

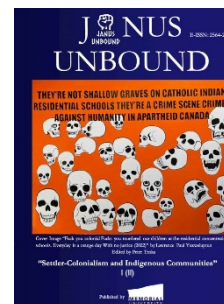
Title: Genius in the People: On Collective Resistance and Musical Instrument Making in the Jails of the Colonizer

Author(s): Louis Brehony

Source: *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies*, vol. 1, no. 11

(Spring 2022), pp. 36-52

Published by: *Memorial University of Newfoundland*



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Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies is published by Memorial University of Newfoundland

Genius in the People: On Collective Resistance and Musical Instrument Making in the Jails of the Colonizer

*Janus Unbound: Journal
of Critical Studies*
E-ISSN: 2564-2154
1(2) 36-52
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Louis Brehony



The great escape of five Palestinian political prisoners from Gilboa Prison in September 2021, through a tunnel dug with jailhouse spoons, captured the imaginations of many supporting the Palestinian cause. Though they faced recapture and severe punishments, their actions spoke the truth of a line once sung by Umm Kulthum: “Patience has its limits.”¹ Israeli jails have become a frontline of struggle, driving those captured towards self-education and collective political culture, serving to redefine concepts of *sumud* (steadfastness) and anti-colonial resistance. That music is central to such processes is shown in other examples of the grassroots ingenuity bred among “those-in-*sumud*.”²

Imprisoned at Gilboa in 2010, Fida’ al-Shaer, a Syrian musician from the occupied Golan, led his cellmates in a clandestine project to build an oud, the central instrument in many Arab musical traditions. Crafting the oud out of everyday objects and smuggling in strings, the inmates expanded established practices of political prisoner songwriting and orally transmitted singing connected to their daily struggles, treading paths comparable to other prison struggles in anti-colonial movements. Following the musical narratives of al-Shaer, and Meari’s definition of *sumud* as signifying a “revolutionary becoming” (2014), I turn to the often overlooked contributions to Marxism of Fidel Castro,³ whose thoughts on the Cuban process and the development of a “genius people” find parallels with other anti-imperialist histories. Adopting the notion of genius as a collective phenomenon in revolutionary processes, I return to discuss the oud’s symbolic power as a motivating tool of national liberation.

Introduction: the Palestinian Crisis and Schools of Revolution

Oh Naqab, be strong, be glorious and pioneering
Become a sword, a teaching
From the lessons of the intifada
—Salah Abd al-Ruba, “Ya Naqab Kuni Iradi” (Oh Naqab, Be Strong)

The movement of *asra* (“political prisoners”; singular *asir*) in Zionist prisons finds enduring resonance among Palestinians, with a little context needed to find out why. Despite the release of Palestinian political prisoners in the 1990s being claimed as a victory of the Oslo “peace” process,⁴ Israeli forces arrested 120,000 Palestinians between 1993 and 2019, with growing yearly numbers of child prisoners in the 2010s.⁵ Three decades on from the 1991 Madrid Conference, which poured water on a popular intifada, kickstarted the Oslo negotiations process, and rubber stamped Israeli colonization the collaborationist Palestinian Authority (PA) born through the process remains deeply unpopular, and is exposed as totally complicit in Israel’s violent repression.

Prominent arrests involving PA collusion include the January 2002 capture of Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) leader Ahmad Sa’adat, later transferred with British imperialist connivance to Zionist detention (MacIntyre), and the September 2016 arrest of activist Basel al-Araj, who was subsequently murdered on 6 March 2017 by Israeli “border police” in al-Bireh, near Ramallah. Anti-corruption figure Nizar Banat was arrested and killed by PA police on 24 June 2021. Actions in solidarity with prisoners of Zionism—and the actions of the prisoners themselves—therefore work counter to both Israeli colonization and the Palestinian elite class presiding over the impasse felt by those resisting on the ground and in exile. Steadfastness, critique, and the fight for an alternative path have formed part of the song worlds of new generations of Palestinian musicians.

Despite Zionism’s overwhelming, imperialist-sponsored militarism,⁶ felt most sharply in aerial assaults on blockaded Gaza, the war on Palestinian resistance remains unwinnable for Israel. Yet, notwithstanding the symbolic victory gained by the May 2021 Unity Intifada and international mass identification with the Palestinian struggle, the crisis of leadership over the national movement is debilitating, described in class terms by Khaled Barakat as aborting popular uprisings and preventing victory.⁷ The latter is arguably compounded by the Syrian crisis and de facto acceptance of Israel’s Golan occupation by the dominant global powers.

That the “frontlining” of political prisoners’ resistance in national liberation movements reflects both the crises facing such struggles and the vanguard roles played by many of those imprisoned is reflected in waves of anti-imperialist confrontation in Ireland, which appears in several analogies in this essay.⁸ Seen in this way, the determination and *sumud* of political prisoners held by the Zionist entity serve as a reminder to comprador bourgeois collaboration with the politics of “peace” processes and “security” collaboration. At a time of a crisis, campaigners have seen solidarity with those in Israeli confinement as a way of rebuilding the Palestinian Revolution.⁹

The story of musician Fida’ al-Shaer told in the next section serves as a graphic reminder that Syrians from the occupied Golan form a sparse but important contingent of those locked up in Zionist jails, in a context where crisis and proxy warfare in Syria since 2011 has included frequent Israeli bombings.¹⁰ The dichotomy of national crisis and heroic prison struggle alluded to above may have currency in the presence of Syrians within the Israel prison system. The movement for the liberation of the Syrian Golan faces its own complex challenges and continual Zionist encroachment, yet Syrians-in-*sumud* also offer a clear rallying cry: Majed Farhan al-Shaer, the father of Fida’, was hailed as a national hero in Damascus upon his release from Gilboa in January 2016 (Mijo). The narrative of his son hints at the

daily solidarity forged by Palestinian and Syrian political prisoners inside Israel's regime, while hinting at wider creative practices and resistant artistry under colonialist regimes.

Zionist prisons have long been training grounds for those captured by the occupation regime, with music culture forming an important component of daily and periodic resistance, a tool of education, and providing methodologies for the transmission of collective and revolutionary narratives. Harking back to the days of British occupation, repertoires of prisoner struggle include "Min Sijn 'Akka" (From Akka Prison), attributed to Nuh Ibrahim in the wake of the 1930 British execution of three anti-Zionist activists, and "Ya Zulam al-Sijn Khayyam" (Oh Darkness of the Prison Over Us), written by Syrian poet Najib al-Rayes during his imprisonment in a French occupation jail in 1922. Both songs are widely sung by Palestinian political prisoners on days of protest on the inside. The ingenuity of prison songwriting, without instruments and recording technologies, requires a particularly communal commitment for its transmission, especially when melodies are attached to the words. The poem "Ya Naqab Kuni Iradi" by Salah Abd al-Ruba was composed and sung collectively inside Naqab prison camp during the 1987 prisoner uprising and has become an anthem in the years since, with performances both in and out of prison.¹¹

Also referring to "Ya Naqab," the narrative of released longstanding *asir* Asim al-Ka'abi reveals the preservation and re-transmission of sung poetry composed in earlier moments of struggle. Describing Palestinian presence in Zionist prisons as "graduating through the school of revolution," his own 18-year journey was shaped by becoming a leading organizer, entering into and helping to further collective political culture and cross-factional cooperation on the inside.¹² Though few *asra* consider themselves musicians, al-Ka'abi indicates that singing is an essential practice, inseparable from a calendar of protest and commemoration:

On Prisoners Day, we always sing "Ya Zalam al-Sijn Khayyam." When a prisoner is released we sing "I'tla'na Wa Qaharna al-Sijjan" (We Rose Out and Conquered the Jailor).¹³ Every occasion has its own specific songs. There are new songs that we learn after years in prison, coming via new prisoners, and we memorize them, and add them to the lists of songs we sing on specific days.

These occasions include Yowm al-Asir (Political Prisoners' Day), Nakba day and other commemorations, and campaigns of action tied to current conditions on the inside. Al-Ka'abi reports that all new detainees join a political faction and become part of a cell and cross-prison organization. It was from comrade al-Ka'abi that I first heard a prisoner account of the story of Fida' al-Shaer, which had gained renown among inmates shunted through the Zionist jail network: an oud built in a prison cell and a collective commitment to build and guard the instrument.

Meari's political prisoner ethnographies point to prison singing as part and parcel of building *sumud* culture, where anti-colonial activity *becomes* revolutionary through emergent inventions, social forms, and the development of knowledge production:

Sumud is a possibility that is actualized in particular moments and rises up as a potentiality in others. It is materialized through a complex web of relations

to the self, comrades, the revolutionary political organization, and the community, as well as the colonizer. (Meari)

Arguments on the acts of revolutionary becoming are present in histories of confrontation outside prison, as well as inside other colonial and imperialist jails. For political prisoners moreover, as leading *asira* Khalida Jarrar states in reflection of her own imprisonment and fight for the right to education of women under the Zionist regime, “Prison stakes out a moral position that must be renewed daily and can never be put behind you” (Baroud and Pappé 175).

From the vantage point of a developing socialist process and a tightening US blockade of Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Union, former political prisoner Fidel Castro could find that “the most important resource this country has is the investment it has made in the minds of the people” (Castro 1992), with culture and education central to the survival of the revolution. Though Cubans had succeeded in wielding national sovereignty in ways that inspire many, including Palestinians, who continue to suffer colonial conditions, political culture and the idea of the masses as “resource” and “solution” to the nation’s problems find intriguing relevance. Themes of mass ingenuity and communalized political vivacity will be expanded on below, following the story of the Gilboa Prison oud maker.

Fida’ al-Shaer and Collective Oud-making in Gilboa Prison

I imagined that these notes would scream beauty and melody, and break down the prison walls so that people could hear them. A cry for freedom and hope ... to conquer the jailor. (Al-Shaer)



Figure 1. Fida’ al-Shaer returns to perform in France following his release from an Israeli prison, February 2014. Photo supplied by the performer.

Paris, April 2010. Grainy audience footage of a solo oud improvisation shows Fida' al-Shaer in calm concentration, performing in a low-lit theatre in front of black and white moving images of land and sea; not the rural coast of a Bilad al-Sham country, but the 1929 silent film *Finis Terra*, filmed off the Brittany coast. Occasionally he glances at the projection, but the sense is that he knows the film footage, alert to a sense of temporality and space despite the improvised nature of the performance.

Recorded shortly after, Fida' would perform a Paris event for Palestinian Political Prisoners' Day, 11 April. The self-composed instrumental piece "Baladi" (My Country), played in front of another black and white film, this time blending imagery of wounded children with defiant protesters waving Palestinian flags, displays techniques developed earlier during Fida's training at the Damascus Conservatory. The double stops also hint at his fondness for Iraqi player Naseer Shamma. He'd performed Shamma's "Ishraq" (Sunshine) at the Star of Golan contest in May 2009, and the seven-course oud Fida' played in France, made by Egyptian luthier Mohammad Ali Ja'far, replicated Shamma's own model. Little would he know that three months later this finely crafted instrument would be confiscated, and himself thrown into an Israeli prison, spending the following three Political Prisoners' Days in confinement and protest.

Hailing from Majdal Shams, any route in and out of Fida's hometown in the northern Golan requires navigating Israeli border controls and airports: the site of his immediate arrest upon returning from Paris. Holding travel documents, rather than passports,¹⁴ and facing extremely poor chances of acquiring foreign visas compounds the daily realities of Zionist colonial rule. However, having tread the unusual path for a Syrian in occupied Golan of studying in the capital was only one factor in the vindictive claim of the Israeli authorities that Fida' had had contact with a "foreign" country. His father, an anti-occupation poet, would be imprisoned on the same charge.

My interviews and informal discussions with Fida' showed the artist to be highly committed to a Syrian national identity maintained in steadfast defiance of—and propelled by—the partition and occupation of his country. Offering the impression of being energetically engaged in local music making, including in the musical education of young Syrians in the Golan, Fida' described his commitment as valuing the nation (*al-watan*) and people (*al-sha'b*) over alignment to particular political party. At the same time, he offered the palpable sense that his fraternal feelings towards the Palestinian people pre-date his imprisonment. Fida' sees his musical and political contribution to Palestine solidarity events in Europe as the real pretext for his arrest:

There were video presentations about Israeli war crimes, not just in Gaza but in the rest of Palestine. It also aimed to show what was positive about Palestine, the energy and creativity of its people. We spoke about how Zionism had captured Palestine and behaved like Nazis towards its people.

Their reaction was huge and they arrested me as soon as I arrived at Ben Gurion airport. They had no evidence against me so they decided to charge me with being a foreign agent. During the interrogations an officer told me, 'we'll make you forget music once you're in prison.' I told him, 'I'll forget my

name before I ever forget music.’ The experience made me more determined to take music with me.¹⁵

Asserting that the oud was a privilege not afforded to Arab prisoners, the Israeli regime refused requests for Fida’ to be reunited with his instrument. He would nevertheless compose an impressive 13 musical works during his three year imprisonment at Gilboa, including five pieces for oud, three for piano, and a series of songs set to Palestinian prisoners’ poetry. The latter included a fruitful collaboration with veteran *asir* Walid Daqqa,¹⁶ resulting in a musical play, and a birthday song for the grandson of Ahmed Abu Jader. Though Fida’s ear training certainly helped—without an instrument, he admitted to feeling “like Beethoven when he went deaf”—a handful of these musical pieces were composed with the aid of an extraordinary instrument built by Fida’ with the support of his comrades in Gilboa.

As soon as I arrived I began to think about how to construct an oud. The Red Crescent would bring in chess and backgammon tables and I ended up using these materials to make the oud. Of course the comrades inside helped me, in gathering materials or in holding the pieces of wood in place, things like that. They taught me how to make glue out of rice, to cook it in a certain way that it would really stick ... There’s a process whereby it becomes really sticky, you mash it and extract the sticky part to make glue ...

It was a long thought process and many other prisoners were involved in making the oud a reality: everyone who had a chess table they didn’t want brought it to me. I made the sound box relatively easily but then I had to think about how to produce the keys, the head ... Youths started to collect wooden spoons and brought them over. This was great because they were already rounded and could be used as tuning pegs. They would be housed in the bottom part of a sweeping brush, which would form the head of the oud; we had brushes to clean our rooms and I just removed the hair and took the wooden head. I got help from a lot of comrades in the room, and even when we were split and dispersed around the prison wings, others wanted to help without requesting anything in return.

During this process, one of the comrades took apart a metal pan and created a saw for me out of it. At this point it became necessary to have someone play the role of a lookout on the door and give us a signal if we needed to hide everything—it was important that we didn’t get caught while we were working. So the comrade would peep through a gap in the door and if they [the guards] came, we’d hear the signal (*‘zagbrit’*). And we’d quickly put the parts of the oud inside a backgammon table, making it look like we were playing a game and that there was nothing out of the ordinary going on ...

The strings were smuggled into the jail hidden in the seams of clothing. This would have been the most difficult thing to manufacture in prison so once we had the strings inside they were well-hidden in clothes.



Figure 2. A replica of the oud constructed in Golan, built by Fida' al-Shaer in Majdal Shams. Photo by the performer.

Following the observations of 'Ali Jaradat on the uniqueness of collective heroism inside Zionist jails, Meari views Palestinian *asra* illustrating a “singular-collective mode,” sharing no familiarity with that liberal ideal, the autonomous individual (553). Adding weight to such experiences, techniques of inside punishment and isolation aim, according to al-Ka'abi, to limit human contact, sometimes resulting in “prolonged period[s] before you meet anyone else. So we are imprisoned in our own country and then separated on the inside.” Challenging such willful policies of segregation, the creation of political space forms an important component of *sumud* practice among those-in-*sumud*, challenging restrictions on their gathering and enabling collective action, as noted by Samah Saleh (27), writing on Palestinian women prisoners. The experiences cited are revealing of the dialectics of steadfastness, whereby interpretations of *sumud* as patiently waiting betray its protagonistic, revolutionary qualities, and the roles played by *asra* musicians and poets in helping to mobilize confrontation with the regime.

It was while the oud was being made that others began to bring poetic and sung ideas to Fida', showing both the excitement and impatience of the *asra* to be involved in producing music. As well as Abu Jader's song, Fida' describes Walid Daqqa arriving in the wing as the oud was being made, quickly sparking a productive partnership of sitting daily to work on *qasa'id* and other pieces.¹⁷ The oud was still a work in progress but there was a keenness to put it to use as quickly as possible. As soon as the strings were in place, Fida' would play the instrument for others in the cell: "I'd play it in the day and hide it at nighttime—the oud had to be put together and dismantled every day so we wouldn't be caught with it during their raids of the cells."

There were limitations on how much playing could be done once the oud was complete (Fida' actually made two ouds, both confiscated and one only partially finished), but Fida' writes in his own reflections that "there were beautiful moments" in the days that passed before the *asra* were caught with the instrument (Al-Shaer). When the oud was found by prison guards, an outstanding act of solidarity saw Daqqa claim the work as his own, but the Zionist authorities didn't believe him and imposed collective punishment. Al-Ka'abi entered Gilboa after Fida' had been freed and learned that the guards had "taken the oud and thrown Walid into an isolation cell for a week. He was fined, mistreated, and transferred to another prison, all because, apparently, making instruments is not allowed."

For the jailers, taking away the makeshift instrument fulfilled the threat of making the musician forget his music. But, in one sense, the damage to the colonial prison regime was done, in the creation of a politically oriented campaign, in the instigation of musical activity, in potentially long-lasting repertoires of music, poetry, and in the retelling of the story by *asra* dispersed routinely around the prison network. Repeating the narrative, argued Edward Said (56), was essential to preventing the Palestinian case from being ignored. Like the September 2021 Gilboa escape, the defeat of this short term battle could nevertheless fuel further resistance on the path to freedom.

In the throes of Arab history, where the destruction of cultural heritage forms one feature of the redivision of the world, where Palestinian cultural and literary artifacts remain under Israeli lock and key since the lootings of 1948 and other Zionist onslaughts, and where forced migration accompanies imperialist warfare across a broad region, the oud could be forgiven for being heard as solely or primarily representing tragedy (Beckles Willson). Palestinian and Syrian wielding of the oud present positive challenges against attempts to colonize it and erase its indigenous role, a factor leading many to protest against Israel's "oud festival" in occupied Jerusalem (Masar Badil). In contrast to the "passive resistance, and even defeatism" seen by Qabaha and Hamamra as signifiers of the normalizing PA strategy in the decades after Oslo (37), the resistance of the political prisoners is vivacious and vital.

Under Zionist interrogation, Fida' refers to a wish to silence him, to make him forget Arab music as much as to forget the physical theft of Majdal Shams. Instrumental confiscation of this kind is an act of disarmament of the oppressed by the oppressor, but what does the turning of the prison cell into an instrument building workshop represent in counter to this act of colonial theft? What is represented by conjuring up an oud apparently from nothing? The following passage theorizes on

mass ingenuity and implications for “becoming revolutionary” during political imprisonment and beyond.

Revolutionary Becoming and the Development of a Genius People

The late Fidel Castro Ruz was a noted supporter of the Palestinian cause, a staunch critic of Zionism and imperialist intervention in the Middle East, and oversaw Cuban solidarity with the Palestinian liberation movement over the decades of his leadership. During his own imprisonment under the dictatorship of pre-revolutionary Cuba, he famously declared:

I do not fear prison, as I do not fear the fury of the miserable tyrant who took the lives of 70 of my comrades. Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me. (Castro 1993)

Having graduated with other fighters of pre-revolutionary Cuba through the “fertile prison” of political organization and education after leading the 26 July 1953 attack on the Moncada barracks,¹⁸ Fidel would build on his prison time reading of Marx, Lenin, and a range of other texts to develop foundational cultural perspectives in the revolution’s early years. These would prove to be important themes during decades of socialist construction. Published as “Words to the Intellectuals,”¹⁹ his June 1961 speech at Cuba’s José Martí National Library, two months after the US invasion at the Bay of Pigs, noted that, unlike China, Cuba had not yet had its Yen’an conference of artists,²⁰ but that the economic and social revolutions taking place in Cuba “must inevitably produce a cultural Revolution in our country.”²¹ Fidel’s appeal to artists and intellectuals was broad and cosmopolitan, arguing not in favour of particular forms, but for advocates of each to contribute under the banner of the revolutionary nation.

While Che Guevara’s own works were pivotal to the Cuban revolution’s early great debates, Che credited Fidel with having an uncanny closeness to the pulse of the people (Yaffe 2009, 131), won through a particular understanding of their interests and a relationship built through mass rallies and debates.²² Though Fidel drew back on Che, his own Marxism can be charted through the lessons of the revolutionary process, weaved not through treatises on historical materialism but through an abundance of extensive speeches, lectures, interviews, and newspaper columns. Fidel’s own genius is proclaimed by both his supporters and detractors, with the former including Palestinian and Syrian figures, and popular opinion. Palestinian Marxist George Habash studied the Cuban example and frequently discussed Fidel’s role in popular consciousness (85; 105).

In 1978, during his inaugural speech at the Friedrich Engels Vocational School in Pinar del Rio, Fidel returned to a theme he had explored during his imprisonment in 1954 (Mencía 43), telling an audience of students and medical workers:

I do not think that, in the world of the future, or in the homeland of the future, there will be any room for great celebrities; because the great celebrities (or so-called geniuses) belong essentially to an era wherein an insignificant minority of the population could attend school or become cultured, and when the masses were ignorant. But in tomorrow’s

world there will not be one, two or ten people who can become cultured; for tomorrow's world will be a society in which millions can become cultured, in which millions can attend school. Then there will be millions of developed and cultivated intellects, and one individual who has had a great deal of education or who knows a great deal will not seem to be the wise man of the people, because all the people will be wise men. There will not be one or two geniuses, because there will be a genius people. Those alleged super-gifted individuals will not exist, because there will be a super-gifted people (Castro 1978).

Fidel saw the development of “a genius people” in Cuba's rapid achievements in literacy, schooling, and culture which, rather than promoting “elite” mentalities seen under capitalism, was coming to see individual distinction as carrying an obligation to empathize with others, “without humiliating [them] with pretensions to superiority” (Castro 1978).

By the early 1990s, with the fall of the Soviet Union and tightening US blockade threatening Cuba with economic ruin, Fidel would draw on concepts of revolutionary duty and collective achievement, seeing “the solutions to the country's problems” resting “on the investment that the revolution has made in the people's minds” (Castro 2002). Narrating the development of medical schools, polyclinics, agricultural, and technological centres, Fidel referenced the work of Spare Parts Brigades, which had begun as a partly spontaneous movement in 1961 and had become integrated into Cuban institutions. Akin to the Palestinian prisoners' scrambling for scrap wood for the oud, mass brigades of Cuban workers scoured landfill sites and adapted recycled materials to avoid paralysis in metal industries, with the US blockade preventing Cubans from obtaining parts for US-made machinery used previously. Revolutionary magazine *Bohemia* exhorted: “Your machine is also your trench—defend it!” concluding that “the battle of spare parts leads to victory over imperialism!” (Wolfe).

Reflecting on this earlier period, Fidel summarized his thoughts to the Cuban Academy of Sciences:

I was defending the thesis that genius is nothing without the group, without the society, without others. Without the nation, it is nothing. If a genius is a disinterested and a noble genius, willing to dedicate the intelligence he received from nature to the service of his people, then that genius is nothing without the revolution (Castro 2002).

As part of a youth brigade to Cuba, I was an awestruck witness to Fidel speaking to Cubans and international supporters at Karl Marx theatre, Havana on 26 July 2005. Highlighting the concreteness of Fidel's philosophical contribution, a speech spanning some four hours focused on the achievements of the Battle of Ideas, in the struggle for energy efficiency, and dealing with the threats of the then G.W. Bush regime against the island. Leading Cuba scholar Helen Yaffe argues that this period bore the stamp of Fidel's influence, in “mass, voluntary mobilisation ... reminiscent of the revolutionary fervour of the early 1960s” (2000 70). Blending tech-

nological progress with youth engagement in door-to-door social programs, the genius envisaged by and attributed to Fidel spoke to his claims on such ideas being meaningless without a committed people willing to put them into action.²³

In the speeches of Fidel, the concept of genius is both collective and individual, but irrevocably revolutionary, as a break with capitalist notions of elite attainment, and a fundamental shift towards seeing the conscious mass, rather than the superior individual, as the stimulant for change. His evolving reflections spanning over half a century suggest a process in movement—a revolution continually becoming, revolving until victory. In his 1961 “Words to the Intellectuals,” Fidel had spoken in first person plural, recognizing “the people” as the essence of the process, calling out to intellectuals and artists to reject privileges and join in forging new generations of human thinkers, at a transcendent moment in world history (Kumaraswami).

There is a revolutionary backstory and philosophy of *inventos* (or producing creatively to deal with shortages) at the heart of Cuban attempts to deal with sanctions and underdevelopment. *Inventos* had meant scrambling for machinery parts with the immediate onset of the US blockade in 1962, but this would later translate into a turn to organic farming with the fall of the Soviet Union, or the late-century street level development of socially conscious Cuban hip-hop, which later won the sponsorship of the socialist government (Jacobs-Fantauzzi). All of these movements echoed Fidel’s earlier commitment to define in broad, inclusive terms that artists and intellectuals could develop novel ways of contributing to the revolutionary process (Kumaraswami 540).

The challenges of the continually colonized Palestine and Syrian Golan are of course vastly different. However, notions of revolutionary becoming find interesting analogies among those for whom anti-colonial, anti-imperialist struggle are daily priorities. In the Marxism of Fidel, collective genius is aspirational, process-driven and, like the revolution itself, dependent on the masses. Seeing the destination in “tomorrow’s world” of socialist society means interrogating the conditions of today, finding makeshift solutions, developing new mentalities, and forging a decisive break with capitalism’s self-centred competitiveness.

Decolonizing society in the interests of the oppressed fuses practical and ideational initiatives in movement. Reporting in 1959 on the progress of the Algerian revolution, its challenges, its depiction internationally, and on the brutal lengths to which French imperialism had gone to maintain its foothold in North Africa, Fanon observed that the new human being was “no longer the product of hazy and phantasy-ridden imaginations,” but a reality (19). This juncture had as its goal “an Algeria open to all, in which every kind of genius may grow” (7).

Both the Cuban and Algerian examples saw victory in sight, and in the former case, the consolidation of state power in the hands of the revolutionary movement. Fanon and Che were joined in envisioning the new human being of a revolutionary society by Palestinian communist Ghassan Kanafani (2015 484) after the 1967 Arab defeat and Naksa, or colonization of swathes of Palestine and Syria. Voiced alongside his critique of Zionism and Arab reaction, Kanafani called for “new blood,” renewed Leninist organization at the grassroots, and creative responses to the crisis. Formed in an era of reaction, this appeal was simultaneously a thought on collective action, an act of foresight, and a view that saw beyond the systemic limits of liberal discourse. Revolution is a process, not merely an event or a year to pinpoint.

The active process of collective resistance rejects what Kanafani saw as the tendencies of lamentation and withdrawal in some critical views of defeat, which proved its proponents were “less capable of *sumud*” (1990).²⁴ Further examining the “singular-collective mode,” Meari concludes: “In this sense, heroes or icons, the terms Palestinians use to refer to Palestinians-in-*sumud*, do not underpin the liberal subjective state of individual exceptionalism” (554). In many ways, the reactionary period in which we are living, and crises which push the political prisoners to the fore as leading anti-imperialist actors and national inspirations does also highlight their exceptional character. Yet the mode of being represented by *sumud* outgrows the straitjacket of liberal universalism and simply being human, as Meari shows, to present revolutionary, liberationist potential for humanity.

With these words, and the social dynamism and time in prison which pushed Fidel towards conceptualizing popular ingenuity, there is logic in conceiving of the organized mass of Palestinian political prisoners as forming a body of collective genius, dealing inventively and with inescapably political force to resist their internal dismemberment by the settler-colonial regime. The actions of the Gilboa *asra* in mounting an audacious escape in 2021 and constructing musical instruments in the time of Fida’ al-Shaer’s imprisonment respond to the calls of Kanafani, Fanon, and Che for new human beings, and further substantiate Khalida Jarrar’s claim that political prisoners form a new moral existence, defiantly taking the future in their own hands and highlighting their own vanguard role. That Syrians are involved also offers glimpses of the kinds of cross-Arab resistance envisaged by Kanafani, Habash, and other key thinkers. In so doing their actions evoke the revolutionary future imagined by Fidel across the horizon of socialist construction.

Producing instruments under colonial incarceration finds confluence in the experience of Irish republican political prisoners in British occupation prisons, where harps were crafted and secret recording sessions took place during the post-1969 struggle.²⁵ Themes of land, steadfastness, and heroism also found their place in Ireland’s rebel songwriting. At the same time, the stories of musical activism offered in this essay carry specificity to the cases of Palestinians and Syrians under occupation, referencing the kinds of guerrilla artistry that have featured in histories of the displaced. It is certainly worth considering whether the extreme energy crises which accompany imperialist and Zionist sanctions on Syria and Gaza spur youth towards embracing acoustic instruments like the oud and buzuq. Oud player Reem Anbar remembers playing at home for family and neighbours in Gaza city during long periods in the dark during power cuts and Zionist bombings; she would record instrumental pieces as a “message ... that Palestine would continue to live.”²⁶ Discussing the role of Palestinian women, Ilham Abu Ghazaleh sees their recognition as heroines reflecting their “ingenuity in developing survival methods under occupation” (Sabbagh 192). Performing on indigenous instruments both challenges their attempted looting and silencing by the colonizer and enables resistant narratives to be voiced through different aesthetic forms. Further highlighted in the prison camps of the occupation, I argue that the alternative paths of communal collectivity and political organization challenge individualist “autonomy” pursued in the profit-driven music industries and Insta-selfie culture promoted in the outside world from which the *asra* are violently isolated.

Conclusions

Though music forms an established and central component of Palestinian and Syrian anti-colonial histories, instrument making in occupation prisons is rare and attests to a particular,²⁷ collective drive in moments of confrontation. Fida's narrative suggests being driven towards his role as luthier-*asir* by the jailers themselves, yet the realization that this would require new forms of collective solidarity took shape on the inside. The structures of organization that made this brief experiment possible are embedded in years of cross-factional, mass organizing detailed by al-Ka'abi, whereby the *asra* take control politically of their own social existence and calendar of activities. My brief references to Ireland suggest that there are other examples to be explored, united by a communal will towards political culture among those dispossessed and incarcerated by imperialist and settler-colonial regimes. Overcoming prohibitions and confiscations, as well as casualized torture, separation, and administrative control, political prisoners locked up by Zionism become revolutionary in the process.

The ethnographies and arguments presented here do not intend to glamorize or romanticize life behind bars in conditions to which most of us cannot directly relate. Indeed, Zionist internment debilitates and destroys talent and livelihoods, as the case of former Palestinian footballer Mahmoud Sarsak shows, winning his own freedom in July 2012 after a gruelling hunger strike, his playing career was over. Performing musicians with conservatoire training, like sportspeople, quickly fall out of shape technically when deprived of the means to practice. Since release, Fida' has performed mostly in Majdal Shams, but has travelled regularly to Europe, despite persistent visa issues. It is worth considering that, though he acted in solidarity with (and with crucial support from) imprisoned Palestinians, physical isolation from broader music scenes may be indicative of post-2011 political journeys; reflecting, it may be argued, a limitation of forms of pro-Palestine campaigning in failing to make common cause with the Syrian struggle to liberate the occupied Golan. At the same time, pro-Palestine and anti-occupation Syrian events continue to provide an important platform for the musical contribution of Fida' al-Shaer, with keen audience engagement reflecting activist commitment alongside aesthetic interest in the oud.

The story hints at the creative and political possibilities of collective organization. I have enveloped Fida's narrative with a discussion of genius, not because the *asra* have arrived at the future society or personification of the future human being foretold by Fidel Castro or the other figures quoted here, but because, as Meari writes, the resistance of those in Israeli captivity shows people *emerging* and *becoming* revolutionary through the "anticolonial revolutionary potentiality" of steadfastness (2014 575). Fidel speaks to the potential of liberation to stimulate genius in the people and, conversely, of the propensity of popular ingenuity to forge a liberated future. Building the oud in Gilboa prison presents one counterattack to the repression of indigenous music culture by the forces of colonialism and imperialism, wielded by political prisoners in new ways against these selfsame forces.

History will absolve them.

Biography

Louis Brehony is an activist, musician, researcher, and educator from Manchester, UK. He is the author of an upcoming monograph on Palestinian musicianship in exile and is director of the award-winning documentary film *Kofia: A Revolution Through Music* (2021).

Notes

1. The 1964 song “Li-Sabri Hdud” was composed by Muhammad al-Mogi to poetry by Abd al-Wahab Muhammad.
2. I adapt this phrase slightly from Lena Meari, who refers to Palestinians-in-*sumud*, towards acknowledging the particular presence of Syrians in Israeli prisons, as expanded on in this article (2014).
3. This statement should be qualified by pointing out that, though Fidel’s work is dismissed by much of mainstream academia and many proclaiming themselves to be Marxists in Europe, his unique contribution is not overlooked by other revolutionaries, including those in countries like South Africa, where Cuban solidarity was monumentally important in defeating settler-colonial rule.
4. An Addameer campaign report points out that, although 970 prisoners were released in a “good will gesture” in March 1994, all had served most of their sentence and had not been charged with serious offences. This was followed by the arrests of 2,700 Palestinians in 15-20 April, with 200 subsequently imprisoned under “administrative detention” rules without charge or trial (Addameer).
5. Statistics provided by Abdel-Nasser Ferwaneh, Prisoners’ and Freed Prisoners’ Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, September 2019.
6. At the time of writing, US “aid” to Israel runs at \$3.8bn per year. It also went largely unreported that Israeli programs received \$1.45bn from the European Union Horizon program for scientific research in 2020 (Cronin).
7. Barakat writes: “Yes, there is a Palestinian conflict that always exists. Its fire fades and escalates according to the balance of forces and the tension of the internal class struggle. This has been the norm since the feudal leaders and the big bourgeoisie came to power, becoming a handful of compradors, representing the occupation and capital in Ramallah, Amman and Nablus. Regardless of the causes that led to this reality—which are undeniably important and should be addressed in subsequent articles—the fundamental and unwavering truth is that there is a Palestinian minority ruling sector that holds the cords of political decision-making and monopolizes it with power, money and foreign, American, European and reactionary Arab support, due to its security coordination with the occupation. It is willing to commit political crimes in order to defend its interests. These forces have prevented victory, aborted more than one popular uprising, negotiated away land and rights and destroyed Palestinian national achievements” (Barakat).
8. Political prisoners were central figures in the Irish struggle against British colonialism, with James Connolly and other participants in the 1916 Easter Rising imprisoned and executed by Britain. The period following the 1969 reintroduction of British armed forces to the north of Ireland known as “The Troubles” was accompanied by a raft of “anti-terror” legislation, including

internment without trial, reminiscent of Israel's administrative detention. Inside and outside struggles for the political prisoners most famously included the deaths on a second hunger strike of leading activist Bobby Sands and nine others in 1981 as the Thatcher Conservative government found backing from its Labour opposition, both of whom focused on criminality and denied the political status of those imprisoned. "Peace" processes in both occupied Ireland and Palestine have failed to adequately deal with the issue of political prisoners.

9. This was a stated aim of the Masar Badil (Alternative Path) conference in Madrid in October 2021.
10. I borrow analysis on proxy wars from Matar and Kadri, who conclude that the post-2011 war in Syria reflects an "imperialist power play" (279) and an extension of the motives for war on Iraq in 2003.
11. Available recordings include an oud and vocal performance by Ibrahim Salah.
12. Quotes from Asim al-Ka'abi are from my interview with the author, 27 August 2021.
13. The word *qabarna* has a double-translation here: denoting conquering, the root *qaf-ba-ra* also suggests "angering," with the subject (*al-sijjan*, the jailor) angered by the acts of prisoners gaining freedom. My translation as conquering references the words of Fida' al-Shaer in the section which follows.
14. Syrians in the Golan overwhelmingly reject Israeli citizenship, with one consequence being exposure to an apartheid system pertaining to travel and visas, where the privileges of those holding Israeli passports are out of reach.
15. Unless stated, all quotes of Fida' al-Shaer are translated from Arabic following a series of remote interviews with the author in September-November 2021.
16. Walid Daqqa was jailed prior to the intifada, in 1986. His situation highlights the plight of political prisoners for whom the Oslo process was a mirage.
17. Plural of *qasida*. Though this traditional poetic form has particular characteristics, the word is casually used as a blanket term for poetry.
18. In *The Fertile Prison/La prisión fecunda*, Cuban historian Mario Mencía shows how the concept of anti-colonial leader José Martí that "a fortress of ideas is worth more than a fortress of stone" was applied and developed by political prisoners of the Batista dictatorship. Drawing on the letters and recollections of Fidel and others later to lead the 26 July Movement, Mencía describes the detailed organization of days inside prison by inmates on the Isle of Pines, where "the weapons were the library" and "the fortress was the academy, a small blackboard and the wooden tables on which they ate under the ledge in the yard" (37).
19. According to Par Kumaraswami, this speech served as a key example "of the complex cultural policies and politics that have characterized the entire trajectory of culture and revolution in Cuba" (528).
20. He refers to the communist-led Forum on Literature and Art in the Chinese province of Yen'an in May 1942, at which Mao Zedong presented an influential cultural commentary in the context of prerevolutionary China. Translation by Kumaraswami (531).
21. Che argued that the Cubans' willingness to follow Fidel's leadership, and "the degree to which he won this trust results precisely from having interpreted

the full meaning of the people's desires and aspirations, and from the sincere struggle to fulfil the promises he made" (Guevara 2005, 126).

22. Signifying visions of mass knowledge through technology and creative invention—and further illustrating the closeness to the masses seen in Fidel by Che—the speeches I have drawn on were aired in the country's highest circulating newspaper and radio organs.
23. Using similar language, Palestinian vocalist and guitarist Ahmed Haddad described growing up in Gaza as making the youth "more capable of *sumud*." Conversation with the author, December 2020.
24. I will return to the theme of music among Irish political prisoners in a future essay.
25. Conversation with the author, July 2014.
26. Palestinian political prisoner Dahoud Ariqat also reportedly produced an oud during imprisonment.

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