

"Arab Idol": A Palestinian Victory, At Last*

Ronni Shaked and Itamar Radai



From the left: Mohammed Assaf, Yacoub Shahin, and Ameer Dandan in "Arab Idol" finale, 25.2.2017. Source: "Arab Idol" website: <http://www.mbc.net/ar/programs/arab-idol-s4.html>

On February 27, 2017, Palestinians in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the diaspora, as well as the Palestinian citizens of the State of Israel, sat captivated by the broadcast of the finale of the fourth season of the reality television show, "Arab Idol." Held in Beirut, the final round of the Arab Idol competition featured two Palestinian contestants, Yacoub Shahin of Bethlehem in the Palestinian Authority and Ameer Dandan from the Galilee town of Majd al-Krum in Israel, along with a third finalist from Yemen.¹

¹ The Israeli Hebrew press portrayed the Arab Idol finals as "a competition between an Israeli and a Palestinian," however Dandan was enlisted to the program and presented himself during

When Shahin was declared the winner, widely known as "*Mahbub al-ʿArab*" ("Darling of the Arabs/Beloved one of the Arabs"), it touched off a celebration in Bethlehem's Manger Square. Thousands of the city's residents had gathered in the plaza outside of the Church of the Nativity, with Palestinian pennants in their hands and the distinct Palestinian symbol, the black and white checkered Palestinian *kufiyya* (headdress/scarf), on their shoulders. On the east side of Manger Square, the municipality had set-up a big screen for a public viewing of the show's finale. Palestinian dignitaries viewing the broadcast included the Secretary of the Central Committee of Fatah, Jibril Rajoub, one of the most powerful figures in the West Bank. The festive atmosphere allowed most of the audience, and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza as a whole, to set aside their collective frustration and bitterness and enjoy a fleeting feeling of national pride and unity.

A concurrent gathering was held in Majd al-Krum that was no less nationalistic in character than the event in Bethlehem. A mass of young Palestinian citizens of Israel waived Palestinian flags and wrapped themselves in Palestinian *kufiyyas*, eagerly expecting the coronation of Dandan as the winner. Many Arab citizens in Israel hoped that a Dandan victory would generate recognition of their community in the Arab world and would reinforce Palestinian national identity in Israel.

The disappointment from the defeat generated various explanations, including conspiracy theories that blamed the MBC television network for engineering Dandan's defeat because he was a citizen of Israel. It was also argued that senior officials of the Palestinian Authority, including President Mahmoud Abbas, worked against Dandan behind the scenes and openly advocated for Shahin, a son of the West Bank and a citizen of the Palestinian Authority.²

The Arab Idol program began broadcasting in 2011, employing an international format that is similar to the American program, "American Idol," and other equivalents across the world. Young contestants sing their versions to well-known songs and the audience and team of professional judges choose who advance to subsequent rounds and the ultimate winner. The competition transforms the victors into stars and cultural heroes. The judges are celebrity singers and artists, who are known in every household throughout the Arab

the season as a Palestinian. See: "[An Israeli against a Palestinian in the Arab Idol finale](#)" [in Hebrew], Ynet, February 20, 2017.

² "[Arabs of 48 divided over win of the Palestinian Yacoub Shahin in Arab Idol](#)" [in Arabic], al-masdar.net, February 26, 2017.

world, like the Lebanese singer Nancy Ajram and the Emirati singer Ahlam. After four seasons, the Arab Idol program enjoys broad success and popularity.³

In contrast to the American or other versions of the show, contestants on Arab Idol represent various countries. Thus, the show also provides a unique window into Middle East politics. Contestants express national pride and patriotism during their performances, but the show also functions as a vehicle for popular expressions of pan-Arab unity and fraternity, particularly in light of the conflicts tearing apart the Arab world. The flags of Arab states hang side by side on stage and the judges from various Arab states demonstrate unity and harmony during the competition. The singers, many of whom represent rival states, and states torn apart by internal conflicts, do not mention war, civil strife, or violence.⁴

The high-rate of Palestinian participation in Arab Idol is notable, given the disproportionally small size of its population in the Arab world. In 2013, 24 year-old Mohammed Assaf, from the Khan Younis refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, was crowned the winner. At the time, Palestinians had rarely stood out in the Arab world in musical performance, and it was clear that Assaf enjoyed unusual sympathy from the audience and judges. Assaf was noticed as much for his Palestinian identity as for the rare quality of his voice. Ragheb Alama, a Lebanese judge, told Assaf, "The audience chose you not only because you sing beautifully. You were chosen because, among other things, you represent oppressed Palestine, and you fired missiles of peace, art, and love here." The audience joined Assaf on stage in a *debka*, the Palestinian folk dance, as he sang a national Palestinian song, "*Ali al-Kufiyya*" (Waive the *kufiyya*). Assaf's life was transformed by his victory in the Arab Idol; he was able to leave the Gaza Strip, spending most of his time traveling and performing abroad as a star singer and an Arab and Palestinian cultural icon.⁵

Assaf's victory was also an opportunity for the Arab citizens of Israel to demonstrate their identification with Palestinian nationalism. In 2014, Assaf performed in a stadium in the town of 'Ilut, near Nazareth, in front of more than 10,000 people. Among them was the mayor of Nazareth, 'Ali Salam, and prominent Arab public figures, among them MK Ahmad Tibi. Many in the audience wore black and white checkered Palestinian *kufiyyas* and waived Palestinian flags. Adoring letters and articles were published in the Arabic language media in Israel, emphasizing that Assaf was a symbol of unity, which

³ ["Arab Idol" Facebook page](#) [in Arabic].

⁴ ["Arab Idol" website](#) [in Arabic].

⁵ ["The dark nightingale of Palestine"](#) [in Arabic], *al-Quds al-Arabi*, June 13, 2013.

brought pride and happiness to Palestinians everywhere, including Israel's Arab citizens.⁶

Assaf's victory appeared to inspire other young Arabs in Israel. Two of them, Haytham Khalaily and Manal Mousa, from the Galilee towns of Majd al-Krum and Deir al-Asad, respectively, appeared on the show in 2014, performing as Palestinians in every respect. After passing the initial auditions, held for the first time in Ramallah, they were granted temporary Palestinian passports and traveled to the competition in Lebanon. Similar to Assaf in 2013, both sang Palestinian national songs, and like Assaf, "were adopted with great warmth by the judges," not only for their artistic talents but also because of the obvious sympathy for the Palestinians.

Khalaily lost in the finals, but the participation of both was heralded by columnists as a breakthrough, given their double marginality, as Arab citizens in Israel, and as Palestinians in the broader Arab world.⁷

Palestinian success on Arab Idol culminated in the most recent season, held between November 4, 2016 and February 25, 2017. Of the 26 contestants, six were Palestinians. Two Palestinians from Gaza and two from Israel were dismissed during earlier rounds, while Shahin and Dandan advanced to the finals. Like other contestants from Israel in recent years, Dandan appeared on the show as a Palestinian. In the finale, both Dandan and Shahin sang national Palestinian songs: Shahin sang Mohammed Assaf's song, "My blood is Palestinian," and Dandan answered in turn singing, "It is our obligation to defend al-Aqsa, Oh son of Palestine," with both winning great sympathy from audience and judges. The Lebanese judge Wael Kfoury declared, "I have a dream that has not yet been realized, to visit liberated Palestine," and Ahlam exclaimed, "I am Palestinian in as much as I am Emirati." The third contestant from Yemen was virtually cast aside, turning the final into an intra-Palestinian contest. When Shahin was declared the winner, Mohammed Assaf joined Shahin and Dandan on stage in a demonstration of Palestinian unity between the three communities: the West Bank (Shahin), the Gaza Strip (Assaf), and the Palestinians of '48 (Dandan). The three of them draped themselves in Palestinian flags and together performed "My blood is Palestinian," in front of an adoring audience.⁸

Senior Palestinians also attended the Arab Idol finale in Beirut, including the billionaire Munib al-Masri, Bethlehem Mayor Vera Baboun, and Mahmoud Abbas's son, Yasser. Two days prior to the finale in Beirut, Mahmoud Abbas also

⁶ ["Thousands at Mohammed Assaf's show in 'Ilut stadium, Nazareth"](#) [in Arabic], *Panet*, April 25, 2014.

⁷ ["Manal Mousa and Khalaily have broken the 48 barrier"](#) [in Arabic], *Panet*, September 19, 2014.

⁸ [Arab Idol finals, 2017](#) [in Arabic], YouTube.

arranged for a political trip to Beirut in connection to the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. He nevertheless found time for a highly publicized meeting with the competition's finalists and even with the judge, Ahlam. On social media, many wondered how Abbas found time to meet with the Arab Idol contestants, but nevertheless did not visit a single Palestinian refugee camp during his visit. He was also mocked on social media for his meeting with the Emirati celebrity, Ahlam.⁹

For Palestinian leadership and society, the Arab Idol contest, like every cultural event or sporting contest, was an opportunity for national empowerment and a prominent stage on which to advocate their cause. The contest provided a unique opportunity to advocate for their national demands to establish an independent state, and to delegitimize the Israeli occupation. For Palestinians, and Arabs in general, the success of the two Palestinians finalists affirmed that "the Palestinian nation lives," culturally and socially, as well as politically, despite Israeli oppression.

A great deal of poetry and song in the Arab world deal with politics, nationalism, and its struggle; a broad genre of Palestinian songs earned the label, "revolutionary songs" symbolizing the national struggle. Assaf and Shahin provided the Palestinian people with a rare opportunity to feel a sense of collective joy and national pride in their cultural achievements.¹⁰

At the same time, on the night of the Arab Idol finale in February, some activists on social media were disparaging Yacoub Shahin's Arabness, and his Palestinian patriotism, because of his Christian faith (Shahin was the first Christian to win Arab Idol, despite the fact that Christians have been well represented among the competition's judges).¹¹ At the same time, Ameer Dandan was also being attacked on social media for his Israeli citizenship.¹²

Nevertheless, with his return to the Palestinian territories following his victory, Shahin was greeted as a national hero. Upon his arrival at the Allenby Bridge Crossing, Shahin was met by a Bethlehem youth marching band, alongside hundreds of ardent young fans. Shahin traveled directly to Ramallah, where before meeting with President Mahmoud Abbas, Shahin paid his respects by visiting the burial site of Yasser Arafat. Abbas, accompanied by senior PA officials, bestowed on Shahin the honorary title, "Palestinian cultural ambassador." Abbas used the opportunity to make a political statement about

⁹ [Twitter.com \[in Arabic\]](#).

¹⁰ For a discussion see: Ronni Shaked, *A Look Behind the Kufiyya: The Ethos of Struggle in Palestinian Society* [In Hebrew], forthcoming.

¹¹ "[Yacoub Shahin's religion contradicts his people](#)" [in Arabic], YouTube.

¹² "[Ameer Dandan is Israeli in his citizenship!!](#)" [in Arabic], YouTube:

the right of his nation to liberty, independence, and an independent Palestinian state. Facing Shahin, Abbas said that his victory on Arab Idol succeeded in spreading this message to every part of the world. From Ramallah, Shahin traveled to Bethlehem, where he was received by thousands.¹³

Ameer Dandan's hometown in Israel, Majd al-Krum, also greeted him as a Palestinian national hero, despite his falling short in the competition. Dandan took the stage wearing a kufiyya and wrapped in the Palestinian flag. The Palestinian leadership in Israel was represented by former MK Muhammad Barakeh, the Chairman of the High Follow-Up Committee of Arab Citizens of Israel in Israel, as well as others. In the audience were hundreds of young people, wearing Palestinian national kufiyyas. Dandan was also invited to Ramallah by Mahmoud Abbas, but his reception there was modest and relatively muted in comparison to Shahin.¹⁴

Overall, the Arab Idol competition gave expression to the complex network of relations between Palestinians and the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel. The Palestinians living in Israel are part of the Arab cultural landscape in the Middle East, and they both influence and are influenced by Arabic culture. Arab Idol highlighted their identity as Palestinians and Arabs, and on the other hand drew attention to their identity as citizens of the State of Israel. Both elements shape them as a subgroup of Palestinian society that possess unique characteristics, and are separate, to a great extent, from the rest of Palestinian communities in the Israeli-occupied territories and the diaspora.

[Ronni Shaked](#) is head of the Middle East unit at the [Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace](#), the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

[Itamar Radai](#) is academic director of the [Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation](#) at the [Moshe Dayan Center \(MDC\) for Middle Eastern and African Studies](#), Tel Aviv University.

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¹³ "[Thus Bethlehem received her son, who won the title of Arab Idol, Yacoub Shahin](#)" [in Arabic], Sayidaty.net, March 5, 2017.

¹⁴ "[Thousands of people in Ameer Dandan's reception in Majd al-Krum](#)" [in Arabic], Sonara.net, March 10, 2017.

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