution, leftist militants were increasingly partaking in military operations inside occupied Palestinian territories. Since 1968, LCP-backed Popular Guard spread throughout South Lebanon. Moreover, increasing numbers of refugees from South Lebanon fleeing Israeli aggressions transformed the struggle into as much a Lebanese question as a Palestinian one. The left, in alliance with the PLO, positioned itself as a revolutionary force defending Lebanon’s southern population and villages. In the absence of any official Lebanese policy to protect the southern borders, leftist militias filled the vacuum, gaining more popular affinity and support. During the early 1970s, the alliance of PLO-LNM was majorly influencing Lebanon’s political and cultural realms. Its influence preconditioned the military insurgencies that led to civil unrest, and civil war, in April 1975.
The Revolutionary Moment and the Cultural Expression: Leftist Militant Songs

The confluence of this radical political movement with growing leftist influence majorly impacted Beirut’s metropolitan culture since the late 1960s. Artistically, this wave of leftist radicalism manifested itself through different mediums. In the aftermath of 1967 defeat, there was a radical turn towards political art in Lebanon’s cultural circles. A generation of artists and cultural producers were increasingly experimenting with new approaches to art as expression of lived realities. The topical sociopolitical conditions became a major subject in new art works. It is in this period that political art became increasingly vibrant, especially in terms of representing the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Palestinian question was being perceived through the scope of armed struggle. Official Arab leaderships were depicted as regressive and defeatist, while the Palestinian Fida’iyeen were glorified as the redeemers of Arab honor. At the intersection of radical political expression and artistic experimentation, the leftist revolutionary moment manifested in cultural realms marked by the spread of radical theatre and new forms of poetic and literary expression. At the heart of Arab cultural production, moreover, Beirut was home for a transnational community of Arab intellectuals and artists who sought haven and relative freedom of expression in its multicultural composition and liberal government. The latter fostered a transnational of collaborations and artistic approaches beyond the limitations of national belonging. In literature and poetry, revolutionary Palestinian writers like Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani vanguarded this radical wave. Theatrical productions with political underpinnings also flourished after 1967 with playwrights like Issam Mahfouz, Remon Jebara, Jalal Khouri, and Saadallah Wannous as well as theatrical groups like Mohtaraf Beirut lil-Masrah [Beirut Theater Workshop]. Leftist artists like Roger Assaf, for example, attempted in theatre to “reclaim the tools of expression from the establishment and place them in the hands of the subordinated.”

Within this general cultural inclination, leftist militant songs emerged at the intersection
of radical poetry, theater, and music. During the early 1970s, Beirut’s cultural spaces featured discussions about the possibilities of a ‘new song’ that would project the new generation’s radical revolutionary outlooks. New literary experiments, especially free-form poetry, facilitated different approaches to songwriting and composition, which leftist artists like Paul Matar and Ghazi Mikdashi began undertaking since the late 1960s. In Mawt Moudir Masrah [Death of a Stage Manager], Abido Basha traces the earliest manifestations of ‘political songs’ with Mikdashi and Matar composing and singing texts by Mahmoud Darwish and Adonis in the late 1960s and early 1970. He discusses the intersection of the songs’ free form with the new poetic movements in Beirut. In theatre, moreover, Basha mentions Mouhtaraf Beirut’s collaboration with musician Walid Gholmieh to compose songs for their theatrical productions. This included the translation and adaptation of Che Guevara’s poem Ma Hamm An Namout Fi Douii Sarkhat al-Harb [What Does it Matter to Die Amidst the Cries of War] in the 1969 play Majdaloun. Similarly, Popular playwright and actor Hasan ‘Shooshoo’ Ala’eddine featured in his theatrical productions several songs with political underpinnings, some of which were composed by Matar like Ya’eesh al-Iqtisad al-Horr wa Tahya al-Dimogratiiyya [Hail Free Economy and Long Live Democracy]. The political nature of such songs was to the extent that the government banned their distribution on records or their performance outside the theatrical context. Though politically inclined art was not essentially leftist in nature or outlook, however, it undoubtedly contributed to this rising wave of radicalism.

By 1974 a generation of leftist militant songwriters infiltrated Lebanon’s cultural field, introducing alternative styles and approaches to cultural production. Musicians and songwriters like Khaled Habr, Ziad Rahbani, Ahmad Kaabour, and Marcel Khalife appeared on the scene with explicit leftist outlooks. Their productions were esthetic and political endeavors articulating the conditions and aspirations of their generation. Their cultural productions,
moreover, encapsulated collaborations with poets, musicians, and cultural producers in a broader leftist revolutionary scene that emerged in Beirut during the 1970s. This process of inter-medium exchange provided complimentary tools to express the overarching revolutionary moment that inspired them.68

Leftist militant songwriters penetrated the cultural scene in search of possibilities to trespass what is already available and dominant in popular culture, clashing with dominant cultural figures politically and ideologically.69 Their approach and attitude towards songwriting, production, and performance stands in opposition to the prevalent forms of cultural production. It also clashes with the dominant figures in the cultural scene, especially those embraced by Lebanon’s official political-sectarian establishment. According to Basha, they shared a common concern to “discredit and breach the embargo of the prevailing songs in Lebanon” and present something new.70 A main point of convergence of their artistic endeavors was their contradiction with dominant forms of cultural productions associated with Lebanon’s elite establishment.71 Leftist militant songwriters challenged the market-oriented cultural industry in Lebanon and its touristic depiction as a haven for stability and harmony. Most vocally this contestation targeted the Rahbani Brothers and Fairouz, who were denounced for the role they played in representing and reproducing Lebanese nationalist notions in popular culture. Their musical plays projected quasi-nationalist notions of identity represented by a homogenous, exclusive community rooted in the Christian mountain village.72 Such productions, moreover, projected an image of tranquility and a magical Lebanon in which hardships were overcome with love, and the outsiders were often represented as the true source of instability. According to leftist artists, such dominant artifacts were misrepresented, if not even contradicted, the reality of the state of affairs. This image blurred the real socioeconomic mood of the age. In contrast, the reality on the ground conveyed “increasing turmoil between the state and peasants, workers, and students as well as disclosing “fascist” characteristics of
the Lebanese state and its attempts to eliminate the Palestinian Resistance,” as Ahmad Kaabour portrays it.73 Dominant cultural productions were detached from the reality on the ground, and thus failed to address the conditions on the ground that shaped the experiences of large segments of the Lebanese population.74 They represented a status quo and an illusion of peace and magic.75 In response, leftist cultural productions moved towards a more authentic representation of the subaltern population displaying the hardships of their daily lives. Similarly, Khaled Habre discusses that the social turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s was foundational to forming his political consciousness. His songwriting was heavily influenced by socioeconomic and political struggle of the 1970s, like the Labor movement in Ghandoor factory and the Israeli interventions in Lebanon.76

As such leftist militant songwriters sought to represent reality from the revolutionary scope that inspired them. They engaged on the cultural level to project and articulate their leftist revolutionary sentiments in a countercultural attitude that not only contested dominant cultural productions in Lebanon, but also posed itself as a revolutionary alternative.77 Their approaches to cultural production, performance, as well as the content of their songs propound radical notions of the self and of identity deeply embedded in the overarching revolutionary movement.

Beyond opposition to dominant cultural figures, leftist songwriters reverberated notions of a new identity the subaltern subject. They sought to represent “reality” from the scope and experiences of disenfranchised communities that were perceived as subaltern and subjugated in leftist discourse. Cultural productions moved towards representations of the subjugated communities and their hardships, resenting the melancholic, simplistic depiction of the poor and rural communities and concentrating on their plights, hardships, and subjugation.78 This shift in representation of “ordinary life” was happening in tandem with a radical movement for self-redefinition.
Collective Ethos

A significant characteristic of the leftist cultural scene was its collectivist nature. The establishment of *al-Kawras al-Sha‘bi* [the Popular Chorus] marks the first significant politically oriented music project. The project was founded by Ghazi Mikdashi, a leftist affiliated with the Communist Action Organization, upon his return from Belgium. ⁷⁹ The *Chorus* consisted mainly of amateurs: neighbors, relatives and friends of Mikdashi’s.⁸⁰ Through its “collectivist ethos,” Mikdashi’s project intended to challenge the prevailing professional modes of song production by opening up the participation to whoever was willing. To him, motivation and commitment, with basic knowledge of singing and music, mattered more than professional training. His communal approach facilitated the participation of ordinary people in the production of culture.⁸¹ Moreover, the *Chorus* implemented a collectivist approach to song production, including the choice and creation of texts of songs and the composition and interpretation of music.⁸² This approach is not limited to the *Chorus*, however. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, bands of different genres and styles emerged around the Arab world, many of which were associated with the revolutionary political outlook. Musical groups that expressed revolutionary sentiments manifested including the *al-Firqah al-Markaziyyah* [the Central Band] of Palestine and the Iraqi *al-Tariq* [the Road]. Similarly, several bands with leftist outlooks emerged in Beirut like *al-Firqa* [the band], founded by Khaled Habre and *Firqat al-Ard* [The Land]. The singer/songwriter Khaled Habre was affiliated with the Lebanese Communist Party. He released his first collection of political songs in 1975. Similar to the *Chorus*’ approach, groups and ensembles challenged the prevailing notions of marketable ‘stars’ and the mainstream capitalist cultural field that embraced it. Bands were consciously “taking a stand against elitism and a certain professional approach to music, in order to get involved in some kind of grassroots work.”⁸³ Moreover, in 1976 communist musician and composer Marcel Khalife established *al-Mayadine* [The Fields],
alongside Omayma al-Khalil and Walid Aboud, and Tony Wehbe. Khalife’s ensemble had explicit communist affiliations, and was often associated with the LCP.

Moreover, there was a mobility of musicians and performers in between leftist groups and ensembles. For example, Toni Wehbe, a leftist singer, worked with both al-Mayadine and Habre’s al-Firqa. While many other artists, including Habre and Ahmad Kaabour, were affiliated with the Popular Chorus while simultaneously pursuing their own independent musical projects. This mobility contributed to nurturing a kind of coherence by promoting common artistic features in different productions, beyond the exclusive image of individual artists.

**Decentralized Performance**

Decentralized performance shows another dimension of this dissident attitude towards mainstream culture. Leftist musical groups began touring and performing in different areas of Lebanon. Their performances took place in conventional cultural centers as well as improvised venues in schools, field hospitals and military barricades. For example, Ahmad Kaabour and his ensemble performed Ounadikom for the first time at a field hospital for civilian war casualties in Khalde region to the south of Beirut. Moreover, artists like Khaled Habre often performed for leftist militant fighters near the firing lines. In the early years of the civil war, Habre and al-Firqa toured and performed in different areas around Lebanon, especially those with leftist predominance. He performed in provincial cities such as Tyre, Saida, and Nabatiyyeh in South Lebanon and Tripoli in the North. He also performed in villages like Zawtar and Barja in south Lebanon. Ziad Rahbani also attempted to further develop a decentralized approach to theatrical performance by attempting to create a mobile theater troupe that would tour and perform around Lebanon. Such performances in locations that otherwise were peripheral –if not even irrelevant– to Lebanon’s cultural map, challenged
challenged the position of cities as the major cultural hubs, especially the role of the capital, Beirut.

Political rallies and ceremonies by leftist parties also provided a space for performances of leftist songs. The Lebanese Communist Party ceremonies hosted leftist artists since as early as 1974, including Ziad Rahbani and Ghazi Mikdashi, both of whom presented anthems for the event. In fact, performances of leftist artists and political rallies could easily be intertwined. Even outside the context of the political organization, musical performances carried political weight. Artists, through their militant and unapologetically leftist songs, attracted an audience sympathetic to the leftist political project, fostering a revolutionary moment in every performance. Performances at military barricades by artists like Khaled Habre show this relationship between the militant attitude of the song and its political-cultural incubator.

As such, leftist artists were reaching out to their audiences through their performance. Rather than retaining the song within the conventional cultural sphere, they were physically delivering it to the audience they primarily intended to address: the subordinated communities oppressed on the peripheries, and the militant revolutionaries fighting for their freedom. Such interactions also helped fostered an intimate relationship between leftist songwriters and their audiences outside the traditional cultural hubs. Moreover, they were also crucial for leftist songwriters to overcome the technical difficulties and financial limitations on recording and production during the early years of the war. Through live performances, songwriters exhibited their songs in their rich compositions, an issue that was often hard to consider when recording with limited financial resources. 86

Text and Form

The choice of texts for songs also carries explicit political underpinnings. A prominent characteristic of leftist songs during the 1970s was their intersections with new poetic forms.
Leftist militant songwriters were seeking expressive texts to sing, and found many in the works of contemporary poets. They adapted texts by a wide array of Arabic poets like Bader Shaker al-Sayyab, Mohamad Abdallah, Abbas Baydoun, Shawqi Bzei’, Jawdat Fakhreddine, Hassan Abdallah, Samih al-Qassim, and Tawfiq Ziyad. Most prominently, the texts of Palestinian revolutionary poet Mahmoud Darwish were used widely: *The Popular Chorus’ Sajjil Ana Arabi!* [Register, I am An Arab!] as well as several works by Khaled el-Habre and Marcel Khalife. Along his own songs, Habre’s 1975 album *Agani Siyasiyya* [Political Songs] included the song *Halat al-Ihtidar al-Tawila* [The Long Death] based on the text by Darwish. He would continue to utilize long and short texts by Darwish throughout his musical career including ‘Azif al-Guitar [The Guitar Player], Ahmad al-Zaatar and Madih al-Thol al-‘Ali [Praise of the High Shadow]. Moreover, Khalife’s 1976 album *Wou’oud Minal ‘Asifa* [Promises of the Storm] was almost in its entirety a musical adaptation of Darwish’s poems. Four out of the five songs on the album were based on his texts *Promises of the Storm*, *My Mother*, *Rita and the Rifle*, and *Passport*. Khalife’s musical adaptations of Darwish’s poetry are a constitutive characteristic of his own artistic endeavors. In fact, this collaboration between songwriters and poets, especially Darwish, had a mutual effect on both the songwriters’ and poets’ popularity and reach. Darwish’s central position and uncontested popularity in the Arab world expanded even further through this interaction. Moreover, such collaborations signified the confluence of the Palestinian and Lebanese revolutionary movements, and the intersectional nature of their struggles. The national origin of the poem, the poet, or the songwriter was diluted into the revolutionary potential and political aspirations. As such, the leftist militant songwriters in the 1970s trespassed the boundaries of nationalities to project a communal Arab —if not even internationalist— revolutionary identity derived from the new experimentations in poetry and song.

Moreover, adaptations of New Arabic poetry majorly impacted the songs’ form. The
fluidity in the forms of modern poems by Mahmoud Darwish, for example, imposed a fluid movement in the song. Musicians experimented with the style and form of their new songs to match the movement of the texts. The new product is not a rigid form of song that is reproduced in future works. Rather, it is an ongoing experiment always manifesting itself in different forms. For example, Ahmad Kaabour’s *Onadikum*, based on a poem by Palestinian Tawfiq Ziad, is a constructed in the classical sense with four verses and a repeated chorus. In contrast, Habre’s *Halat al-Ihtidar al-Tawila* is more fluid, flowing along with Darwish’s motion in rhyme and rhythm. Habre’s performance also switches between singing and reciting the text. Similarly, Khalife’s adaptations, though often including a chorus, involve transitions in the scales and melodies of the song to suit the texts at hand.

**Esthetics: East-West Dialectics**

A significant debate stimulated leftist cultural circles regarding the identity of the “new art.” Void of any all-embracing stylistic rules, there was a vast wave of experimentation in form and style of songs. Central to their development was the discussion on form and style, especially the song’s relationship to oriental Arabic tradition. This contrast is representative of the wider debate regarding the foundations of this new song and the approaches to creating it. This included the validity of using western instruments like the guitar as the basic instrument for composition. For many, this would impose a western appeal at the risk of detaching the songs from the Arabic-oriental tradition, and alienating the general audience. The song might then become an elitist expression and a westernized sub-culture, as opposed to its intrinsic ambition to express popular sentiment.

In response, many of the guitar players argued on the basis of the guitar being a mobile instrument that could easily be transported and practically used. Most compositions, moreover, were being based on oriental scales, most significantly the Bayyat Maqam, to maintain the
oriental outlook of their work.

This binary opposition is clear in two of the earliest productions of leftist militant songwriters: Khaled Habre’s *Aghani Siyasiyya* [Political Songs] and Marcel Khalife’s *Wou’oud Min al-‘Asifa* [Promises of the Storm]. Published in 1975 and 1976 respectively, the two albums were explicitly political, albeit in two different styles. A main commonality of the two albums is that the songs were entirely composed and recorded with a single instrument: Habre utilizes an acoustic guitar while Khalife composes in the eastern tradition using an ‘Oud. Both albums also included a song entitled *Jafra*, based on a text with the same title written by Palestinian poet Ezzeddine al-Mounasra. Though the lyrics of both songs are almost identical, the contrast in composition and style is obvious, reflecting the debate between Khalife’s ‘Oud and Habre’s guitar.

Experimentation with new forms and styles was not limited to the two instruments, however. It transcends the binary opposition between Eastern and Western music opening the possibility of fusion and merging. Artists like Ghazi Mikdashi, Paul Matar, and Makhoul Kasouf had been experimenting with western genres of music since the late 1960s. Forbearers of this leftist political genre, they were testing the limits of composition using eastern musical scales on classical western instruments. Similarly, more advanced experimental approaches followed during the 1970s with groups like *Firqat al-Ard* producing songs in the jazz tradition.

Ziad Rahbani’s work problematizes further this binary opposition. He composed songs in both eastern and western traditions using the piano and the *buzuq* as his main instruments. Ziad had also been composing and performing jazz. He collaborated with other artists like Khaled Habre and Ahmad Kaabour on several songs with western compositions. For example, *Sobhi al-Jeez*, based in the jazz tradition, was released in Habre’s 1976 album of the same title. Differently, the songs from his plays were mostly composed in the Oriental Sharqi tradition.
like Sahriyyi and Nazl al-Sourour.94

The piano and buzuq are a commonality between Ziad and his father Assi Rahbani, who is primarily accredited for standardizing the “Lebanese song.”95 The Rahbanis themselves did not commit to a rigid traditional approach to music, however. Their work borrowed and built on a wide array of musical traditions from around the world, including Brazilian, European, and classical music. The Rahbanis were influenced by the modernist approaches to musical production in the works of Egyptian musicians Sayyid Darwish and Mohammad Abdul Wahab.96 Thus, the musical component of the “Lebanese” song that they had introduced was in no way limited to a strict musical tradition. Rather, it was fluid and very modern in nature and form. This in itself allows for further experimentations that leftist artists attempted during the 1970s, without alienating their work from the general culture.

Another aspect of this debate is the musical background of leftist songwriters. Beirut during the 1970s was a metropolitan city with cultural influences from across the globe. Most prominently, the cultural field was influenced by Oriental Tarab music coming from Nasserist Egypt and the Francophone colonial inheritance.97 Moreover, since the 1960s, international music festivals, mainly Baalbeck International Music Festival, hosted international music stars, including jazz star Dizzie Gallespie.98 Global trends inevitably infiltrated the scene, including the counter-cultural movements from the United States and Europe, and the Free Jazz movement as well as the sub-cultures of the 1968 uprisings in France. Against this backdrop of cultural diversity, a wide spectrum of musical traditions and trends, whether historical or contemporary, informed the musical endeavors of leftist artists in the 1970s. Sheikh Imam, Jazz, The Beatles, Gilbert Bécaud, Sayyed Darwish, Jaque Brell, and Brazilian Song, among other forms influenced leftist songwriters in Beirut.99

The ongoing debate on the nature and function of the song was gradually being absorbed by the collaborative nature of the scene, nevertheless. Collaborations within the scene also
affected the general direction of leftist songs. Fleeing the right-wing dominated areas, Ziad Rahbani, Joseph Sakr, and Sami Hawat relocated to leftist-dominated West Beirut. The three began working more closely with leftist artists in Ras Beirut after 1976, further flourishing the leftist cultural scene.\textsuperscript{100} Ziad’s collaborations with Ahmad Ka’abour and Khaled el-Habre on songs like \textit{Shou B’aad} [How Far they Seem] and \textit{Sobhi al-Jeez} began appearing as early as 1976. A major example to such collaboration is the 1977 production \textit{Ahmad al-Zaatar} by Khaled Habre. Composed and performed by Habre, this orchestration was arranged by Ziad and featured members of \textit{al-Mayadeen} ensemble.\textsuperscript{101} The variation of styles and approaches to song production among leftist cultural producers provided a diverse array of artifacts. It could be seen in light of the diverse nature of the Lebanese National Movement. The debate on the nature and identity of the new song is reminiscent of the diversity within the National Movement itself, and leftist circles in general, regarding the outlooks and politics of the leftist discourse. Recalling his relocation to West Beirut, leftist singer/songwriter Sami Hawat discusses the possibilities in cultural and political diversity of the scene in the 1970s. “The project of the National Movement was not an authoritative homogenizing project […] the movement embraced the diversity, and the scene is merely an example.”\textsuperscript{102}

As such, the diverse cultural artifacts provided for the diverse popular tastes, attracting a broad audience in Leftist circles and outside them. Those features are representative of the diversity and political nature of the songs. However leftist militant songwriters did not essentially clash with the dominant on the aesthetic level. In fact, it seems like they embraced it but proposed to move beyond it. Their artistic endeavors were in continuation and artistic dialogue with those existing in cultural realms. Nevertheless, the language and representations prevalent in productions of leftist militant songwriters clearly indicates a shift in the scope of perception of reality, identity, and the self. Beyond contestation, hence, leftist militant songs clashed with dominant ideas in popular culture proposing a new worldview that is centered on
Contesting Hegemony: Shifts in Style

Leftist militant artists challenged the orthodox representations of lived experiences that prevailed in the productions of dominant cultural figures. By doing so they were engaging in ideological contestations on the terrains of common sense and popular culture in order to pose an alternative conception of the world inspired by the revolutionary moment.

This is clearly demonstrated in Ziad Rahbani’s 1974 play *Nazl al-Surour* [Hotel of Happiness]. Performed a year prior to the outbreak of civil war, it is a constitutive example of how leftist militant musicians positioned themselves in Lebanon’s political and cultural spheres. This satirical parody was considered “the manifesto of the new left.”103 Through it, Ziad adopts a “parodic positioning” against the works of his father and uncle, the Rahbani Brothers.104 He deconstructs their cultural project, challenging their approach to cultural production, folklore, and the “Lebanese idea.”105 In contrast, Ziad ridicules the “Lebanese Miracle,” denouncing the “golden age” as one big lie.106 His approach to his parents’ project echoes the leftist critique of Lebanism.107

In the play, two armed militants infiltrate ‘Happiness Hotel’ – where no one is really happy – hold all the residents at gunpoint, and demand that they either subscribe to the revolution or die. The first part of the play is a comical act with rarely any mentioning of social and political tensions, concluded by a series of songs that fall in line with the dominant styles of cultural production.108 After the militant mob invades the scene, resurrecting reality in full scale, the mood as well as the music changes. The militants plan the executions to happen in a specific order based on each person’s usefulness in society. The two *Tarab* musicians are assigned to die first, followed by the dancer and the leftist armchair intellectual. According to the militants, the two musicians pose the biggest danger to society because the *Tarab* music

the subaltern subject.
they perform functions like opium; “the people sink in misery and you provide them with lamenting songs,” asserts one militant. The musicians may be pardoned, however, if they manage to compose an anthem for the revolution before sunrise.

Ziad opens a dialogue about the role and functions of artists and intellectuals through two songs, *al-Sha’b al-Maskeen* [The Powerless People] and *Ya Nour ‘Inayya* [Oh Darling!]. Through *Ya Noor ‘Inayya*, the two musicians lament their abduction by the militant mob, yearning for their previous state of drunken self-indulgence. The lyrics say:

“Oh my!
We have been abducted by the revolution!
[…] Before you freaks came along
We were singing Qarasiyya”

In the context of the play, the song comes as a reaction to the militant threat. Through it Ziad posits a critical stance on the tactics of coercion employed by militant groups.

Nevertheless, *al-Sha’b al-Maskeen* reaffirms the revolutionary outlook of the playwright himself. It is played at the end of the first half of the play after a militant aggressively reminds the musicians of their five-hour deadline to compose the anthem. Being the only song presented outside the theatrical context, it seems like an alien injection: Ziad’s own allegiance to the “powerless people.” It reinforces the role of politically committed art as not just an expression of realities, but a position informed by a real understanding of those experiences. Through its lyrics Ziad expresses his faith in the inevitable revolution, its hardships, and sacrifices:

“I have come with the powerless people
asking, to whom does my land belong?
and in whose name are my children starving to death
in their own homeland?
… Oh, thousands of oppressed,
years of bloodshed await.”
This duality challenges the function of the artist in relation to the revolutionary movement. On one hand, Ziad rejects cultural artifacts that are opiating like *Tarab*, or deluding like folklore, in favor of critical art that addresses the lived experiences in society. He reaffirms the role of revolutionary art as an effective mechanism to raise awareness and consciousness. On the other hand, he denounces the coercive imposition of revolutionary discourse on the artist. Ziad’s argument is not to imply that art should be left alone, but rather that revolutionary art should be an autonomous decision by the artist.

In the play he ridicules the leftist armchair intellectual, who is heard lecturing monotonously about successful steps to establish a revolutionary movement: “a party, then a newspaper, then…” Alternatively, he grants revolutionary agency to uneducated militants who spontaneously reacted to exploitation, but with no clear expression of what their ‘revolution’ entails theoretically. By doing so, Ziad is critical of the condescending approach of leftist discourse and its notions of ideology as false consciousness. For him, class-consciousness develops in a process that is rooted in the social experiences of ordinary people. The role of the intellectual becomes to engage society in practical activity so as to help perpetuate those ‘spontaneous bursts’ into a coherent conception of the world from the bottom-up.

What is more, in *Nazl al-Surour* Ziad incites a quasi-nationalistic wedding speech from the Rahbani Brothers’ 1960 play *Holiday of Glory*, not to celebrate a peaceful ending to the play, but to disrupt the original narrative with the newly-wed couple producing “a revolutionary multitude of children.” Rather than a generation that, after God, “worships Lebanon,” the couple are to produce a “proud generation that does not yield to anyone […] and give them free rein.” An “offspring that were once squarely the province of the parents,” are now the children “of life.” After the wedding, the play continues in a series of unfortunate events leading up to the suicidal detonation of militant fighter Abbas. Ultimately, Ziad’s work in this play is clearly an attempt to discredit older forms of cultural production by inserting in them a
revolutionary spirit absent in the dominant styles of the Rahbani Brothers (his father and uncle).  

His approach to folklore is reminiscent of Gramsci’s discussion of the need to uproot the ‘reactionary aspects’ present in folkloric works. According to Gramsci, progressive educators must work on disarming folklore that influences a reactionary conception of the world. Moreover, this intertextuality proposes a certain process of substitution, whereby Ziad deconstructs the dominant image of Lebanon’s social order, highlighting the different experience of reality on the ground.

On another level, Khaled Habre’s song, *Zanabiq li Mazhariyyat Fayrouz* [Lilies for Fairouz’s Vase] brings to mind Fairouz’s 1965 song “al-Quds al-Atiqa” [Old Quds]. Inspired by her 1964 visit to al-Quds, Fairouz sings about a vase that was gifted to her by the people of al-Quds, to remind the world of their sufferings. Written by Palestinian poet Samih al-Qasim, Habre’s song responds to that of Fairouz. It is a dialogue between a male (Habre) and a female (Fida Adeeb) representing an imagined conversation between the poet and Fairouz upon her return. It proposes adding blood-soaked lilies to better complement Fairouz vase:

“My friend, I have blood-red lilies from old al-Quds,
Soaked by the blood of my slaughtered cousin behind her open window screaming ‘I see you, my country! I see you, my country!
[...] I bestow upon you my blood-soaked lilies,
To complement your vase,
So your present would be completed.”

Habre’s song converses with that of Fairouz, but it contributes a violent addition to the image that Fairouz initially projects. The blood-soaked lilies disrupt the original image by disclosing the sufferings of the people of al-Quds. By doing so, Habre denounces the humanizing melancholic representation of the suffering of Palestinian people in prevalent anthems and songs. In contrast, his song proposes acknowledging the brutality and violence of ‘what is actually being lived’. It is not sad it is horrific, according to the Habre and al-
This shift in representation signifies a transition in the forms of representation reminiscent of Williams’ generational shift in ‘style’. Habre acknowledges the influential position of the Rahbani’s and Fairouz in articulating popular sentiments and sympathy towards the Palestinian cause. Nevertheless, his song shifts the scope of representation from sorrowful renditions of Palestinian sufferings to brutal images of torment and the blood spilled in al-Quds.

This contestation with the dominant ideas transcends the realms of cultural production into being a clash on the terrain of ‘common sense’ inasmuch as the latter is influenced by the cultural hegemony. Leftist militant artists engaged not to demolish the old ideas but rather to allow for a shift in perception of the self and surrounding realities. Following Gramsci, this contestation on the level of popular thought allows for a process of “differentiation and change in the relative weight of old ideas” transforming what was previously subordinate into the “nucleus of a new ideological and theoretical complex.” What is more, in the context of the rising revolutionary movement, this contestation allowed for a process of “ideological deconstruction and reconstruction,” to follow Hall’s approach, to a “set of organized political positions, and to a particular set of social forces.”

Through opposing this hegemonic worldview in their alternative representations and performance, moreover, productions of leftist militant artists imply a sense of surrogacy. As Roach notes, “even as parody, performances propose possible candidates for succession.” As new entrants to the cultural field, leftist militant artists were also seeking ways to carve out a position for themselves against the dominant. Empowered by the revolutionary moment and the possibilities it posed, they positioned themselves as the new alternative to the “old” heritage that the civil war, or the revolution, destroyed.
Subaltern Representations

Besides their oppositional nature to the dominant, the songs signify and radical shift in representation, happening in tandem with a radical militant movement of self-redefinition. Leftist songs projected a generation-specific worldview and notions of identity rooted in the overarching revolutionary consciousness of 1970s Lebanon. Their representations of reality and identity are centered on the experiences of subaltern communities; their different plights and unifying subjugated position. The songs represent the struggle against subjugation and oppression as the basis of the new identity that welds together the different communities in a common revolutionary struggle for real change in society. What is more, this new identity trespasses the boundaries of national belonging, representing the confluence of the Palestinian and Lebanese revolutionary movements on the basis of the shared Arab identity and the shared struggle for liberation.

Several of Khalife’s songs from the late 1970s allude to “ordinary people” including factory workers, street vendors, public transportation drivers, farmers and traffic policemen. Contesting the simple harmonious rural life represented in the folkloric productions of the Rahbani’s and Fairouz among others, leftist songwriters focused on the plight of the poor, subordinated communities and their sufferings.

For example, Khalife’s song Ya Saada [Oh, Sa’di] alludes to a tobacco farmer lamenting his inability to marry his lover. His harvest had been getting worse every year until his hopes to fulfill his promise of a future with his loved one were reduced to impossibility. Khalife’s song adverts to the plight of tobacco farmers, especially in South Lebanon, whose harvests were being continuously damaged and deteriorating since the late 1960s. Threatened by Israel’s aggressions on one side and the state-embraced monopoly of large corporations on the other, tobacco farmers had become symbolic were among the most disenfranchised
communities in Lebanon by the 1970s. They had become symbolic in leftist discourse as the victims of the status quo. From the farmer’s standpoint, Khalife sings:

“Oh Sa’di
Oh well, Sa’di, maybe next time!
It seems that luck is against us,
We thought the crop is plenty
We hoped and made promises.
Every time I work in the tobacco fields,
I worry and Say
We will talk tomorrow
But the seasons passed, (and every harvest is getting worse that its precedent,)
And we never talked, and never married.”

Similarly, in *Oghniyat al-‘Ommal* [The workers’ Song] Khalife sings:

“All we hear are loud roars of machinery
that confuse our hearts.”

Khalife echoes the working classes’ alienation from the simple pleasures of love and joy. His songs diverge from mainstream representations of abundant love to reflect the experiences of ordinary people who are burdened by the harsh socioeconomic conditions imposed on them. His incitements go beyond just the representation of disenfranchised tobacco producers or factory workers. They become metaphors for all the subjugated and voiceless communities in 1970s Lebanon: the subaltern communities.

Leftist songwriters exposed the multiple cultures specific to communities that underlie the subaltern identity, rather than reducing them to an abstract ‘people.’ As such their representations of the “subaltern” vary and differ to encapsulate different images of farmers, fishermen, working classes, refugees, and freedom fighters. Simultaneously, however, they proposed a shared goal for all those communities in the overarching struggle for liberation and revolution. In this context, the notion of “comrade,” especially in the leftist sense, became
prominent. The term obscures individual differences, projecting a unified identity of comradeship in the struggle for collective liberation.

Two examples of this “comradeship” are Habre’s songs *Ila Jamal* [For Jamal] and *Sobhi al-Jeez*. Composed by Ziad Rahbani and sung by Habre, *Sobhi al-Jeez* was released in a cassette of the same name a year later. The song mourns the death of a street-sweeper called Sobhi al-Jeez, who also was a communist activist, under obscure conditions. The song opens with Habre’s voice over piano with a dedication: “a song for my friend and comrade Sobhi al-Jaeez who was a Sweeper and was Martyred.” Habre sings:

“"My comrade Sobhi al-Jeez
Left me on the ground and took off
He dropped his sweeper and left.
He didn’t tell me what to do about the millions of dispossessed.
[...] Comrade, oh comrade, where are you?
You left me with a huge burden,
Rocks dust and boxes,
You replaced my previous name with Comrade.
And now I have no comrade, but my name will stay Comrade.
Now I’m looking for someone like you,
Along whom I can walk and carry on in this road."

The protagonist in the song is a poor street sweeper who, despite his harsh conditions, saw in organizing and advocating for militant leftist ideals a real solution for humanity. He is depicted as the true knowledge-bearer and educator; the comrade who was supposed to provide answers and lead the way. Sobhi al-Jeez becomes the agent transforming Habre and Ziad into comrades. He moves beyond giving a voice to the subaltern subject towards granting it primacy in historical struggle.

Released on Habre’s 1975 cassette entitled *Aghani Siyasiyya* [Political Songs], *Ila Jamal* elaborates on the notion of comradeship and the revolutionary struggle despite violence and death. Habre sings:

“Comrade, if I fall
Save your tear,
Carry on in my steps”
The song is a tribute to another “comrade,” a communist militant called Jamal Ayash who was killed in combat during the early years of Lebanon’s civil war. Like Sobhi al-Jeez, Jamal is iconized as a symbol of the revolutionary struggle for change brought about by the civil strife. The martyr is iconized through the song, in a similar vein to many other leftist militant songs that glorified death in combat. In fact, the iconization of martyrs in songs had a powerful influence on militant fighters who hoped to have songs written about them after their death. In this leftist revolutionary discourse, Sobhi al-Jeez and Jamal Ayash become two faces of the “comrade:” they are two representations of the disenfranchised subject marching on the ‘road’ towards the inevitable revolution against the oppressive status quo. The subaltern in this light is transformed into a self-conscious agent actively engaged in the revolutionary struggle for change.

Like Sobhi al-Jeez and Ila Jamal, Khalife’s Ya ‘Ali [Oh, ‘Ali] projects a similar representation of the disenfranchised as active agents of revolutionary change. Written by Lebanese poet ‘Abas Baydoun, the song is an address to ‘Ali, a freedom fighter who died in battle, from the wretched peoples, ‘the barefooted of the cities’. In a mixture of lament and celebration of martyrdom, the song is also an ode of commitment to the revolutionary struggle against injustice, even if through violence.

The reference to ‘Ali, however, incites a religious dimension since the name ‘Ali is most specific to Shi’a communities, who compose the majority of South Lebanon’s population. Shi’a communities in Lebanon during the 1970s also comprised the majority of the lower class, becoming a central symbol in leftist discourse during the time. Leftists during the 1970s romanticized the Southern Lebanese Shi’a population as a core component of the subordinated. This was aggravated given their geographic location bordering Israel, and hence suffering its aggressions, and in the misery belts surrounding the capital Beirut. The allusion to Shi’a
communities in the song is also clear in the repetitive chanting of “Ya ‘Ali,” a common daily
eexpression in Shi’a faith asking for divine protection of Imam ‘Ali bin Abi Taleb. However,
the ‘Ali in the song is a different person than the divine Imam. He is a communist freedom
fighter martyred in combat. In this light, even divine interventions are channeled through the
rifles of revolutionary freedom fighters.

“You have resisted
to liberate your blood
from the garages of grease
and your mouth from the sugar warehouses
and your bones form the seats of the Beyks and the charlatans.
But, ‘Ali, where will you find a land
for a proud head and two free hands?”134

References in the song are intermixed, transitioning from the fight to liberate the
occupied lands to class-inspired anguish and revolution. Throughout, the text is fueled with
allusions to revolutionary violence and a hopeful prospect in the war’s outcome where the
bourgeoisie would be eliminated.

“Every morning, a gun falls on the mountain
and we are but silent witnesses.
But a day will come when we will direct our ploughshares
to their obese and debauched hearts.”135

Alongside the attempts to redefine the subject in terms of its subaltern position and the
associated hardships, leftist songs attribute another dimension to the conditions of the
disenfranchised populations: the possibility to reclaim control over their history through
revolutionary politics. The songs project an emerging unified class-consciousness manifest in
the revolutionary movement. In this light, the subaltern subject becomes an agent of the
historical. Subaltern communities are no longer subjugated and dispersed. In their march
towards emancipation they rid themselves of their individual identities in order to collectively
overcome their different plights under the banner of comradeship, as Khalife’s song
Mounadiloun [Strugglers] declares:
“We are strugglers
With no names (addressed)
Strugglers, on every land.”
We tell tales of heroism to children,
We dream with roses and bread and oil,
And books of love and fire,
And sketches of birds,
And the love for the rain and the flowers
[...] What transformed the palms into bombs,
And the heart into soil and bread?
We are strugglers, we are marching,
to break the chains of our captivated home.”

As the song also proposes, the struggle trespasses national boundaries into an internationalist dimension. Through their songs, leftist militant artists challenged notions of Lebanese exceptionalism projected by the right-wing discourse and, to a high extent, by the official Lebanese State. They transcended barriers of national identity to emphasize the transnational character of the struggle. Several songs by leftist militant artists echo this internationalism, alluding to the global sites/symbols of leftist struggle like Cuba and Yemen al-Ahrar [Yemen, Land of the Free] by Khalife.136 As such, songs projected notions of leftist internationalist discourse that rejected the provincialization of subaltern struggles emphasizing the intersectional nature of any revolutionary movement. The transnational perception of the struggle is most vocally projected in relation to the Palestinian Revolution, however. Faced with the nationalization of the Palestinian question, leftist discourse in Lebanon referred to the shared Arab identity as a platform for uniting the struggles of Palestinian and Lebanese communities.

*Al-Kawras al-Sha’abi* was among the first to vocalize the contestation over the Lebanese identity by adapting Mahmoud Darwish’s *Sajjil ana ‘Arabi!* [Record: I Am an Arab!]. Performed by a choir of voices, the song declares:

“Record I am an Arab!”
Employed with fellow workers at a quarry
I have eight children
I get them bread
Garments and books from the rocks,
I do not supplicate charity at your doors,
Nor do I belittle myself at the footsteps of your chamber
So will you be angry?
Record! I am an Arab
I have a name without a title
Patient in a country
Where people are enraged
My roots
Were entrenched before the birth of time
And before the opening of the eras
Before the pines, and the olive trees
And before the grass grew"

The song that was published in 1976 was a bold declaration of Lebanon’s Arabness.137 It challenged notions of Lebanon’s particularism and exceptional character embraced by Lebanese nationalists to distinguish themselves from their Arab milieu. The utilization of Darwish’s texts, who was the most renowned and vocal Palestinian revolutionary poet, poses another challenge to Lebanese nationalists at a time when the Palestinian question was a topic of armed contestation in Beirut. What is more, it also blurs the boundaries of national identities, in favor of the unifying Arabness.

In essence, “Record, I am an Arab!” is written in a Palestinian context. It addresses the plight of Palestinians under occupation and their stubborn dedication to preserve Palestine’s Arab identity. Using such the poem in the Lebanese context is not just an unyielding declaration of Lebanon’s Arabness, but also a militant commitment to the revolutionary discourse of the Palestinian Revolution. The song was a political statement, as Ghazi Mikdashi recalls; it was an explicit endorsement of Arab identity.138

Furthermore, Khalife’s Jawaz Safar [Passport] projects a humanist dimension to this identity. Also based on a text by Darwish, the song tells the suffering of Palestinians under occupation, and Israel’s pressures to strip them of their authentic belonging to the land of Palestine. The poem portrays a stateless individual stranded between airport checkpoints and seeking rights of passage. Khalife sings:
“Stripped of a name, an identity?
On soil I nourished with my own hands?
[…] All the birds that followed my hand
to the distant airport gate,
all the wheat fields
all the prisons
all the white tombs
all the borders
all the waving handkerchiefs
and all the eyes,
were with me, but
were dropped from my passport”

Against this oppressive condition, he protests:

“All the people’s hearts
are my nationality.
So rid me of this passport!”

As such, leftist militant songs transcended the limitations of national identities to emphasize the multinational and intersectional character of the leftist revolutionary discourse. They represented the common struggle of the Lebanese and Palestinian subaltern communities under a unifying Arab identity that preserves the specificities of each community on one hand, but provides a common battlefield for a foundational unifying banner for a strong revolutionary movement, on the other.

The left’s endorsement of the Palestinian revolution could be clearly sensed in the song *Asfour* [Sparrow], written by Khalife and performed by Omayma al-Khalil from *al-Mayadine Ensemble*. The song tells of a bird with broken wings seeking refuge on the window of a little girl. The bird alludes to a Palestinian freedom fighter, a symbol widely used after 1967. Weary and exhausted from his unending flight, and weakened by the treason of its neighbors, the bird asks the little girl for shelter. The little girl, singing the song, welcomes the bird, comforting it with a hopeful faith in the rays of freedom shining over the forest. Omayma sings:

“A sparrow stood on my window
And said: Oh Cutie
Hide me with you
I beg you
I said: where are you from?
From the limits of the sky, he said
I said: where did you come from?
From the neighbor’s house, he answered
I said: what are you afraid of?
I escaped from the cage, he said
I said: Where are your feathers?
Fate took care of them, he said

[…]
A tear fell on his cheek.
His wings tucked underneath him.
He landed on the ground and said,
"I want to walk, but I can’t."

[…]
“I said: do not fear,
see the sun rising?
He looked toward the forest
saw the tides of freedom glitter.
He saw wings flutter
beyond the high gates.
He saw the forest flying
on the wings of freedom.”

For many Marxists after 1967, the Palestinian freedom fighter came to symbolize the historical preamble for the liberation of Arabs people and lands. However, though many songs during the 1970s celebrated the Palestinian armed struggle, leftist militant songs expressed a more sentimental relationship with the Palestinian revolution. In Lebanon, the left embraced the Palestinian revolution as an extension of the struggles of the Lebanese subordinated communities themselves. The confluence of the Palestinian and Lebanese subordinated communities as depicted through Asfour is characteristic of how leftist discourse during the 1970s perceived the struggle as intersectional. Those communities were united in their hardships and they could only win their different battles through cooperation in a united front. Politically, this manifested in the alliance of between the leftist Lebanese National Movement and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

Another example is Ahmad Kabour’s song Ounadikom, originally written by Palestinian poet Tawfiq Ziad. The song was an ode to the Palestinian Fida’iyeen. Sung in the
Lebanese context, however, the song projected a more confrontational character of not just a salute to the Palestinian freedom fighters, but an active involvement on the revolutionary path alongside the Palestinians.

Moreover, there is a militant hope that this union would bring about radical change; the liberation of subaltern communities, the oppressed peoples, as well as the occupied lands. In this light, the struggle against colonialism and imperialism represented by Israel and the West intersected with the socioeconomic struggles of tobacco farmers, fishermen, and the working people among other subordinated communities in Lebanon.

This revolution is not void of violence, nevertheless. As Ya ‘Ali and Ila Jamal show, however, this revolutionary violence was perceived in hopeful light as an essential tool for inflicting real change and achieving freedom. In Asfour, Omayma asks the bird not to fear and look towards the sun shining over the jungle, and he looks and hears the birds chanting for the *banners of freedom*.

Similarly, Khalife’s *Wou’oud Minal-Asifa* [Promises of the Storm] is hopeful of the war’s outcome despite the misfortunes and sufferings. Based on Darwish’s text of the same title, Khalife’s 1976 song seems to express a sense of gratification in the violence turn of events in Beirut. It is also in the hope that this winter would be followed by a spring:

“So be it…
I must reject death,
scorch the tears of drippy songs
and strip the olive trees
of counterfeit branches.

If I serenade the happiness
behind the lids of frightened eyes,
it’s because the storm has promised me wines
new toasts and rainbows…

[…] I must pride myself with you
oh wound of the city
billboard of the lightning in our sad nights.
when the street frowns at me
you protect me from the shadows
and the looks of hatred.”

The song rejects lament and tears, associating the wounded, grey city with promises of a new toast and rainbows. It proposes that the stormy winter of the war will inevitably be followed by a spring. This spring was promised by the storm itself in a similar vein to the promise of a brighter future that the revolution will deliver. However, the song is not just a hopeful wish that the war would end some day; Khalife is actively working towards achieving this new spring, by challenging fear with songs and grooming the olive trees to greet this new spring. The protagonist in the song must cause the storm, or partake in it, in order to fulfill the inevitable spring.

In a similar spirit, Habre intermixes context clues relating to the spring and the war. In his song *Sa Nazra’ou Fil Shayyah*... [We will Plant in Shayyah…] he sings:

“We will plant in Shayyah a million chrysanthemums
and sing for the inevitable spring.
We will carry arms
and sing for the rifles.
We will write the names of martyrs
with gunpowder.”

Habre’s song proposes that the battle in Shayyah preludes the inevitable spring of the revolution. Shayyah is a disenfranchised neighborhood in Beirut’s southern suburb inhabited mostly by segments of the working class, Palestinian refugees, and displaced communities from South Lebanon. The battles of Shayyah and Ain el-Roumaneh, its neighboring section controlled by right-wing Phalanges party, in April 1975 heralded the full-scale military clashes around Beirut. In the song Habre perceives the battles and bloodshed in Shayyah as one that heralded the “inevitable spring.” He merrily celebrates the battles and martyrs by songs and gunpowder, promising that, after the battle, it will be transformed into a beautiful garden with a “million chrysanthemums.”
Moreover, Habre’s song challenges the historically constructed Lebanese identity. It denounces the historical narrative that was constructed through books and religious texts, dubbing it false. In protest, Habre sees in the revolutionary movement the real agent that would reclaim all history. Shayyah becomes the site on which all history is contested and identity is reconstructed on the grounds of the subaltern’s uprising.

“Rome did not burn, it was a festive celebration
Nero was not a tyrant, he was a poet.
The Arabs did not conquer andalusia, they came as guests.
Christ was not crucified, the Prophet did not die.
The real story is not what has been recorded in books,
it is we who make meaning of all that.
The real story is that
we will plant in Shayyah a million chrysanthemums.”

As such leftist militant songs contested Lebanon’s identity and reproduced it on the grounds of the new reality that the revolutionary moment insinuated. They deconstructed dominant conceptions in popular culture to reconstitute an identity rooted in the subaltern experience and the revolutionary potential that the early rounds of the civil war represented for subjugated communities to achieve social justice and liberation. Through the songs, the plights of diverse subaltern communities become different faces for the same struggle, while the anonymous ‘strugglers’ and ‘freedom fighters’ —comrades — become the driving force of history. Their revolutionary struggle aimed at a future of prosperity, liberation: a ‘promised spring’ or the inevitable achievement of a socialist order.

Conclusion

Leftist militant songs reverberated a conception of the world deeply rooted in the newly emerging consciousness of the overarching revolutionary movement from which they emerged. Their militant approach to song production, performance, and representation was happening in tandem with a radical movement for self-redefinition. It is interlinked to the constellation of
social forces in the revolutionary movement that manifested itself on the social, political, and cultural levels. As expressions of this constellation, they projected a generation-specific worldview rooted in the overarching revolutionary consciousness of 1970s Lebanon. They challenged popular notions of Lebanon’s identity, and the dominant figures influencing popular culture, through representing the lived experiences of subaltern communities. As such they reconstituted identity on the experiences of subjugated communities and the revolutionary potential that the armed insurgency represented since 1975. Leftist songs breached the constraints of national belonging by projecting Arab identity as a unifying platform between the Palestinian and Lebanese revolutionary movements, and the intersectional nature of the struggle for liberation as a unifying scope. At a time when Arab politics was moving towards the provincialization of the Palestinian question, leftist discourse in Lebanon rejected the singling out of the Palestinian people in their struggle for liberation.

What is more, empowered by the revolutionary possibility, as the struggle took a violent turn in April 1975, leftist militant artists positioned themselves as the new alternative to the “old” heritage that the civil war, or the revolution, destroyed. Beyond dissidence or opposition to the hegemonic in the cultural realms, their performances, whether in parody or denunciation, imply a sense of surrogacy to the dominant cultural figures embraced by Lebanon’s establishment. As organic intellectuals in the context of civil war, leftist militant artists embarked on a Gramscian war of position in Lebanon’s cultural realms to secure the hegemony of their revolutionary discourse in popular culture.

Analysis of leftist militant songs often misplaces their cultural significance by demoting them to militant expressions of the civil war culture. This often happens at the expense of contextualizing them within the revolutionary processes through which emerged. A main reason for that, as Williams contends, is their reduction into fixed, final forms. Another reason is that they often perceived through the ideological scope of Lebanon’s sectarian-political
postwar culture. As such their analysis is often influenced by authoritative archive and censorship of the post-war hegemony, which imposes different forms of silencing over the history of the civil war, especially in what concerns the defeated parties. The violent civil war had drastic implications on the political and military position of the leftist revolutionary movement, and its cultural expressions. Syria’s military intervention in 1977 to constraint the leftist contingency, and the subsequent assassination of LNM leader Kamal Junblat heralded the movement’s recession. Subsequent shifts in power dynamics, especially after the 1982 Israeli invasion and the outing of the PLO from Lebanon aggravated the leftist position and influence in Lebanon’s political and cultural scenes, reducing it to the margins after the war’s official conclusion in 1989.

In his book *The Cultural History of Lebanon* (2015), Kamal Deeb denotes the civil war as an era of cultural decay. He nevertheless attributes Ziad Rahbani and Marcel Khalife as symbols of contemporary popular culture. Deeb ignores, however, the context through which both artists emerged: as militant communist artists with explicit ties to the leftist revolutionary movement during the 1970s. The aim of this essay was to re-contextualize leftist militant songs in the process through which they emerged, as expressions of a revolutionary consciousness that perceived positive change through armed struggle. Lebanon during the 1970s was a battling ground for diverse subaltern communities, each with a cause and a struggle. Leftist discourse challenged Lebanese exceptionalism and Arab provincialism, in favor of a unifying identity that bonds all subaltern communities in their struggle towards achieving emancipation and liberation.
Endnotes

3 Ibid.
5 Basha quoted in Bardawil, “Art, War, and Inheritance,” 19.
6 Williams describes *practical consciousness* as ‘lived’ social experience that is different from official consciousness, or the received and fixed forms of social thought. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 131.
8 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 130-32.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 128–35.
12 Raymond Williams, “Hegemony” in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 145.
14 Crehan, *Gramsci*, 146.
15 Williams, *Keywords*, 1190.
18 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
24 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 133.
25 Gramsci argues that there exists a “complex reciprocal interaction between the advance of a new mass culture and the advance of the social group out of whose experience it has emerged, where each is dependent on the other.” Gramsci, *Selections*, 395-6.
29 Radio Orient management prioritized broadcasting the works of Fairouz and the Rahbani Brothers. Such policies were largely due to sentiments of Lebanese Nationalism that the management expressed. See Bardawil, “Art, War, and Inheritance,” 11.
35 Y. Harkabi, “Fatah’s Doctrine,” 123.
36 The term Impotence is used here in reference to Sadik Azm’s usage of the term. Azm blames the defeat on the “impotence” of Arabs that the political-cultural status quo had implanted in Arab communities. See Sadik Azm, *Self-Critizism After the Defeat*, trans. George Stergios (Beirut: Saqi, 2011).
The Palestinian revolution was depicted as the ‘locomotive’ that will precipitate Arab progress. See Takieddine, *Al-Yasār al-Lubnānī Wa Tajribat al-Harb*, 31.


Deeb argues that Lebanon’s “cultural diversity, modernist outlook, and democratic appeal provided adequate conditions for cultural and intellectual production in a context that protects freedom of expression.” Deeb, *Tārīkh Lubnān al-Thaqāfī*, 149.


Bashawil, “Art, War, and Inheritance,” 24-25.

Bashawil, “Art, War, and Inheritance,” 24-25.

Bashawil, “Art, War, and Inheritance,” 24-25.

Bashawil, “Art, War, and Inheritance,” 24-25.
This could be seen in light of the limited resources available for leftist artists during the early years of the civil war. Recordings from live performances expose a different composition of songs including multiple instruments. For example, a live recording of a 1976 concert in Tripoli by Khaled Habre’s group featured two guitars, drums, percussions, and brass instruments. The group performed several songs from Habre’s first album, which only included an acoustic guitar. Habre recorded his first album on a monophonic single audio tape recorder at a friend’s electronics shop. Several other songs performed had not been published on tape yet, though the crowd’s interactions reveal their familiarity with the songs.


Khalife was the most to adapt texts by Mahmoud Darwish throughout his musical career. Ibid., 134.

Darwish was already a star poet, with thousands attending his poetry recitals. Their song adaptations popularized them even more, facilitating their dissemination into popular culture. See Joseph Massad, “Liberating Songs: Palestine Put to Music,” in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32 (2003): 32


Ibid., 46.


Stone, *Popular Culture and Nationalism*, 63.

Deeb, *Tārīkh Lubnān al-Thaqāfī*; 252.

Ibid., 212.


Nasserreddine, *Committed Song in Lebanon*.

100 Ras Beirut is a neighborhood in the western district of Beirut that was under the LNM control until Israel’s invasion of Beirut in 1982.

101 This project did not include Marcel Khalife, who produced another adaptation of the same poem with al-Mayadine in 1988.

102 Sami Hawat, personal communication with author, July 25, 2016.


Stone, *Popular Culture and Nationalism*, 100.

Ibid., 100.


Ibid., 100.

Qarasiyya is a form of traditional oriental *Mowashahat* from Aleppo, Syria.

107 The rest of the songs in the play were performed as part of the narrative. In contrast, this song had no representation in acting. It stands out as separate from the play’s plot and events. See Bardawil, “Art, War, and Inheritance,” 62.

111 Ibid., 65.


113 Ibid.

114 It should also be noted that the music in the play is mostly composed in the genres that the play critiques. In that Ziad is showcasing his ability to produce mainstream artifacts, but his conscious choice to ridicule and alter the meanings that it carries. In fact, songs like *Ba’atilak* and *Ya Nour Inayya* became rapidly widespread after Ziad’s play. Ibid., 63.


116 Habre composed and performed this song on several occasions before its official release on his 1981 album *Mnitthakkar* [We will Remember]. Khaled Habre, personal communication with author, July July 12, 2017.


118 Ibid.

119 Rahbani’s and Fairouz, who also were central cultural figures in the articulation of the popular sentiments towards the Palestinian cause. See Massad, “Liberating Songs,” 27.

120 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 131.
121 Ibid.
122 Khaled Habre, personal communication with author, July 12, 2017.
123 Hall, Problem of Ideology, 42.
124 Ibid.
126 Bardawil, “Art, War, and Inheritance,” 25.
127 Ibid.
129 Hawa (air) in Arabic is often used as a metaphor for love.
130 Jamal Ayash: member of LCP since 1973, he was killed at the Kahhaleh firing line on 26 June 1976. He also had composed texts for leftist militant songs including Fil Shayah Madinat al-Boutoula [In Shayyah, the City of Heroes]. This information was retrieved from the LCP official website: http://bit.ly/2f4bQKUH and Habre’s official Facebook page: http://bit.ly/2uUSw6r.
131 Examples of such songs are Ajmal al-Ommahat [The Most Beautiful of Mothers] and Nasheed al-Shouhada’ [Anthem for the Martyrs], both of which are based on texts by Mahmoud Darwish.
132 Abido Basha, personal communication with author, June 20, 2016.
133 Baydoun was a member of the Communist Action Organization. Traboulsi, History of Modern Lebanon, 181.
134 The translation of this text is retrieved from Traboulsi, History of Modern Lebanon, 181.
135 Ibid.
136 Yaman al-Ahrar was a song composed as a tribute to Socialist Yemen, the two songs appeared on Khalife’s 1979 album entitled ‘Aras [Weddings].
137 Basha, Mawt Mudīr Masrah, 250.
138 Mikdashi in Basha. Ibid.
139 Ibid.
142 A neighborhood in the ‘poverty belt’ around the Beirut, Shayyah was home for sub-proletarian communities. It was also fertile ground for the spread of radical leftist ideas during the 1970s. See Traboulsi, A History of Modern Lebanon, 163. And Nasr, Sociolūjia Al-ḥarb Fī Lubnān, 108-9.
143 Bardawil, “Art, War, and Inheritance,” 25.
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