

Music in Peace Building and Conflict Resolution: The Case of Fairouz

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Abstract

Today, the Lebanese singer Fairouz is regarded as a cultural and political icon, a symbol of peace and humanity, and embodiment of the soul of Lebanon. Her image formed by her powerful voice is so influential, to the extent that she is believed to have stopped the progress of the 15-year civil war in Lebanon that broke out in 1975. This article seeks to explore and discuss the ways Fairouz has revealed the power of music that overcomes the impasses of conflict, the value of peace, reconciliation, and coexistence both with her singing and silence on the one hand, and has become synonymous with the cause of freedom of Lebanon, reflecting both the cultural and religious diversity along with Lebanese nationalistic sentiments on the other.

Keywords: Fairouz, Music, Peace, Lebanon.

Barış İnşası ve Çatışma Çözümünde Müzik: Fairouz Vakası

Öz

Bugün Ortadoğu'nun birçok ülkesinde Lübnanlı şarkıcı Fairouz kültürel ve politik bir ikon, aynı zamanda da barış sembolü ve Lübnanlılık ruhunun somutlaşmış hali olarak kabul edilir. Fairouz'un güçlü ve etkileyici sesiyle biçimlenen imgesinin 1975 yılında Lübnan'da patlak veren 15 yıllık iç savaşın ilerlemesini durduracak derecede etkili olduğuna inanılır. Fairouz bir müzisyen olarak Ortadoğu'nun hem kültürel hem de dini çeşitliliğini Lübnanlı milliyetçilik duygularıyla birlikte yansıtarak Lübnan'ın özgürlük davasıyla eşdeğer noktaya ulaşmıştır. Bu makale, hem sesi hem de sessizliğiyle Fairouz'un şiddetli toplumsal çatışmaları, birlikte yaşam, uzlaşma ve barışla ikame etme konusunda müziğin gizli gücünü ortaya koyma biçimini keşfedip tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Fairouz, Müzik, Barış, Lübnan.

Introduction

Martyrs' Square, the heart of the downtown district of Beirut, Lebanon, hosted a historic concert on 17 September 1994. It had been nearly four years since the fifteen-year civil war, which resulted in an estimated 130,000 to 250,000 civilian fatalities, had ended. Over 40,000 people attended the concert, as well as 125 million watched it on TV. The star of the concert was one of

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the most prominent Arab singers of all time who has often been associated with Billie Holiday and referred to as “Callas of Arabia” (www.encyclopedia.com [Fairuz, 2004]) by Western critics among other ascriptions such as Arabs’ Ambassador, Neighbor to the Moon, Poet of the Voice, Velvet voice, the Soul of Lebanon, Seventh Pillar of Baalbeck, and Lebanese’s Ambassador to the Stars. Refusing to sing in Lebanon for almost twenty years, Fairouzⁱ, who has dominated the vocal scene in the Arab world since the 1950s, showed her disapproval of war and her reappearance was bearing the stamp of peace at the center of the city that had been devastated by the civil war.

Today, Fairouz is a cultural and political icon, a symbol of peace and humanity, and embodiment of the soul of Lebanon. She has become synonymous with the cause of freedom - in this case, of Lebanon. When one writes “Lebanon” in the YouTube search box, the first video out of the displayed results would be containing pictures of Lebanon’s historical sights and landscapes to the accompaniment of the song “Watani” (My nation) sung by Fairouz. Her songs are frequently broadcast on most radio stations and many TV channels, both in Lebanon and in the Arab world in general. Her image formed by her powerful voice is so influential, to the extent that she is believed to have stopped the progress of civil war in Lebanon. The following story told by one of the admirers of Fairouz in a documentary film entitled “We loved each other so much” illustrates that her music arouses such strong feelings and imaginary worlds in people’s hearts and minds that a person’s admiration to Fairouz is different than that of a teenager’s to any pop star:

“At school, we always listened to her music. Especially during art class, it was Fairouz all day long. My whole life was Fairouz. I day-dreamed of meeting her and photographing her. I will tell you something that happened and I witnessed it. I was taking pictures of Fairouz at the Baalbeck Festival. It was heavily clouded. The sky was black as ink. Indescribable. They used spotlights on the stage. Then Fairouz

descended onto the stage and she started singing: “O, moon, why don’t you show yourself, o moon?” And you won’t believe this but suddenly the clouds dispersed, the sky opened up and the moon appeared. Baalbeck was bathing in moonlight. It was as bright as day. I said to myself: Fairouz has the voice and she possesses the faith and the feeling. Only she can talk to the heavens, talk to God. And when God heard her, the clouds dissolved into nothing and Baalbeck became a source of light. Because she had sung to the moon: “O, moon, why don’t you show yourself, o moon?” (Janssen, Jack and Pieter van Huystee, 2003).

Introducing Fairouz

Fairouz, whose original name was Nuhād al-Haddād, was born in Beirut, Lebanon on 21 November 1935ⁱⁱ into a Syriac Orthodox family. In 1947, Mohammad Fleifel (also Mohamed or Mohammed Flayfel), a renowned Lebanese musician, teacher, and one of the founders of the Lebanese National Higher Conservatory of Music in Beirut, noticed young Nuhād’s talents and advised her to enroll in the conservatory. Fairouz studied at the conservatory for five years and began her musical career as a chorus member at the Lebanese Radio after she was discovered by Halim Al-Rumi (also Halim Elrumi or Halim El Roumi), a prominent composer, musician, and the head of the music department at the Lebanese Radio Station. He composed several songs for her and suggested her to take the stage name of Fairouz, which is the Arabic word for turquoise. As she was working at the Radio, Fairouz was introduced to Rahbani Brothers, Asi and Mansour, Lebanese composers, musicians, songwriters, authors, playwrights, dramatists, philosophers, and poets that helped shaping her singing carrier. During most of her singing career, Mansour Rahbani wrote her lyrics, and Asi composed and arranged the tunes. Asi and Fairouz were married in 1955ⁱⁱⁱ, and Fairouz then converted to Greek Orthodoxy, the church to which Asi was attached. Fairouz’s artistic collaboration with the Rahbani Brothers continued until 1979.

Fairouz's reputation as an exceptional musical talent had already been established by the late 1950s not only in Lebanon but also throughout the Arab world. Fairouz's first large-scale concert before a live audience took place in the summer of 1957 at the Baalbeck International Festival and from this date on, Fairouz's name has become a synonymous with Baalbeck. Fairouz met with extraordinary enthusiasm from listeners coming from various countries with a series of folkloric musical-theatrical shows staged with Rahbani Brothers at the Baalbeck Festival. The symbolic importance of the Baalbeck Festival and Fairouz singing at the festival for Lebanon is going to be addressed in a separate section. Rahbani Brothers wrote and composed hundreds of famous songs, many operettas or musical plays, which were the cornerstone works of the Rahbani Trio, three motion pictures for Fairouz during the 1960s. The more her songs, musical plays, and films were disseminated, the more she was acclaimed as one of the musical phenomena of the century. At that period, Fairouz also traveled abroad and performed in very prestigious musical events and venues of numerous countries such as Canada, USA, Brazil, Argentina, England, Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, Tunisia, and Algeria.

In 1971, Fairouz's fame became an international phenomenon after her sold out 11-city tour in the USA, Canada and Mexico. With the exception of historical epic "Petra," which was performed in both the Western and Eastern parts of then-divided Beirut in 1978, Fairouz stopped her singing activities in Lebanon with the outbreak of the civil war in 1975. For this reason, the date appeared at the very beginning of the present writing is critical because it stands for the end of a 15-year hiatus. During that period, Fairouz continued to give impressive performances in numerous countries around the world.

After Fairouz and the Rahbani Brothers end their professional relationships in 1979, Fairouz continued her carrier with her son, composer Ziad Rahbani, his friend the lyricist Joseph Harb, and composer Philemon Wehb. Fairouz's image has kept evolving continually as the legendary Arab singer since 1990s. Fairouz has continued to hold

sold out concerts around the world and she has sold more than 80 million records worldwide. The discography of Fairouz includes a large repertoire of more than 1500 songs out of which nearly 800 songs have been released. She has received numerous domestically and internationally prestigious awards and recognitions including Key to the Holy City awarded by Jerusalem Cultural Committee, Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres (Order of Arts and Letters) awarded by French President Francois Mitterrand in 1988, Jerusalem Award awarded by the Jerusalem Culture and Arts Committee in 1997, Chevalier de la Legion d'honneur (National Order of the Legion of Honor) awarded by French President Jacques Chirac in 1998, and Honorary Doctorate from the American University of Beirut in 2005.

Lebanon, which has a distinctive ethnic, religious and cultural diversity, gained its independence from France in 1943. The image of Fairouz reflected in the Middle East is inextricably intertwined both with this diversity and with nationalistic sentiments needed to be established at that time. Christopher Stone (2008) observes that:

... Fairouz and the Rahbanis were and continue to be key players in the protracted struggle over the identity of this new nation. Fairouz and the Rahbani Brothers (Asi and Mansour) have always been thought of as unifying forces in Lebanon and beyond, and this seems to have been their intention (p. 1).

The social, cultural, and technological developments, rapid expansion of urban communities, and increasing western influences are also discernible in her musical language. Her music incorporates both western techniques of composition and the elements of Middle Eastern traditional music. Her extensive repertoire comprises innumerable songs about romantic love, simple village life, patriotism, comedy, drama, philosophy, and contemporary politics many of which related to Palestinian nationalism^{iv}. The musical expression formed by this repertoire, which is blended with Western instrumentation

and Eastern melodies, and the special combination of lyrics, and unique timbre of her voice earned Fairouz the name of the “greatest Arabic singer of modern times.”

A Unique Diversity and Conflict: The Lebanese Civil War

Lebanon, composed of different ethnic and religious groups, is one of the most complex and diverse countries in the Middle East. Having experienced numerous violent clashes among various religious factions and ethnic groups throughout the years, the Lebanese knows the devastating effects of warfare and the value of peace and tolerance on earth. Lebanon, the very model of coexistence and peaceful diversity, enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity during the third quarter of the 20th century thanks to tourism, agriculture, and banking and it was often referred to as the “Switzerland of the East” because of its financial power. In addition, economic and educational opportunities and the cosmopolitan structure of the city of Beirut, the capital city, earned the reputation as the cultural capital of the Arab World. As Stewart (1996) suggests, “[b]y the 1960s, (the city) had become known as the “Paris of the Middle East” for its cultural and economic vigor” (p. 489). This economic prosperity, on the other hand, obscured the increasing tension among various religious groups.

The population of Lebanon comprises of various Christian and Muslim groups. Maronites, the Greek Orthodox, and Armenians are the three major Christian groups. Three major Muslim groups, on the other hand, include the Sunni, the Shi’a, and the Druze, an offshoot of Islam, who holds a faith incorporating aspects of Islam and Gnosticism, neo-Platonism and other philosophies. During French control, which lasted from 1920 to 1943 Christian groups, particularly the Maronites, were favored politically and economically. By official estimates, the Christian population was numerically superior during this period. The last general census of Lebanon, conducted in 1932, found that Christians outnumbered Muslims by a six-to-five ratio

(Hudson, 1968, p. 23; Phares, 1995, p. 89). Furthermore, the Maronites were estimated to be the largest single religious community, with 29 percent of the total population (Hudson, 1968, p. 25). In 1942, Lebanon’s religious diversity was reflected in its unique political system that was based on a power-sharing mechanism called confessionalism. Christian and Muslim groups shared out parliament seats based on a system in which six Christian-held seats for every five Muslim-held seats. The arrangement was designed to ensure stability in the sharing of political power (Goldschmidt, 1991 and Phares, 1995 as cited by Stewart, 1996, p. 490). With independence from French rule, the political supremacy of the Maronites was guaranteed in the National Pact made in 1943. However, there had always been an implicit tension among these religious groups. Salibi (1988) explains the constant rivalry for political and economic power among religious groups:

The plain fact remained that the religious communities in Lebanon were essentially tribes, or in any case behaved as tribes, and the game that came to be played between them was a tribal game. At an overt level, the game was a contest between different concepts of nationality for the country. At the covert level, tribal rivalries and jealousies were mainly involved (p. 55).

Due to high birthrates among Muslims and out-migration in the Maronite community, the numerical superiority began to change in favor of Muslims after 1960s. Furthermore, around and after the foundation of the state of Israel (1947-1949) and during the Arab-Israeli War in 1967, a huge number of Palestinian Arabs immigrated to Lebanon, which had a dramatic impact on the demography of the country. Colbert C. Held (1994) suggests that Beirut was estimated to have a population of 1.2 million – nearly 45 percent of the country’s total population – and approximately 350,000 of the country’s inhabitants were of Palestinian origin before the Civil War (p. 222). In the twentieth century, in addition, Beirut absorbed waves of immigrants, ranging from Armenians to Kurds, who increased both the size and the

diversity of its population (Khalaf and Khoury, 1993 as cited by Stewart, 1996, p. 488). According to Stewart (1996), Shi'as constituted the majority of Lebanon's population as early as 1975 and yet the Maronites maintained official political control, as laid down in the National Pact (p. 491). Hourani (1991), additionally, points out that economic inequality between Maronites and Muslims escalated the political and sectarian tensions.

These series of events occurred after mid-1950s caused the increase of tensions among religious groups. Each faction began to form its own armed forces and clashes between these forces exacerbated the already tense relations that caused Lebanese Civil War that broke out in 1975. Soon after the fighting erupted, Israeli army, Iranian guerrillas, military troops from the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, and U.N. peacekeeping forces were involved in the conflict (Stewart, 1996, p. 493).

The fight among militias lasted until the Syrian military intervention that took place in 1990. The Christian militias were dismantled by Syrian military and the political power was given to the Sunni Muslims under the Taif Agreement, signed in 1989. The effect of the fifteen years of war, which had destroyed much of the infrastructure and industry of Lebanon, was severe and destructive particularly on Beirut. The city, which hosted countless intense armed conflicts, was divided into two parts as east and west by the so-called "green line" which cut through Martyrs' Square. Fairouz's appearance in this square in 1994, on the other hand, marked this place as a symbol of peace and unity four years after the warfare ceased in 1990. As Dona J. Stewart (1996) states, "Although armed conflict has ended, many of the issues that aggravated relationships among the country's various confessional groups remain unresolved" (p. 487). At this point, only an extremely powerful national image such as Fairouz would be able to hearten people for a peaceful coexistence. Fairouz's role in overcoming the problem of joining divergent sectors of society, reconstruction of Beirut, and

the reunification of Lebanon is eloquently described by Stewart (1996):

For many Lebanese the first tangible-and highly symbolic-proof of the country's emergence from civil war and return to normalcy was the return of Fairuz, often considered the Arab world's greatest living singer, to the Beirut stage on 17 September 1994. A highly emotional concert, the Greek Orthodox singer's first in Lebanon since the onset of civil war 1975, took place in the ruins of Martyrs' Square. The mixed audience of Muslims and Christians embodied hope for Beirut's future based on multiethnic cooperation (p. 495).

Fairouz and the Baalbeck International Festival

The Baalbeck International Festival, which has been organized since 1955 except between the years of 1975 and 1996 due to the Lebanese Civil War, is one the oldest and the most prestigious cultural events in the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean as well as, in Boullata's (2003) words, "the clearest manifestation of the cultural cohabitation of East and West" (p. 24). In 1956, Baalbeck Festival became one of the government's institutions aiming at promoting the cultural and touristic life of Lebanon. The festival has been taking place annually during the months of July and August in the Roman ruins of the Baalbek Temples in the ancient Roman Acropolis, one of the largest and well preserved Roman temples ever built. The festival, with the attendance of hundreds of thousands of people from around the world, has featured numerous international artists who perform classical music, opera, jazz, modern world music, rock and pop music as well as ballet and theatre. Since their first appearance in 1957, Fairouz and the Rahbani Brothers have become an indispensable part of the Baalbeck International Festival. Fairouz has often been nicknamed "the seventh pillar of Baalbeck" with a reference to the six famed great pillars of the temple of Jupiter in Baalbek. The poet Henri Zoghaib tells us how Mansour Rahbani

remembered the first performance at the Baalbeck Festival in 1957:

Opening night came and none of the ladies of the committee knew what was going to be in the show. At the beginning of the first scene the director Sabri Sharif [Sabri al-Sharif] put Fairouz on the base of one of the columns and shined the light on her from the bottom of the pillar and from different angles. This made it seem to the audience that she was flying in the air while singing “Lebanon, How Beautiful and Green.” The first scene was stunning in terms of the audience’s reception, the applause igniting in a wave that was a mixture of excitement, tears and bliss. The whole event was put on before a very responsive crowd. We did the show for just two nights, as had been previously decided (each night approximately 5000 spectators came to see what Lebanon would present between the foreign acts) The press praised us, and we were happy to see that they understood what we were trying to do . . . and they focused on the necessity of repeating these “Lebanese Nights” at Baalbeck (Zoghaib, 1993 as cited by Stone, 2008, p. 40).

Fairouz became the most demanded artist of the Baalbeck International Festival after her first appearance in 1957 and her performances continued to amaze large audiences every year until 1973. Exercising the uplifting power of music, Fairouz’s performances reminded the Lebanese of the feeling of solidarity in Lebanon. The longing for this feeling of solidarity rendered Fairouz’s first appearance at the Festival in 1998 after a twenty-four-year hiatus very special. This issue is effectively addressed with these words:

Fairouz is a unique phenomenon who . . . became the symbol of Baalbeck. It is one of those rare times when an artist is transformed into a symbol for the nation In the darkest days she did not give up her belief that art is the most lasting face of Lebanon, nor did she lose faith in the ability of art to save the world. Thus she

became a symbol of Lebanon and a sign of a desired utopian Lebanon. With this inspiration and symbolic voice she returns to the ruins of Baalbeck. We greet her return like the renewal of the promise and we hope for the resurrection of the utopian dream from its ashes (Sa’id, Kh., 1998 as cited by Stone, 2008, p. 13).

Lebanese journalist Abduh Wāzin also writes about the return of Fairouz to the Baalbeck:

The return of Fairouz is not just a return to the fortress and its steps, but is a recalling of the myth that the Rahbani Brothers and Fairouz created, and which was the only myth that withstood the destructive war. There was Fairouz in her white clothes like a statue of the pure Virgin [Mary] (Wāzin, 1998, p. 18 as cited by Stone, 2008, p. 2-3).

Conclusion

Johan Galtung suggests that “Art may make us forget the ordinary, catapulting us for some time to a virtual, more spiritual level where we meet a pure, more detached reality, a form in space (visual art, sculpture) and/or time (music, literature), detached from empirical reality” (2008, p. 54). Creating this uplifting effect on people with her music and voice, Fairouz has always been the one who reminds them about empathy, peace, and an optimistic future. Even though she maintained a pact of silence during the Lebanese Civil War that tore the country, her image continued to create a sense of belonging to same unity in Lebanon and with her significant role in the struggles to define, and shape Lebanese identity, Fairouz is recognized as the Lebanese musical ambassador. Every political and religious group who were fighting with each other during the Civil War could reach a compromise on Fairouz and her songs dedicated to the human being. Nizar Qabbani, a prominent Syrian poet, suggests:

When Fairouz sings, mountains and rivers follow her voice, the mosque and the church, the oil jars and loaves of bread. Through her, every one of us is made to

blossom, and once we were no more than sand; men drop their weapons and apologize. Upon hearing her voice, our childhood is molded anew (Qabbani cited by Blanford, 2008).

To sum up, Fairouz has showed us the power of music that overcomes the impasses of conflict and the value of peace, reconciliation, and coexistence both with her singing and silence.

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ⁱ Fairouz is also spelled as Fairuz, Fayrouz, Feyrouz, Feiruz, or Feyruz in different sources.

ⁱⁱ Although this date is given by many sources as the exact birth date of Fairouz, it is not definite. Some sources suggest that she was born either in 1934 or 1933.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to some sources, Asi and Fairouz got married in 1954.

^{iv} For an analysis of Palestine's connotations in the Rahbani Brothers' musical plays, see Fawwaz Trabulsi's *Jabal al-Suwwan: Filastin fi fan Fairuz wa-l-Rahabneh (Mountains of Flint: Palestine in the Art of Fairuz and the Rahbani Brothers)*, al-Karmel, no. 57 (Fall 1998), pp. 203-12. 7.