



## **Choreomundus: Master's Degree in Dance Heritage, Knowledge, and Practice**

Master's Dissertation by  
Sarah Amawi

Depoliticisation of Dabke: A Case of Staged  
Dabke in a European Context

Spring 2020

## **DEDICATION**

This work is first dedicated to Njoud, my mother, and the warrior who brought me this far. Everything I am, I owe to you..

To the people of the Levant.. who are carrying their causes and struggles all over the world.. May you keep dancing.. may you keep singing.. may you find peace..

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This dissertation is a cumulation of many individuals' efforts, care, support, and directions.

I would like to thank the conveners of this program; academic and non-academic teams, who made this journey and degree possible and attainable..

I owe a special gratitude to Watan Dabke Group, my field family, and the biggest contributors to this dissertation. Special thanks to Ahmad, Salim, Fadi, and Nour, whose care and love extended till after my presence among them..

I thank my supervisor, Professor Raphaël Blanchier for directing my path in making my ideas grounded. I also thank Professor Georgiana Gore for her continuous help whenever needed. I would also like to acknowledge Professor Colin Quigley's assistance in my work structure.

To my fellow Choreomundus colleagues, who became nothing less than a family. Each one of you contributed to this piece of research in a special way. Special thanks to Fadi's scolding, to Oyinkansola's pomodoro attempts, to Celina's daily check-ups and laughter, to Solomon's academic guidance, to Anyla's last minute inspiration, and to Naiara for igniting a flare in my mind..

My biggest gratitude goes to my mother, for whom without, this dissertation would have never been..

To my father's unrivalled support..

I am grateful for my brother, Abdelrahman, my backbone and support anytime and anywhere..

Special thanks to M. Fakhoury, my best friend back home, with whom a simple conversation I had ignited a whole argument for this dissertation.

I thank Gouda, a best friend who listened for hours and gave this dissertation a sense of purpose all the way from Egypt.

Thanks to each and every friend I have all around the world, who have shown support and encouragement for me to fulfil this journey.

Last, but absolutely not least, to a very special unforeseen support system, one who made the last few months of writing up this dissertation possible and healthy. The calm to the storms of all the stressful days, and the engine and fuel to all the sleepless nights, making this dissertation come to life.. to Pouya.. I thank you wholeheartedly..

## ABSTRACT

*Dabke* is a social dance that has been transformed and implemented in political and national identification contexts in the post-colonial Levantine region, right after the British-French Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, in which the Levant region became separated into Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Those post-mandate countries modified and utilised *dabke* in ways that it became a national pride emblem in each of those newly-formed countries.

This dissertation investigated and evaluated the strategies through which the Levantine *dabke* group, Watan, intended to take *dabke* dance out of its pre-established political and national contexts, and represent it in a neutral, modern, and globalized fashion, in Belgium. The unprecedented nature of this effort to depoliticise a dance like *dabke* inspire this research to enrich this field of academia; in which relatively few studies have been made on this dance in its modern context.

The methods used to conduct this research varied between participant-observation, observant-participation, interviews, and contextual analysis.

After investigating the elements and strategies the Watan Dabke Group practised in the quest of achieving an apolitical representation of *dabke*, an evaluation of their consistency took place. The outcome of this evaluation showed the complexity of depoliticising as a process, and revealed the paradoxes generated in the differences between the idea and its implementation. Those inconsistencies manifested through comparing the ideologies this group promotes and the actions through which they execute them.

Keywords: Dabke, depoliticisation, neutralising heritage, westernising, apolitical manifestation.

## Table of Contents:

DEDICATION.....	1
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT .....	2
ABSTRACT.....	4
INTRODUCTION:.....	8
Overview of the field:.....	9
Research focus: From <i>dabke</i> as a national symbol to its progressive depoliticisation.....	11
Chapter 1:.....	14
1. METHODOLOGY: Positions, Data Collection, and Relationships.....	14
1.1. The Field roles, and positions:.....	14
1.2. Methodology and data collection:.....	21
Chapter Two:.....	26
2. LITERATURE REVIEW & PERSONAL STAGE EXPERIENCE: .....	26
2.1. Dance and Politics:.....	26
2.2. <i>Dabke</i> : a historical timeline perspective:.....	27
2.2.1. Pre-colonial era: .....	27
2.2.2. Colonial Era in Action:.....	28
2.2.3. Post-colonial era- performing nationalism:.....	29
2.3. Staged <i>Dabke</i> Through Personal Experience:.....	31
2.4. The Special Case of Palestine:.....	33
Chapter Three:.....	36
3. NEUTRALISING THE LEVANT’S CULTURAL HERITAGE: An attempt to a unified international identification.....	36
3.1. Fusion in choreography: .....	36
3.2. Outfits used:.....	42
3.3. Recruitment:.....	49
3.4. Sponsorship: .....	51
3.5. Conducting workshops: .....	53
Chapter Four:.....	56

<b>4. Westernising <i>Dabke</i> as a Dance:</b> .....	56
<b>4.1. Accessibility to workshops and performing at weddings:</b> .....	56
<b>4.2. Legal Registration:</b> .....	60
<b>4.3. Music Styles and genres:</b> .....	61
<b>4.4. Performative elements:</b> .....	66
<b>4.5. Conducting Practices/ Rehearsals:</b> .....	67
<b>Chapter Five:</b> .....	70
<b>5. REFLECTIONS ON DEPOLITICISING STRATEGIES:</b> .....	70
<b>5.1. About Recruitment Policies:</b> .....	70
<b>5.2. About Sponsorships and Political Agendas:</b> .....	75
<b>5.3. About Designated Appearance on Stage:</b> .....	77
<b>Discussion and Conclusion:</b> .....	81
<b>Bibliography:</b> .....	84
<b>Interviews and Conversations Cited:</b> .....	88
<b>Appendix:</b> .....	88

## List of Figures:

<b>Figure 1. A photo of me with some members before a performance, wearing the Watan Dabke t-shirt. Leuven, Belgium</b> .....	17
<b>Figure 2. A photo from one of the Watan Dabke Group’s practise sessions at the Flemish Cultural Centre</b> .....	37
<b>Figure 3. A photo of a member of the Watan Dabke Group holding the drum and stick</b> .....	43
<b>Figure 4. Members of the Watan Dabke Group wearing the red and black outfit. The first guy on each side holding a drum and a stick while wearing the <i>bisht</i></b> .....	44
<b>Figure 5. Members wearing the blue and golden outfit, with a guy posing in the middle wearing the <i>bisht</i></b> .....	46

**Figure 6. Members wearing the designated t-shirts for Watan Dabke Group, with black pants, and a keffiyeh.....47**

**Figure 7. Ahmad conducting a *dabke* workshop at a wedding in Mechelen, Belgium.....54**

**Figure 8. A schedule of the wedding in Mechelen, Belgium, showing “Performance by the Watan Dabke” before the dinner.....57**

**Figure 9. The Watan Dabke Group performing a wedding entrance with the bride and groom. Mechelen, Belgium.....58**



## INTRODUCTION:

**We are people who dare to be happy. We experience joy, dance, sadness, not just death and war. I am tired of politics. I want to say something new about Palestine, something deep from our heritage, joyful as dance. This is what could make people interested in getting to know about your country, they see a dance and ask, ‘Where is it from?’ They see a demonstration and they probably would not ask the same (Ahmad, 2019).<sup>1</sup>**

Dance, unlike historic artifacts, is a kind of intangible heritage that is dynamic and evolving in its nature. Meaning assigned to it and its representation throughout history is relatively dynamic, depending on numerous factors, such as its origin, the period in which the dance was developed, the reason and meaning it held in relation to the meaning and manifestations of it throughout history up until this point and into its future.

This dissertation focuses on one of these cultural dances; the *dabke* and a specific setting for its transmission outside its indigenous context. The *dabke* (also spelled *dabkeh*, *dabka*, *dubki*, and with the plural, *dabkaat*) could be defined as ‘a circling folk dance made up of intricate steps and stomps’ (Rowe, 2011: 363). *Dabke* is a folk dance that originated and continues to be practised in the Levant region<sup>2</sup>; which includes the Middle-East region of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Iraq. ‘Each region has its own variation [of *dabke*]’ (Ahdia, 2015). ‘In addition [to that], the traditional dance of Kurds in the diaspora carries the same name’ (Al Obeidyne, 2014: 7). In his book ‘Dance and Authenticity in Israel and Palestine- Performing the Nation’, Elke Kaschl defines *dabke* as an Arab dance, shaped in a counter-clockwise line that forms into a circle, to the rhythm of a drum and single flute. He describes the style of dancing as forceful, containing sprints and stomps

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Ahmad translated by the author from Arabic to English.

<sup>2</sup> “Levant” or “The Levant” is a geographic term that refers to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea and the nearby islands. Maps of the Levant don’t show an absolute boundary, because at no time in the past was it a single political unit. Rough boundaries are generally west of the Zagros mountains, south of the Taurus Mountains and north of the Sinai peninsula’ (Gill, 2019). Read more on: <https://www.thoughtco.com/maps-of-the-levant-119279>.

performed mainly with legs with variations and different style patterns decided by the line leader (2003: xv-xvi). To be more specific, this dissertation will focus on bringing light to the elements of this dance in this current era of time, being performed on stage in a European context and the discourses that emerge in that process.

### **Overview of the field:**

This dissertation is a result of fieldwork conducted between the 13<sup>th</sup> of July and the 31<sup>st</sup> of August of the year 2019 in Brussels, Belgium with the Watan Dabke Group. This group was founded on September 2017 by a Palestinian Muslim man and a Lebanese Christian woman, both in their late twenties at the time; Ahmad and Abeer respectively. Ahmad and Abeer, who moved to Brussels to pursue their higher education, have lived in the city for several years before establishing this group. They met while they were both performing in another group which focuses solely on the Palestinian *dabke*, then decided to leave it and create a group on their own that would present Arab culture from the Levant area in a way they found suitable.

The way in which the two founders began recruiting for the *dabke* group was by creating public events on Facebook, where they invited people to *dabke* workshops free of charge for the purposes of both attracting people and evaluating how interested attendees could be in joining the group later on. ‘We had created the event two weeks prior and eight people showed up for the first workshop. We have decided to do a second workshop to see the ratio between the attendees from the first workshop and the newcomers. Eleven people showed up in total, seven of them were from the week before’ (Ahmad, 2019). It is worth noting at this point that the group utilises social media, especially Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube to promote themselves, their activities, and their past performances.

After the workshop Ahmad and Abeer would go up and talk to the attendees, ask them for feedback and if they would consider joining a *dabke* group, committing to weekly practises and learning a whole new style of dancing. According to Ahmad, most of those attendees showed interest and willingness to commit to this new group, yet to be officially

established. The spectrum of nationalities that wanted to join at that time was quite diverse; It included Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians, Moroccans, Maltese, and Belgians. ‘We started some sort of military-like training sessions with those new members, six hours each week’ (Ahmad, 2019).

At the point where I became involved with this group, it consisted of fifteen members, most of them under the age of thirty. Nationalities present were Lebanese, Syrians, Venezuelans, Spanish, German and one Palestinian, who was Ahmad. Different members had different stories and reasons to how they ended up in Brussels. The Syrians and the one Syrian-Kurdish member in the group came to Brussels fleeing the war in Syria that erupted in 2011. The rest of the members moved to Brussels mostly for work. At a very early stage of getting to know this group and their activities Ahmad was keen on introducing the idea of the group to me as “different” from any other *dabke* group in Europe. When asked how different? He would list seven points as follows:

There are currently four *dabke* groups in Belgium, only the Watan group is different in the concept on which it was founded; meaning when Abeer and I wanted start our own group we wanted it to promote the Levant area in a peaceful, inclusive and harmonised manner, which is not evident in any other *dabke* group I am aware of in Europe, and definitely not in Belgium. The variation and fusion of the types of *dabke* we perform is another difference, we mix Palestinian style with Lebanese and Syrian styles in our performances. Also, the kind of music we use is more modern, sometimes electronic even to satisfy the general taste of music in Europe. On another note, the spectrum of nationalities and backgrounds of the members is wide; we have Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians, Germans, Spanish, Venezuelans, and earlier we had Russians and Moroccans. The age range is young, starting from eighteen-years-old to twenty-two-years-old with myself being the oldest member of thirty-one-years-old. What is also different is that we come from very diverse religious backgrounds, including Sunni, Shia, Christians, with some agnostics and atheists. Nevertheless, we are one family with no differences on any basis whatsoever. The most important aspect is that before any performance we are invited to perform at, we contact the inviting party, meet them prior to the event, and ask them about their musical and thematic preferences after showing them what we have, we do not just go present what we have, we actually try to represent ourselves while also satisfying the needs of the inviting party. Either they invite us for a second show the following year or we remain friends with good contact, not just business contact (Ahmad, 2019).

The group's main activities currently include performing at festivals and weddings as well as holding workshops in Belgium and across Europe giving classes for those interested in learning the dance.

**Research focus: From *dabke* as a national symbol to its progressive depoliticisation.**

For reasons to be discussed in coming chapters, the purpose of dancing *dabke* changed throughout history, with some specific turning points. What this dissertation first examines is the original context in which *dabke* was created and practised, shedding light on its historical context in the Levant area and bringing in narratives about its invention. It will then discuss and present the dance's changes in representation and practise in a post-colonial context, more specifically on stage, debating concepts and theories of post-colonialism, elements of representation. In other words, it will examine how *dabke* has been practised and used historically before British and French colonisation in the Levant area, then shaped for political purposes through on stage performances by Arab Levantine youth, especially when performed abroad in diasporic context. Against this setting, I will focus on the special case of the Watan Dabke Group whose claim to individuality, and modern representation of the *dabke* gives it a depoliticised mould. The Watan Dabke Group's main aim since its creation is to represent the Levant area and Arabs in an apolitical manner.

This research aims to question the final product of depoliticisation by breaking down the strategies and approaches this group uses in order to realise this image in the eyes of their audiences in Europe. What elements do they invest in portraying this apolitical culture? And, how well is this continuous depoliticising process consistent with their policies and internal dynamics? To which extent are they being consistent and systematic in building this image? Finally, the question arises as to whether a highly politicised kind of dance such as *dabke* has a chance of depicting itself on stage as an apolitical dance in the current era? To embark on tackling these questions, this dissertation will be broken down into five chapters, in addition to the conclusion and discussion.

Chapter one “Methodology” will be dealing with actual time I have spent in the field, the roles and positions I have shifted between during that period of time, how these dynamic shifts played out in affecting the ways and methods in which data was collected. It will eventually layout how I actually used, grouped and analysed this data in ways which respond to my research questions.

Chapter two “Literature Review” will be demonstrating the sort of research done around *dabke*, through the historical timeline of events that changed the face of the Levant, and how dance and politics have been constantly related ever since British and French colonialism in the Levantine region until this day.

Chapters three and four together divide the strategies the Watan Dabke Group uses in order to convey their desired apolitical image on stage. Those strategies according to my analysis are split in two directions:

1. “Neutralising the Levant’s Cultural Heritage” (Chapter three), which includes the first strategy the Watan Dabke Group has adopted in order to convey a unified neutral cultural identity of the Levant away from political ties and connections. It will bring out the elements and actions through which they aim to depoliticise *dabke*. Those elements include their constant fusion in choreography, outfits they use, their recruitment policy and process, and their sponsorship preferences, in addition to their way of conducting *dabke* workshops for European and Arab diasporic audiences.
2. “Westernising *Dabke*” (Chapter four), which includes the second strategy the Watan Dabke Group has adopted for them to convey a modern, more suited to the western world sort of image about *dabke* and its validity in a European context. It will bring out the elements and actions through which they also aim to depoliticise *dabke*. Those elements include the accessibility to workshops for both themselves and attendees, their legal registration, the music styles and genres they use to perform, in addition to the performative elements encompassed in their staged performances, and finally how they conduct their rehearsals and practises.

Chapter five “Reflections on Depoliticisation strategies” is where I reflect and discuss some aspects in the dynamics of this group in implementing the previously listed depoliticisation strategies. This chapter in its sub-sections, recruitment policies, sponsorships and political agendas, designated appearance on stage, will debate and evaluate some issues that might be considered an impediment or a paradox in achieving a purely apolitical *dabke* community.

Eventually, the Conclusion and Discussion chapter will discuss the final arguments about the extent to which *dabke* in its staged performance context can be deflected from its political heritage gained and shaped throughout the years, and the reasons such dissent could have its limitations in our current era. Through that, concluding answers to the research questions proposed, and the significance of the study. It will also be a recap for the previously mentioned chapters, going over the dissertation from beginning to end, highlighting the main points and arguments discussed.

## **Chapter 1:**

### **1. METHODOLOGY: Positions, Data Collection, and Relationships.**

This chapter, as indicated, will be dealing with methodology. It will be discussing the field roles and positions I have held; the dynamic of positions, and how that directly or indirectly affected the methods of data collection. The roles and positions held by the researcher can affect the kind of information and data they can collect, and at the same time, shifted the focus of the research purpose and questions which occurred after one specific conversation I had with one of the members, in which certain policies about the field became necessary to explore. These aspects will be elaborated on through some stories and calamities, which took place mostly in the beginning of my field research. Then, this chapter will move on to the actual methodology and data collection methods used. Eventually it will discuss the strategy in which data collected was organised and sorted, and overall, how each kind of data responded to the research questions.

#### **1.1. The Field roles, and positions:**

As soon as I landed in Brussels from Amman, Ahmad was waiting to pick me up from the airport. It was not our very first meeting, as we got the chance to be acquainted a few days earlier when he had a long layover in Amman, coming back from Hebron in Palestine to Brussels. We knew each other only through phone calls before that time. During that one-day layover, we had a good chance to break the ice. We got to know each other better and I got more insights about the group members and activities in general; with a clearer idea of what to expect. I knew he was going to be my main informant and main contact person during my field research and so, I was very satisfied with having the chance to meet informally prior to my arrival at Brussels. Nonetheless, I had to consider that first meeting the marker to begin collecting data and taking notes, as Ahmad took it as a chance to give me more perspective on what is to expect and where he could take me along with some other members I am yet to meet. In addition to that I began to realise that with Ahmad

at least, my relationship would not be limited to a researcher-informant dynamic. It was inevitable that we would become friends.

The moment I got picked up from the airport, Ahmad began telling me about the area in which I am renting a room. He insisted on buying me dinner; saying I had just arrived, and I am still his guest. He then took me to the shared flat I had already rented, managed to talk to the owner in French, as we were in the French speaking part of Belgium, and helped me carry my suitcase up the stairs to the third floor. He made sure I needed nothing that night and told me he would call me the next day after his work- he works as an anesthetist in a hospital- to check up on me. The reason this first day interaction was important to me is that it sort of defined the shape of the relationship between me and my main informant; as I quickly realised that whatever approach I take, it cannot be formal, cannot be based solely on my character as a researcher, and most importantly, it cannot be a one-way interaction.

Soon after I arrived and settled in Brussels, I was introduced to some of the group members in an informal picnic setting. Ahmad had planned the whole day. He picked me up and told me to invite my friends that I already know in Brussels, which was indicating how social and informal this hangout was going to be; and so, I did. Soon after we arrived at the park, two of my friends joined, and a few minutes later three people joined us; Salim, one of the oldest members in the group, Fadi, who is Salim's best friend and flat mate. Together, they have fled the war in Syria in 2015 along with some other cousins they had, and Reem-who is Lebanese-, their friend and neighbour. I was getting acquainted with their narrative about their journey as refugees, their lifestyle in Belgium, and how their lives were in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine before moving to Belgium. From that day on, I started feeling a personal connection forming with those individuals because of the mutual cultural background.

At the next training session the group had, I was formally introduced to the present group members, and Ahmad asked everyone to cooperate with me and be as helpful as possible. I entered the field as an outsider and observer, but also as an expert in the dance. Although I shared a similar background with those individuals, coming from Jordan, half



Syrian with Palestinian origins, I still lacked the bond they have formed with each other over the course of few years. Some of the group members had met in Syria and have stayed friends in Brussels after fleeing the war; some had met in Brussels before joining the group, while others have met after joining Watan Dabke Group. At that early point, bearing in mind that I was not solely a researcher for most of the members of this group, -since I came from a similar background, age group, and dance background- I was neither an insider. Therefore, the researcher-informant dynamic was not going to be sufficient and neither was diving headfirst into those individual's social life.

Thus, at that point, I was keen on collecting generous field notes and conducting as many interviews with as many members as possible. Nevertheless, my position in the field was more dynamic than I thought it could be in such a short period of time and the information I was gathering was slowly diverting the original path of my research. Up until that point I was interested in researching this group's elements of representation on stage as a Levantine *dabke* group in diaspora. The main approach for data collection was participant observation; swaying between observing the group and to a limited extent participate in their activities. Throughout the whole field duration this was the main and most suitable method to make notes and patterns from the group's behaviour and activities.

As days passed, informal hangouts with some group members, and gatherings began to transform my position as a researcher to a friendlier level, where I became exposed to much more valuable insights, information and points of view due to becoming more socially intimate with those individuals over the course of time. I was attending every training session and event they were performing at. Soon after, I was given the unified t-shirt the group wears in public while going to or leaving a performance, and at times perform wearing, and asked to wear it whenever I am accompanying them officially.



Figure 1. A photo of me with some members before a performance, wearing the Watan Dabke t-shirt.  
Leuven, Belgium.

I was asked to film the performances at times and give feedback on their overall shows and suggest new ideas for their formations. One day at a training session, and after the official practise, Salim dragged me to dance *dabke* with the members off the record. I sensed some trust given to me after that day from the group's members, more like earning credibility for being an insider to this culture simply by knowing how to *dabke*. I became a friend who “knows what they are doing.” Chapter three will be looking further into practise sessions details, especially the first practise as I was officially introduced to the group members. From that point on, Ahmad and some other members would occasionally ask me how I would do some things if I were at their place. One day Ahmad was teaching the group a new choreography for a new dance and dispute occurred regarding the number of steps that should be put into a tune, and he turned to me and asked: ‘Sarah from your experience am I right? How would you have done it?’ (Ahmad, 2019) It was becoming

more obvious that my role as an observer was insufficient and unrealistic, as I was getting more and more involved with their activities and even with some of them personally.

From that point on, I started shifting my approach to observant participation. According to Brian Moeran, observant participation is superior to participant observation, as it allows the researcher to move from the front stage in organisational ethnography to backstage, and gain knowledge that only an insider could gain (Moeran, 2009). I was invited to all group hangouts, birthday parties and gatherings by consensus. More often I was invited to Salim and Fadi's apartment to hang out with them and their friends and neighbors. They would cook for me and make sure I was doing well every day. In my opinion, this came from the connection we made as friends but also more as expats living away from our homes and families. Soon after I was becoming a secret-keeper for a number of these people on a personal and a professional level. I was aware that my perspective of things could be distorted, affected or somehow less objective by this dynamic change of positions. However, my positioning was determined by possibilities afforded by the context and interaction with this group overtime. Thus, instead of the initial fear of subjectivity generated by personal closeness to the field topic and individuals, I began viewing my growing interaction and positions occupied as opportunities for deeper, more lucid knowledge only an insider can get close to unravelling. Jodie Taylor, in her article 'The intimate insider: negotiating the ethics of friendship when doing insider research' brings out several benefits in the intimacy created between an informant and a researcher. Not only limited to its role in the type and quality of data collected, but this intimacy extends to understanding the informant's verbal and nonverbal engagement in a better, more receptive way. Through spending more time and building more intimacy with the informants, a field researcher gains a better ability to detect the informant's body language, annoyance, shame in a conversation or interview (Taylor, 2011).

As an Arab who shares a similar cultural background and similar circumstances with my field informants living abroad in Europe, random conversations and informal hangouts provided a great deal of insights. The social circle in which I was immersed felt more comfortable and at ease to talk and share the less formal we were and the closer we got as people, not just as researcher-informants. The culture from which I come and share

with my field informants is considered to be a “High-Context” culture. The concept of a high context culture was developed by Edward T. Hall. ‘In [high context] HC cultures, communication style is influenced by the closeness of human relationships’ (Kim et al., 1998, 512). In the case of my field, this was evident in the depth of my access to information, lifestyle, behind the stage matters of my field informants the closer I got to them. In fact, a fairly large part of political layers and internal policies and dynamics of the group were revealed to me at the very end of my stay. How? I had an interview with Ahmad, my main informant, two days after I arrived in Brussels, and another interview two days before I left Brussels. I made sure in the second interview to ask some of the same questions I asked in the first one. Result is after comparing the transcripts from both interviews, I got different, more elaborative, and more real answers in the second interview. It felt as if Ahmad was more comfortable and more open discussing some points and issues about his group and another group in Belgium in the matter of almost forty-five days of me being there, present in his everyday life.

For that matter, I had hoped I had the chance to interview some other members more than once, but time limitation was a real issue, and therefore, I had to try and analyse what some members have told me to get to read between the lines. ‘In a high context (HC) culture, internal meaning is usually embedded deep in the information, so not everything is explicitly stated in writing or when spoken. (...) the listener is expected to be able to read “between the lines”, to understand the unsaid, thanks to his or her background knowledge’ Hall (1976, 91). When I describe my field informants as coming from a HC culture, I mean by that, the Arab majority in the group. As for the non-Arabs, they only helped me realise even more, the subtle differences in communication styles. In other words, when interviewing the non-Arab members, I was given very direct, elaborative, sometimes “painful” answers to my questions, as from what I have noticed, all they cared about was giving me the most resourceful, real answers to my questions, using thick description of ideas and emotions at times, which are some characteristics of a low context culture. ‘An LC [low context] culture is characterised by direct and linear communication and by the constant and sometimes never-ending use of words. Communication is direct, precise, dramatic, open, and based on feelings or true intentions’ (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey,

1988). Overall, my personal closeness to the non-Arab members made no difference in the quality and depth of information I was able to receive from them.

Through hangouts and informal encounters, I compiled a good amount of field notes after every social encounter, whether it was with a group member or a friend of the group. What is outstanding about this method is that it was often not pre-planned or intentionally implemented, and a good amount of information was provided indirectly. Regarding my data, I chose different methods of data collection, including: Images, video recording, audio recording for interviews, all supported by constant field notes, since the researcher's own observation and immersion in the field is rather insufficient. 'Film, sound, and videotape records are today an indispensable scientific resource ... They may contain information for which neither theory nor analytic schemes yet exist. (American Folklore Society 1974:51).

I stopped conducting any interviews for ten days and specifically after a changing point occurred during one of my hangouts with one of the members. I call this changing point the salient moment in my field research, as that one specific encounter struck me and had me reconstructing my research topic. Through that salient moment, - which will be explained in detail in chapter five- I began to realise a deeper level of constant hard work this group does in order to achieve the desired image they want to reflect about Levantine folk and culture. The point in which my focus shifted was when one of the early members of the group told me that they avoid recruiting people from specific ideological backgrounds, in order for them to sustain the desired image of the group. After that piece of information, my research topic went from identifying the elements of representation this group uses to analysing the strategies and process through which this group tries to achieve its apolitical image through schemes of depoliticisation. As mentioned in the introduction, this dissertation's aim is to break down these strategies and their reflection on the group's inner culture, and eventually evaluate the consistency of their aim and ideology in achieving an apolitical image.

## 1.2. Methodology and data collection:

I was in a socially and culturally rich context and, most of the time, interesting pieces of information came from the most random moments when I was not prepared to document anything, thus; methods I chose to exploit at those moments varied depending on which was more suitable and accessible. Five official interviews were conducted in both Arabic and English with selected members, of whom I chose based on the samples I needed information and insights from. Consents were recorded orally on tape. The time span between the first and second interviews was relatively long; the first one was with Ahmad, while the second was with Manuela, a Venezuelan member. I went back to conducting interviews as soon as I had a more solid idea of what exactly I needed to collect through those interviews, especially after the previously mentioned salient moment. Nonetheless, it took two more weeks almost to be able to get the third interviewee to set a specific time with me and so the third interview was conducted with Abdalla, a Syrian member. Two of those five these interviews were conducted with Ahmad Motira; the second one was at the end of my fieldwork, due to the need to discuss some of the new insights I received and needed to process through more systematic information from him, in addition to asking some questions again to be sure I got the full image. It was also challenging to some extent to get the full scope of the co-founders' ideologies and strategies due to the refusal of the other co-founder Abeer to have an interview with me. Her refusal was due to 'being too busy with work and paperwork and her family visiting from Lebanon' as I was informed by Ahmad. This was a set-back of a qualitative kind, as I was receiving insights about the whole ideology and goal of this group from one of the co-founders and no one else could fill this gap Abeer would have in telling me her side of the story.

Nonetheless, having all this data scattered around my fieldwork timeline crippled and limited my ability to extract information relevant when needed. Therefore, the need to create a database<sup>3</sup> emerged. For my case, I chose a simple method for sorting out my data in competence with the type of data I have and the kind of organisation I would need for easy access and extraction. I used Microsoft Excel, created a table of data I have collected.

---

<sup>3</sup> Screenshots of excel sheet database can be found in the appendix.

After sorting out the data, I had five audio recordings of interviews, twenty-four pictures and twenty-one video recordings.

Now moving on to the actual data collected, as I have mentioned before in this paper, I used different methods for various occasions and reasons while using different technologies to save and archive it personally. The most dominant form is field notes; as they were merely the comprehension of my reflections, thoughts and events that took place. Sometimes, they were written in a synchronous manner while the event was happening. When that was not possible, I wrote bullet points in my phone notes to be able to remember the points I need to elaborate on later that day/night. My field notes are explanatory of; scenes I witnessed, elaboration on images, elaboration on videos, elaboration on audio interviews, and almost always, my own notes about my dynamic position shift in the field or the exact situation I am in. In short, those notes tried to collect an emic point of view, reflected, and decoded by an etic point of view which is me in this case. I tried to keep a balance between my field informants' voices and my own reflection of events, conversation, and scenes. There are also incidents that were collected based on my own interpretation when the situation directly involved me as part of social interaction, and at times I wrote down the situation or interaction from my own perspective and interpretation when it was not involving me, in order to compare what I was seeing to records of information given to me in interviews by some members.

I used the method of one-to-one interviews, the duration varied between ten to around twenty-five minutes. Five official interviews were recorded. I preferred using one-to-one interviews as I needed to hear members' different perspectives on questions regarding reasons they joined the group, how they got to know of it in the first place, what do they think about the concept and ideologies of the group, and how consistent they personally are with that concept as individuals. Those questions contributed to building some elements of depoliticisation and at the same time measured the consistency between the overall group ideology in relevance/ contrast to individuals' ideologies. The interviews were semi-formal, in other words, they were conducted in privacy on pre-set times and dates according to individual availability, nevertheless, I tried to make it feel as casual as possible to allow an easy flow of discussion. That did result in some interviewees getting

off-topic or far from the questions asked sometimes, which I welcomed as there were useful and indirectly relevant insights among them. At the same time, not constraining interviewees in this case helped them talk and express themselves more freely.

Other oral interactions that resulted in additional information were formulated and written down as notes after the occurrence. Those interactions were the result of informal hangouts, side conversations, and the members' friends and neighbours I got the chance to spend time with. Although some interactions with members' friends were limited and, at times, short, they contributed in responding to how close outsiders (friends of members and at the same time spectators) see the overall image of the group, and whether that image is consistent to what the group promotes about themselves as apolitical and inclusive. On the other hand, those notes gave me the space to reflect on the actual members' dynamics, relationships, and thoughts among themselves versus the overall ideology of the group. The difference between this kind of data and data collected from interviews lays in the depth of insights I got to receive through informal interactions. That is to say, through hangouts and side conversations, there was more space for self-expression, realism, and "on the spot" thoughts, in both individual and collective settings. As people were talking at their pace, in a more allowing social space and did not feel the pressure of having an answer ready to an interview question.

As for the more technical side of data collection, I used video recordings at actual performances or from training sessions. The average video was three minutes. Since my research was not mainly about dance or movement analysis, I did not create long span videos. I recorded dances and different types of performances to keep a clear record of the different choreography style in relevance to accompanying music, in addition to keeping a record of the different music styles, genres, and types chosen to dance to, at different occasions. This process responds to evaluating some strategies of depoliticisation this group adopts in relevance to the inclusiveness and modernity of music styles, in addition to the general movement and styles of *dabke* used compared to movements used for stage spectacle. Some of the very short videos were made in order to capture the general ambience of the event happening to describe its elements, and how involved and satisfied spectators or audiences were at various occasions. Some videos at one occasion were



recorded with a different device, which was one of the group members' phones, as in that occasion, I was requested to record for them in that phone because of their quality, on the conditions that I may record the way I see suitable for my vision and that I can transfer the recordings to my device later. This was one of the reasons the videos were produced in three to five minutes snaps as I recorded each dance separately during that occasion.

Overall, I can say that my database is not filled with visual and audible material as much as field notes. Since, as I have mentioned earlier, my field was a socially rich context in which informal hangouts, gradually placing myself socially within members' social life generated data that needed to be written down immediately, even if as bullet points at first to remember them and later on actually elaborate on. As recording those kinds of events in an obvious manner would have generated the feeling of being watched in members' minds, and therefore disrupt or at least disturb the casual, unprompted manner of interaction that would usually take place.

As I started analysing my data, I began with the field notes alongside with the interviews. I started coding by breaking down the information, and organising related notes, stories, and content into categories first. I then began grouping similar, repetitive information that responded to a specific category of my research questions together. After that, I grouped results of data that fit together and created themes. From there I defined the most prominent variables that made up those themes, which then aided me in following a systematic thread to define my results.

To conclude, this chapter went over the dynamics of roles and positions acquired throughout the field period, hovering over the initial intention of research to the shift in perspective and focus of what I was looking for. It then discussed adaptations to methodologies and data collection tools used depending on the continuous shift in position in the field. Eventually it elaborated on the use of each data type and the coding method used, and its relevance to answering the proposed research questions. Next chapter will handle the history of *dabke* as a social folk dance, it will bring in literature on the historical, systematic process of politicising *dabke* and its connection to the British and French mandate in the Middle-East and its geographic and political results. It will also introduce

concepts and theories I will be using to present the phenomena of depoliticising *dabke* as a new concept.

Finally, continuous shifting in positions and roles in the field broadened the perspective through which I saw my informants, while at the same time shifted my focus of research to a more specific, in-depth investigation of representation aspects.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **2. LITERATURE REVIEW & PERSONAL STAGE**

#### **EXPERIENCE:**

This chapter addresses first, the relation between dance and politics, as described by some scholars. Second, it brings in the history of *dabke* dividing the dance according to eras; pre-colonial, and post-colonial, while putting under spotlight the political and geographical results of British and French mandate in the Levantine region. It will highlight the factors that slowly contributed to the need of generating individual national identities for post-mandate countries through culture, and specifically *dabke*. Eventually, the last section will be handling the special case of Palestine will be discussed, to provide context on its present situation regarding *dabke*, as it is the only Levantine country under colonisation in our present time by the Israeli occupation. Thus, it has not moved to the post-colonial state.

#### **2.1. Dance and Politics:**

In this section, I aim to piece together some concepts and theories posed on the politics of dance and dance's implementation as nationalistic tool. This section will be brief, as the main focus of this dissertation is evaluating the process of reversing this systematic politicisation of dance.

For at least the past two centuries, music and dance have protruded as effective symbols for countries and nations all over the world. Researches on dance and national identity have examined the "objectification" of dance as national culture (Handler, 1998), the politics of the category of "art" (Hughes-Freeland 1997), the reconstruction of tradition (Kaepler 1993b) (...) (Reed, 1998: 510). Dance role could be considered as more versed and vigorous than numerous political debates and speeches (Meyer, 1995

). ‘The role of state institutions in the promotion and reformation of national dances has been documented in a number of studies (Austerlitz 1997; Daniel 1991, 1995; Manning 1993, 1995; Mohd 1993; Ramsey 1997; Reed 1991, 1995; Strauss 1977)’ (Reed, 1998: 511).

The exact issue of reforming national identities in the Levantine region is what the next four sections will be handling, through laying out the role which dabke played out in a pre-colonial context in the Levant region, against its post-colonial context in the post-mandate reformed countries of the Levant.

## **2.2. *Dabke*: a historical timeline perspective:**

### **2.2.1. Pre-colonial era:**

The majority of narratives on the origins of *dabke* come to consensus that it had started as a social dance in the area of Greater Syria, which is now divided into Jordan, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq. The detail that remains uncertain is the exact era in history in which it began (Amawi, 2020). ‘There are multiple possible origins of (...) *dabk[e]*. Once such origin may have developed from Canaanite fertility rites wherein communities joined in the energetic foot stomping dance to scare away malicious spirits, clearing the way for healthy and secure growth of their seedlings’ (Palirootes, 2018). While this story is not overruled, it remains the least credible narrative. ‘However, the more popularly recognised origin is derived from traditional house-building in the Levant where houses were structured with stone and made with a roof consisting of wood, straw and dirt (mud). In order to have a stable roof, the dirt had to be compacted. To achieve this aim, it is said that family and neighbors would come together and perform what is now recognised as the *dabka* in order to make the roof work fun.’ [This is where the most common music and dance style *Dal’ouna* originated from; it used to mean: “Come to help us”] ‘The rhythmic patterns were a joyful way to keep things in sync and effective’ (Palirootes, 2018).

This narrative by Carso suggests that *dabke*, at its early beginnings, was a continuous, repetitive kind of activity. *Dabke* ‘is an Arabic folk dance which originated in

the mountainous regions above the Mediterranean coastline and the Tigris River' (2017). Its practise started out as a social one; as a method to help out building and maintaining the mud houses of village people in the past by stomping on the mud rhythmically, while joining hands. During winter months, people would sing to warm up while stomping. The regions in which this activity took place were what are now known as the countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, 'and some Quasi-Bedouin tribes that were in nearby territories' (Carso, 2017). With advancement in construction, *dabke* started becoming a tradition that represents the importance of a collective society, and community (Carso, 2017). Therefore, *dabke* became present at any joyous occasion historically in the Levantine region and up to this day (Amawi, 2020).

### **2.2.2. Colonial Era in Action:**

'Until World War I the name Syria generally referred to Greater or geographical Syria, which extends from the Taurus Mountains in the north to the Sinai in the south, and between the Mediterranean in the west and the desert in the east' (Encyclopedia, 2020). Up until that point in history, *dabke* was merely a cultural tradition that extended from its use in building homes to being a celebratory dance performed in lines and circles in events such as weddings (Amawi, 2020). '[o]n May 19, 1916, representatives of Great Britain and France secretly reach[ed] an accord, known as the Sykes-Picot agreement, by which most of the Arab lands under the rule of the Ottoman Empire are to be divided into British and French spheres of influence with the conclusion of World War I. In its designated sphere, it was agreed, each country shall be allowed to establish such direct or indirect administration or control as they desire and as they may think fit to arrange with the Arab State or Confederation of Arab States' (History, 2019). Thus, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon came out as newly formed politically and geographically independent countries with newly formed borders between them, which had a direct influence on what is considered a Levantine heritage and what, later on, was tailored and invented to suit and adapt to the newly established countries.

### 2.2.3. Post-colonial era- performing nationalism:

This section will elaborate on the post-colonial elements and manifestations of staged-*dabke* through my personal connection to this dance as practitioner for about eleven years, and as a professional performer in a Palestinian dance group in Jordan for around two years. It will also investigate these elements through the eyes of researchers who investigated this dance in its post-colonial time, in the post-mandate Levantine region.

In a postcolonial context where the historical (Greater Syria) turned into “Syria, Jordan, Palestine-later on Israel-, Lebanon and Iraq” The use and representation of *dabke* took a curve in each of the newly formed political countries. The lyrics combined with the pre-existing music styles became country-specific and highly political. Even the outfits and costumes displayed started carrying details that are area or city-specific. It is fair to note that this is a continuously evolving representation that shifts and evolves with new agendas and political leaders. The aesthetic side of *dabke* included a change in both the music and lyrics used. It also included a change in outfits and props used by the performers to fit the political background represented on stage, using either costumes with embroidery that represents a specific region or city, or at many international occasions wearing black outfits with only a scarf or a headscarf that represents the embroidery pattern of the country represented (Amawi, 2020).

The social use of this dance as a line or circular dance did not change drastically in the post-colonial context. Only some aspects have developed to suit the newly reformed levant, but overall, people still perform *dabke* at social occasions to express joy, happiness and excitement that comes with a celebration. Performers are usually the audience itself, but at times, a professional *dabke* group is invited to perform at the wedding and make a show around the bride and groom’s entrance. *Dabke* is still a dance of community, often performed at weddings and other joyous occasions. It[is] similar to tap dancing – not as much heels, but more like stomping. Often during these performances, the dancers wear costumes based on traditional clothes, and usually perform with music or a live band. Women wear embroidered long dresses and men wear trousers with wide belts and leather

shoes. Both men and women might cover their heads with either a plain white or white with a black pattern “kofiyeeh” (a scarf, which will be elaborated on its meaning in chapter five)’ (Carso, 2017).

Following the establishment of Syrian Arab Republic in 1963, *dabke* took on a new role and was raised to the ‘status of a national performance tradition through state-sponsored dance festivals and folk dance companies that mediated the symbolic production of the state’ (Silverstein, 2015: 82). This has not been a stable role since, as the political agendas, establishments, and propaganda is dynamic and *dabke*’s representation has been continuously adjusted to fit the political trends ever since. As ‘[p]olitical ideologies play a critical role in the selection of national dances’ (Reed, 1998: 511).

For example, in her dissertation, Shayna Mai Silverstein mentions that in 1961, Adnān al-Manīnī published a manuscript called “al-Raqṣ al-Sha‘biyya.” This manuscript reflects ‘contemporaneous debates on models of nationalism, specifically *qawmiyya* and *wataniyya*, and attributes *dabke* practise with new meanings that correlate with these national agendas, themselves steeped in the long traditions of liberal Arab intellectualism. *Dabke* is resignified as secular, rural, and youthful in ways that internalise other subjectivities, such as religious and tribal, and indicate how the modern Syrian nation is formed through the production of alterity’ (Silverstein, 2012: 58-59). ‘Furthermore, [she debates that] *dabke* became a marker of difference for the Syrian nation amongst others in the emergent order of nation-states by which political and cultural leaders positioned their various interests’ (Provence 2005, Gelvin 1998, W[ie]n 2011). This folk dance began serving the propagandas and ideologies any political leader would want to reinforce in the minds and views of the general public.

*Dabke*, according to Silverstein, was developed as ‘Folk Dance in and as Colonial Encounter’. ‘As a custom and tradition (adāt wa taqlid) practised throughout the region, *dabke* was of particular service to models of state and society debated by Arab nationalists in the Mandate period’ (Silverstein, 2012: 60). This discourse applies, and is not limited to, Syria and all the newly-formed Levant countries at that time. Each country developed this

dance and its use and representation in slightly different measures, turning it from a folk tradition to a political statement each time it is performed on stage, locally and internationally. This whole debate of *dabke*'s transformation in context also resulted in change in the aesthetics of the dance. 'Choreographers actively distanced themselves from the Oriental spirit (...) which means *ruh sharqiyya* that signifies and is signified by the popularity of the commercial and entertainment arts. Their distantiation may be situated in the negotiation of *ruh sharqiyya* as a form of cultural intimacy that suggests distinctions of taste between these two fields of cultural production' (Silverstein, 2012: 307).

### **2.3. Staged *Dabke* Through Personal Experience:**

I am a Jordanian Arab born in Syria to a Syrian mother, and a Palestinian-descent father whose parents were assigned to leave Palestine in 1948 due to Nakba. I can say that I have the notion of belonging to these places all at once. In Jordan, the distinction between Jordanians who come from Palestinian descent, and Jordanians whose families were always in Jordan is visible in some contexts, and it is blood-bound. For instance, when asked in Jordan where I come from, I would answer "Yaffa, Palestine". This is due to the fact that my paternal bloodline comes from Yaffa, even though I was born in Syria and my nationality is Jordanian. I was fourteen years old when I started practising *dabke* at school in 2009. At the age of seventeen, I joined a professional *dabke* group for stage performances in Jordan. The group was mainly concerned with performing *dabke* in its Palestinian context; from songs and instruments used, to choreography, even to the details of outfits designed for performers were specific to that region and its specific embroidery. *Dabke* is one of the few things that could connect me to those three places at once, most especially in performance.

Stage-performed *dabke*, with regards to post-colonial and post-mandate events in which it is displayed or performed, has usually been for the purpose of conveying a political message, a connection to the land of Palestine, or to portray a specific political stance. The emphasis here will be on staged *dabke* and its elements, performed outside of its country of origin, through my own experience in a setting as such. When the group I joined was



invited to perform at an event, it would be for a cultural event, school graduations, but most commonly for an event sponsored by a Palestinian Cultural entity in Jordan.

In performances, the music of the traditional line dances was always played by live instruments and live singing. Those live performances were rich with nostalgia for the land of Palestine, connection to the history before the Israeli occupation, and conveyed rich statements of resistance, connection, and the promise to return. An example of these lyrics is “*Zareef Al-toul*”<sup>4</sup>. This is a Palestinian folk song, most of its lyrics are about a man whose nickname was “*Zareef Al-toul*” which means “One of an elegant height, someone tall”. Part of its lyrics goes as:

“ya zareef eT-Tool waqqif ta qullak  
raayiH 'al-ghorbeh wiblaadak aHsanlak  
khaayif ya zareef itrooH o titmallak  
wit'aashir el-gheir o tinsaany anaa” (Barghouthi,)

Which translates to:

“O, *zareef eT-Tool*\* stop so I can tell you  
You are going abroad and your country is better for you  
I am afraid you will get established there  
And find someone else and forget me” (Barghouthi, 1996).

This is a verse from a much longer song, most of its lyrics are about “*Zareef Al-toul*” leaving his land Palestine, and about defending the land and the love of his life. Those line dances consist of ideally an equal number of men and women, between every two women there would be a man and vice versa, and at the front of the line there would be the person with the most talent usually leading the line and at times performing solo in front of the line.

Costumes during such performances were long black dresses for women covered with embroidery, and wide long black trousers for men with a white shirt with belt. Women had long headpieces of the colour white and with some embroidery at the front side of it. Men also have head covers of white and black called *koufiyeh*, which on its own became a very strong political representation for Palestinians. ‘For instance, (...) in Palestine, it’s

---

<sup>4</sup> Folklore Songs by Barghouthi.com. Read more on: <http://www.barghouthi.com/folklore/songs/#zareef>

very common to see a Palestinian *keffiyeh* worn in solidarity protests and demonstrations' (Habash, 2018). Even though the *keffiyeh* has a long history before its political representation, which dates back to Sumerians and Babylonians (Habash, 2018). Aside from the traditional line dances, we performed short pieces of performance called *lawhat*, which translates to portraits. Those pieces at times included a change in costumes to something more comfortable to move in and represented more specific embroidery from specific cities in Palestine.

*Lawhat* consisted of more performative elements of dancing and different formations on stage other than lines, with different styles of Palestinian music which were more modern but still rich in Palestinian expressions, lyrics, and tales. Kaschl argues, according to (Bell 1999; Fortier 1999) that in the context of staged folk performances, the dynamic of *dabke* as a social dance is altered. Most people at the scene are spectators and do not join the performance. They clap and sing along, but do not perform physically on stage. Yet, the power of staged folk-dance manifests in the collective force in watching familiar dance patterns and styles performed to well-known music and rhythms representing shared symbols and costumes. 'In this sense, staged folk dance 'cites' the norms that evoke feelings of belonging and identity' (2003: 15).

#### **2.4. The Special Case of Palestine:**

After the British mandate ended in Palestine, unlike its neighbouring countries, it moved from one colonial state into another. Palestine fell into Israeli occupation in 1947 and is still under occupation until this day. Therefore, the role which *dabke* plays for Palestine can be described as the result of occupation, survival of the national identity of Palestinian people, and mainly a carried heritage for people in diaspora. Just as described in the previous section about my experience in a Palestinian *dabke* group in Jordan, the context in which *dabke* is presented is highly-politicised, and contains an abundance of references to the yearning for the land, historical heroic and love stories from Palestine, and a continuous attempt to sustain the lyrical heritage of the music as original as possible. This notion could be perceived as necessary for some scholars. In his documentary 'Dancing for Hope' which was shot and made mainly in the city of Ramallah, Palestine,

Nicholas Rowe said in regard to *dabke* that, ‘You cannot divorce dance from its context, and its context is a highly political one, and you cannot divorce dance from politics’ (SBS Dateline, 2011).

Kaschl considers *dabke* in the Palestinian/Israeli context to have underwent ‘two processes of inventing tradition’ (2003: 36), a concept in which I will not expand on, rather mention to point out the part in which *dabke* became a tool of creating and sustaining a national identity for Palestinians. The first invention was for *dabke* as an Israeli *dabke* in the forties of the twentieth century, just after the Israeli State was established in Palestine. The second invention, which is the focus point, took place between the late sixties and early seventies. It became ‘Newly categorised as al-turàth al-sha'bì al-filasṭinì (Palestinian heritage), the Arab *dabkeh* was nationalised and became inscribed onto Palestinian bodies in terms of a fixed set of specifically ‘Palestinian’ movement patterns and styles’ (2003: 36).

*Dabkeh* was appropriated by urban middle-class folklorists and dance practitioners, transformed and turned from a social practise associated with Arab peasantry into performances of modern national identity. Historically part of the shared cultural landscape of the Eastern Levant, *dabkeh* as an invented tradition thus became nationalised. The Arab *dabkeh* was refashioned as a specifically Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian or Jordanian practise, distinguished by specific national dance styles and imbued with the authentic spirit of the ‘people’ (Kaschl, 2003: 71-72).

‘In scholarship of the Arab world, *dabke* is more often included in studies of vernacular sung poetry and folk song in Greater Syria than studies of [*dabke*] dance, of which there are relatively few’ (Silverstein, 2012: 20). Kaschl also mentions that references made to *dabke* until the seventies were dispersed and not specific. Between the time when the Palestinian *nakba* took place in 1948 up until the sixties, literature barely held any insinuation to *dabke*. All literature which came afterwards about *dabke* has been carried on under European supervision and published in German and English journals (Kaschl, 2003). Therefore, the study and research on *dabke* has always had its limitations and moulds to fit into, especially after the sixties as the dance became a symbol of

nationalism not only in Palestine, but to all the newly formed countries post-mandate as well.

The notion of performing *dabke* on stage has always been connected to a certain political or national manifestation in the minds of the performers and the spectators. On the other hand, there is no evidence that any staged *dabke* performance has ever taken place out of that context. In other words, in an a-political, social form, presenting the Levantine heritage as a whole; in a more globalised context. As Reed stated, ‘The study of dance within contemporary global/transnational contexts in an arena ripe for anthropological investigation’ (Reed, 1998: 514). In this dissertation I aim to bring to light the case of a *dabke* group founded and practising in Belgium, whose aim is to represent *dabke* in a depoliticised manner. Through their strategies I will examine and evaluate this dance attempting to break-out of its politically loaded links. Keeping it on stage, while packaging it neutrally, apolitically, and inclusively, in a modern, more western mould.

This chapter has provided an insight to the background of the topic this dissertation is dealing with and explained the development of *dabke* from a social dance to a political and national stage dance. Next chapter will be dealing with the first strategy the Watan Dabke Group adopts in their aim of depoliticisation.

## Chapter Three:

### 3. NEUTRALISING THE LEVANT'S CULTURAL HERITAGE: An attempt to a unified international identification.

#### 3.1. Fusion in choreography:

Our message gets through to people very clearly when we are performing on stage; you did not get the chance to see the big shows we usually perform at. The ones you have witnessed here are minor compared to what we usually perform. For example, we have big shows we prepare extensively for. At those shows people grasp our idea of *dabke*, they know that it is cultural and social, and that we pull people from different backgrounds closer. We are not just performing to showcase Palestinian *dabke* or even any singular kind of *dabke* (Ahmad, 2019).

The biggest and main manifestation of bringing this group's aim, in presenting *dabke* as an a-political, inclusive practise, to life is the actual dancing they do. For the general spectators, this is one of the main tangible elements, through which they can see what the group does. Bearing in their minds that most Europeans would not have a clear idea about the type of choreography being performed, the Watan Dabke Group insists that choreography, alongside other elements perceived by the spectators' senses, is able to transfer their vision and message across to the audiences, even if some or most of the audience cannot exactly tell the difference between *dabke* styles. When I asked how exactly they decide which *dabke* style goes at which point in the dance, and how to do they usually proportionalise the different styles he said:

We do not proportionalise intentionally. For us, it is *dabke*, regardless of the style being performed. The major headline is this is *dabke*, this is what matters. No one tries to assign or attribute any style to their country. The only distinguishable element in our *dabke* is the song itself; whether it is Palestinian, Syrian, or Lebanese, that is it! And that has been our purpose all along; to unite *dabke* styles and therefore our people. To reflect that we do not aim to be divided with *dabke*, on the contrary, *dabke* brings us together. The point is to normalise not differentiating various styles and their origins-this is what we are trying to eliminate- and to view *dabke* as a dance that comes from the whole Levantine region instead (Ahmad, 2019).

Since I was not able to witness many big shows as Ahmad said, I had to grasp the application of their vision and aim by the shows I got the chance to attend with them, in addition to the practises they hold twice weekly, as some practises show clearly how they plan, choreograph, and execute their performances.



Figure 2. A photo from one of Watan Dabke Group's practise sessions at the Flemish Cultural Centre.

At the first practise I attended, I had already been introduced to one of the members at an earlier informal hangout and at the day of practise I was to be officially introduced to the rest of the group members actively practising that summer. Salim's flat-mate, Fadi, also came along that day. He never made it to any other practise; he said he wanted to come that day as he knew I could be a little nervous not knowing anyone there besides Salim and Ahmad, and that he would like to keep me company since I was there for the first time. I knew at that point, even though it was still at the beginning of my fieldwork, that I was already becoming a friend to Salim and Fadi. I had obtained formal consent for all those things from each member prior to my arrival in Brussels, but being there in reality and for them to meet me for the first time did give me some anxiety of being socially accepted.

The practises were held in a dance studio at a Flemish cultural centre in central Brussels, which was a huge building with a good number of departments and facilities. The studio looked a lot like a ballet studio with mirrors all around, a clean wooden floor, and

ballet barres all around the room. It was a fairly big studio with a very high ceiling, and overall, it looked like a fancy, expensive place to be practising at. Salim, Fadi and I were the first to arrive, a few minutes later Ahmad walked in with a huge drum, the uses of which will be described in a more elaborate manner in the next sub-section, and told us that ‘today, two couples are going to be attending the second half of the practise to do a *prova*<sup>5</sup> with us.’ Salim followed up telling me that Watan Group is going to be performing at two different weddings in the next two weeks, and that they asked both couples to come to this *prova* to make sure they like the choreography and plan of their wedding entrances with the group.

I remained seated on a side bench near the front corner of the studio, to be able to get a good angle for filming and watching everyone dancing. Fadi sat next to me and every once in a while he would give me a comment about the setting and what was happening in order to clear the picture for me and help me recognise faces and assign names to them, since I have not yet been introduced and met everyone. The group started practising with songs and choreographies they already know and perform occasionally in shows. First, they began with a traditional line dance from Palestine, nevertheless they were doing various *dabke* styles to it, and when I say *dabke* styles I mean styles as they are identified in a post-colonial era belonging to a specific Levantine country rather than the other. They were mixing several styles, from ‘*Dal’ouna*’: the most common style of *dabke*, performed at celebratory occasions in addition to staged performances in Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, to ‘*Zareef Al-toul*’: which is considered Palestinian, to what they called ‘*Taxi*’: which is known by that name in Palestine, and is known as ‘*Darzeh*’ in Jordan, to ‘*Zahlawi*’: which is known by that name in Lebanon, as ‘*Shamali*’ in Jordan, and as ‘*Saahli*’ in Syria. That is to say, several styles they performed were only different in the names they held in every Levantine country. As that dance was over, they began dancing to a remix of songs Ahmad and Abeer have made since this group was founded, they refer to this collective song as ‘*Lebnani, Falastini, Souri*’ which translates to Lebanese,

---

<sup>5</sup> *Prova*: an Italian word for test, proof, trial. It is used broadly in the Middle-East for final rehearsals prior to a staged performance (Collins Dictionary, 2014). Read more on: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/portuguese-english/prova>

Palestinian, Syrian. They refer to it with that name as it combines three songs, one from each of those countries, and they perform it as one conjoined piece. The dance to this remix was a little complex in how it was choreographed. By that I mean that the styles of *dabke* combined were not easy to identify at first glance as they literally infuse *dabke* styles from those three countries to every part of the song. In other words, they would perform what is known to be a Palestinian style of dance to the Lebanese or Syrian part of the remix, and they would perform what is known to be a Lebanese style, in a post-colonial context, to the Palestinian or Syrian part of the remix. What makes it even more complex and hard to identify is the fact that they add a lot of performative elements to the dance. Since the overall choreography of this piece of dance is not a line dance, they have a lot of formations and assortments while performing it, which brings in some dance elements that are not concerned with a *dabke* style rather than the overall beauty and shape of the dancers performing. This includes extensive use of the upper body and arms specifically movements to create volume and shape. It also includes shifting positions and assortments on stage more than once to create intensity and a continuum of movement to the audience. Simply put, Ahmad and Abeer choreographed this dance to be aesthetically appealing while on stage, and that resulted in adding numerous gestures and movements that are not related to any *dabke* style rather than looking ‘beautiful and energetic’ while moving on stage.

Fast forward, and the group started another piece, which was a remix of contemporary electronic dance music of Arab bands, in which the lyrics and some instruments used were purely Levantine, while extensively using electronic western instruments and English lyrics between Arabic. In chapter four I will be discussing this part of music and how this group uses it in westernising what they present in-depth. An hour into the rehearsal, the first couple arrived. The bride was Belgian, and the groom was Lebanese. Ahmad told me they reached out to Watan Group to be their wedding performers after seeing their performances on social media at different weddings in the past. The use and importance of social media to this group in reaching out to audiences beyond Arabs in Belgium will be elaborated on in the next chapter, as it is relevant to the sub-section of “Accessibility to Workshops” as a tool to reach out to a bigger audience.



Ahmad welcomed the bride and groom then started explaining to them how their wedding entrance was going to happen and, later on, how the group would be performing another show during the wedding. He then invited them to the middle of the studio and started demonstrating with other members what the wedding entrance would look like, a minute later he put on the music and they performed a full *prova* of the show they would put on at the wedding. The members trained the couple on where to stand and when to join the dancers and dance. The couple seemed enthusiastic about the whole show, although not as excited as the second couple who walked in around thirty minutes later while the first couple were still there. The second couple consisted of a more diverse background; the bride (S.E.) was half Iranian half British, and the groom (M.E.) was from Madagascar. The bride and Ahmad seemed acquainted well before this *prova*. Later on, I got to know from the bride that she met Ahmad in a *dabke* workshop she attended and stayed in touch since then. She was very interested in *dabke* after she became friends with a Jordanian guy who dances *dabke*, and she told me the reason was that ‘It is very similar to Kurdish dances, and my father has Kurdish roots. This dance just makes me excited especially when I see the similarities of it with Kurdish *dabke*’ (S.E., 2019). The first couple decided to stay and watch as the second couple were practising their place and entrance with the group. They seemed excited and were dancing more with the group, the bride also had some comments on how she preferred certain formations to be done due to the wedding hall space and how they should face the audience. Ahmad agreed. During an interview with Ahmad, I questioned his and Abeer’s knowledge and how deep they went into the history of *dabke* in its social context, to understand how they developed the *lawhat* (dance portraits) of wedding entrances with the inviting couples. He confidently told me that:

‘There are references to which we went back. We found stories about *dabke* styles and how they were created in the first place. For example, “*Dal’ouna*” style; this word meant “come help me” back in the days. This is one of the stories we found looking into the history of *dabke*, as we needed theoretical and actual historical narratives to teach people in our workshops. Similarly, it was important that we study the history of *dabke* and its choreography so we know where we stand and what exactly we are aiming to reach, change and develop, while keeping space for innovation always open. Thus, we developed the wedding entrance choreographies, for when we perform at a wedding. Usually it was only performed with the lower

part of the body -mostly legs- and now we have added movements of the upper body, so it became a full body choreography' (Ahmad, 2019).

After this *prova* and practise was over, the couples left. Ahmad and the members came to the side of the studio in which I was sitting. Ahmad said, addressing the members 'I have two news for you today: I have someone for you to meet, and our official Watan Dabke Group t-shirts are ready and will be given to you today.' Ahmad introduced me first and asked the members to be cooperative and set times for interviews with me. I then came up and introduced myself and my field of study, then elaborated more on my field of research and explained why I was interested in their group specifically. What I felt made me a lot more credible at that point was the fact that I mentioned my long experience in *dabke*, and that I have been part of a performing group back in Jordan a few years ago. For some reason everyone became warmer and more welcoming, it was like I belonged, for the sole fact that I dance *dabke*.

The biggest icebreaker happened right after that session, as the group started playing random *dabke* music and dancing in line. Salim dragged me from my arm to dance with them. I had to put my laptop aside, on which I was taking my notes at that point, and hesitantly joined them in line. Indeed, I was excited to dance *dabke* again but at the same time I was scared I would make members feel like I was invading their space. The result was the complete opposite, most of them seemed excited to see me doing *dabke* and approached me right after the dance to talk and discuss more about my studies and how and when I had learned *dabke*, and for how long I would be staying with them.

The first visible element of this group's strategy in neutralising their representation of the Levant was their fusion in choreographies. The second visible element displayed on stage would be the way they actually look and present themselves, as it holds a heavy weight of the perceivable sensory elements through which an audience can judge the group's neutral representation of Levantine culture.

### 3.2. Outfits used:

Watan Dabke Group aims to present themselves as apolitical, only caring about representing Levantine culture without pulling specific elements from specific countries to showcase specifically. Therefore, Ahmad and Abeer worked on creating and designing outfits that express the culture of the Levant with no elements to reflect a singularity of a Levantine country over the other. ‘We invested a lot of money in getting these outfits designed and sewn in both Lebanon and Syria. We avoided any element that would create a singular representation of any political Levantine country’ (Ahmad, 2019).

Watan has several sets of outfits for both the men and women in the group, and they change them regularly for multiple reasons. The type of occasion they are invited to perform at, the kind of dances they will perform, the venue in which they are going to perform, and changing out of avoiding repetitive presentation to similar audiences in different occasions. In order not to leave any piece out, I asked Ahmad to show me the full actual set of outfits. At the beginning, when I arrived there and wanted to take note of the outfits, they only had one fully ready costume, the rest arrived later on during the time I was there and were taken note of at a later point. ‘To begin with the women’s outfits there are three main ones they change among. The first set consists of red wide and long pants which are tight at their bottom end, also called *sherwal*. On top of that they wear a satin-like beige belt that extends with a sheer veil from the back of a matching colour, and has one small knot on each end for the purpose of sliding a finger from each hand there to be able to grab the veil and move with it attached to the women’s hands’ movement. As for the upper part, they match the red *sherwal* with a long, red sleeve shirt of the same colour, tucked under the belt as well, with a Levantine embroidery on the front side covering the whole chest area. As for the headpiece they have a matching sheer beige veil that slides from the middle of the head down to the back, with an embroidered piece on top where they use it to tie the veil behind their heads. With that veil the women usually leave their hair down under it.

In a show where women are wearing this outfit, the men would match it with black t-shirt, black pants that are also *sherwal* tucked with the shirt under a full embroidered belt, a black-based sleeveless vest covered with the same embroidery of the women’s shirts. Around their necks, men roll a white and black *Keffiyeh*. The embroidery on these outfits for both men and women is considered Palestinian. One or two of the men sometimes hold a big drum that has a strap they wear above one shoulder and they use one stick each to bang on them, usually to increase the sound of the beat with the playback music and to create more enthusiasm and engagement with the audience.



Figure 3. A photo of a member of Watan Dabke Group holding the drum and stick.

The one or two men holding the drum during any sort of performance wear, on top of their outfits, a beige gown, of a shoulder to knee length called “Bisht Cloak.” This cloak is common and known in the Persian Gulf. A *bisht* ‘is a traditional Arabian long cloak, men wear over their thobes. The word *bisht* is derived from the Persian — to go on one’s back’ (Al-Mukhtar, 2012). According to Ahmad ‘the drummers in Watan Dabke Group

wear this *bisht* to relate even on a deeper and broader level to the whole Arabian identity they aim to represent and include’ (Ahmad, 2019). In other words, it is a sort of an inclusive portrayal of Arabs of all origins. Women always wear comfortable black shoes with their outfit and men wear black high-neck boots. Overall, this outfit has mixed origins in its final shape, even though some details are specific to one Levantine country. The reason for this is that this set of outfits was made in Palestine and therefore had to carry the specificity of embroidery and traditional clothing there.



Figure 4. Members of Watan Dabke Group wearing the red and black outfit. The first guy on each side holding a drum and a stick while wearing the *bisht*

The second set of outfits has even less connection to any political manifestation. It is worn and used in different occasions and is relatively new compared to the red and black outfits used usually. The dominating colours of this outfit are blue and golden for women,

black and golden for men. These outfits are more common in design in Lebanon and Syria. The women's outfit was handmade in Lebanon, while the men's outfit for this specific set was handmade in Syria. The women's outfits consist of three pieces: a long flowing blue dress with a v-shaped collar sewn in the colour gold, and a golden belt that goes around the waist, holding the dress tighter at that area, with two golden strips going from the belt down, over the blue dress. Underneath that dress women wear black *sherwal* as well, to assist with a wider range of movement since the dress is flowing and loose especially from the waist down. The sleeves of this dress are divided in two parts: the upper arm part is blue, and the lower arm is golden. Between the two parts there is a golden band right above the elbow, and a thin, long piece of sheer blue veil is attached to it, so when the arms are lifted the veil is following the movement in a fluid way. Finally, the headpiece consists of two pieces of silk-like blue and golden cloth that are wrapped around each other, so it looks like a hair hoop all around the upper head. Hanging from it is a sheer golden veil that dangles from the hoop to the back of their heads down to their waists.

As for the men, their outfit consists of four pieces: black *sherwal*, white silk-like shirt, tucked under a thick black belt, covered with golden embroidery, matching the embroidery on their black-based sleeveless vests as well. This embroidery pattern is more common in Lebanon and Syria in its design. Finally, men also wrap black scarves around their necks. Footwear applies exactly like the previous outfit, comfortable black shoes for women, and black high neck boots for men. At times, one or two men carry the same drum as the one explained in the previous outfit. At other times, they carry a *darabuka*<sup>6</sup>, the person carrying the *darabuka* or the drum also wears the same Bisht mentioned in the previous set of outfits, and has the choice to whether they put a black scarf or the black and white *keffiyeh* around their necks. Although this set of outfits has less obvious attachments to a specific Levantine country, it still carries embroidery from Lebanon and Syria, as they

---

<sup>6</sup> 'Darbuka instrument has a history that goes all the way back to the Common Era in Egypt and comes in different shapes and sizes. It is also very common in Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Arabic countries and North Africa. Darbuka instrument is a percussion instrument that has a goblet shape. It narrows in the middle and widens back at the other end. The head of the instrument is wider than the other end. The traditional darbuka instrument have sheep, goat and fish skin for the good quality sound (...)' (Veysel, 2018). Read more on: <https://salamuzik.com/blogs/news/all-about-darbuka-instrument>

were made there. A more obvious indication to where it was made is the women's headpiece as these wrapped pieces of clothes around each other are more common in Syria and Lebanon.



Figure 5. Members wearing the blue and golden outfit, with a guy posing in the middle wearing the *bisht*

The last set of outfits this group has is a far simpler set with a modern look. Both women and men wear the same clothing in this case. This set consists of black jeans, a designated black t-shirt that has the logo of Watan Dabke Group in the front and back sides.

The logo consists of the name “Watan Dabke” written in white, with a red *tarboosh*<sup>7</sup> over the letter “T” in “Watan”, and a rosary in the shape of the letter “D” in the word “Dabke”. Underneath the logo the words “Dance Group” are printed. Underneath that, they have put their name on social media in both Arabic and English. Up above the logo there is a slogan with a small font that says, “Embrace the *dabke* spirit” and has a red rosary hanging on the word “spirit”. On top of that, they wrap the black and white *keffiyeh* around their necks. Those t-shirts were designed and made in Belgium.



Figure 6. Members wearing the designated t-shirts for Watan Dabke Group, with black pants, and a *keffiyeh*.

---

<sup>7</sup> ‘Tarboosh, also spelled Tarbush, close-fitting, flat-topped, brimless [hat](#) shaped like a truncated cone. It is made of felt or cloth with a silk tassel and is worn especially by Muslim men throughout the eastern Mediterranean region either as a separate headgear or as the inner part of the [turban](#). The tarboosh worn by women is made of rich materials and adorned with ornaments’ (Editor’s of Encyclopedia Britannica, 1998). Read more on: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/tarboosh>



Nonetheless, shuffling between those outfits on different occasions rather depends on factors other than inclusion and diversity. When asked, Salim who is one of the early members and a highly trusted person by both Ahmad and Abeer, told me that:

‘We choose what to wear on a certain show based on what the hosts would prefer, some of them prefer something more Syrian, Palestinian, etc. but this happens rarely, because we do not usually accept performing at an event meant to represent one country without the other. Although, at weddings, we tend to follow the preferences of the bride and groom since it is more about their aesthetic preferences, even the non-Arab couples sometimes prefer a colour over the other. At some shows, we have either a long performance time or too many of us performing. In this case, we split both the time and dancers into two intervals; the first batch of us performs wearing the red and black outfits, and the second batch of us performs wearing the blue and golden outfits. If we had a long performance time but limited dancers, we take a short break between performances and change the outfit. We do this to create a more representative image of *dabke*, while at the same time, giving the audience more to see and catch their eyes. On the other hand, the official Watan Dabke Group t-shirt with black pants are a more convenient choice for either short performances, or workshops. Because when we are given only a short performance time, or the logistics of the venue do not allow space to change outfits, we attend the show wearing the t-shirt and pants with the *keffiyeh*. On the other hand, when we do workshops to teach people *dabke*, we want them to clearly see and imitate the movements, and by wearing skinny jeans we are allowing an easier demonstration of movements, while simultaneously keeping us comfortable. The t-shirt is the most important detail of that outfit as it helps engrave the group’s name in attendees’ minds’ (Salim, 2019).

The group’s choice(s) of outfits came down to three main motives, apolitical in their context, while unavoidably political when it came to the rare occasion of performing at a solely single-country context. These three motives relate to the duration of the performance and/or number of performers, whether the event was a performance on stage or a workshop, and finally the choice of representation the host party picks for the group. While the last option seemed to be the least favourite to the group’s main aim and policy it sounded like an unavoidable compromise to go with how the host wants the performance to look. While Salim said this specific part of the host’s preference, it was with a bit of hesitation, it was like he almost did not prefer it and had to say afterwards that this was limited to specific occasions which they mostly avoid.

### **3.3. Recruitment:**

At the early beginnings, when Abeer and Ahmad started recruiting people for the group, they used to announce -on social media platforms- having workshops for teaching *dabke* and after the workshop ended they approached attendees and simply asked who was rather interested in joining a group and committing to practise weekly. They would then meet again with those interested and measure their individual motivation, time capacity and tendency to commit in the long run. Afterwards, they would start physical training six hours weekly. Some of the people they first recruited had little to no knowledge or experience in *dabke*, and that was in itself a challenge to Ahmad and Abeer, who are the main choreographers as well, since they had to start from scratch aligning bodily tempo along with musical tempo of *dabke*. Nonetheless, they did prefer this kind of hard work in order for them to get as many nationalities and backgrounds interested as possible. For them, the wider the spectrum of people dancing, the more Watan Dabke Group's purpose of presenting the Middle-East as a non-sectarian, inclusive society was fulfilled. Later on, and after the group became officially established as a cultural NGO in Brussels, the recruitment process became more official, meaning that there are processes and stages in order to be recruited and become a member of the group.

During the period in which I was in the field I was not able to witness any live recruitment processes. For that reason, I had to make note of members' attendance policy and recruitment process through asking direct questions to the main recruiter in the group, who is Ahmad.

'When a person contacts us for the purpose of joining the group, we have several markers to check to make sure, at least in the beginning, that this person fits the criteria we seek to be fulfilled in our members. For example, we have to make sure they are open-minded, accepting of all sorts of people and differences. If he is a man, we have to check his acceptance of (stutter) his respect for girls mainly. The most important thing is his respect towards girls, I mean he should not have any awkward or weird actions, especially with girls, you know? Third thing is also the motivation, some people come and want to join but then they do not show any

motivation towards *dabke*, so we tell him off from the beginning. We can, (pause) I mean personally when a person comes to talk to me about joining, I somehow understand and can tell if he will be good to join. One other important thing aside from all that is his respect and motivation to commit to us and our practising sessions and show and performances. Now we are on vacations, so you cannot see how official practises are held. But starting September it is a different thing. Members cannot skip practises unless they have a valid reason to do so' (Ahmad, 2019).

From that answer I was able to understand the “by book” process of accepting members into the group. On the other hand, I was inclined to provide Ahmad some sort of imaginary situations, in which politics would interfere, and see how he would hypothetically react to those situations if applied in real life. I asked him first if they would accept anyone from any nationality and religious background in the group. In a very quick reaction Ahmad said ‘Of course! We have all sorts of religious backgrounds here! Sunna, Shi’a, Kurds, Christians, etc.’ I explained that, as he might know, there is a big ongoing conflict between Kurds and Turkey, mostly about land ownership, as Kurds in Iraq and Syria want geographical independence, while Turkey is refusing that by sending actual missiles bombing northern Syria and Iraq where Kurds are mostly concentrated. I consequently asked him what he would deal with a situation in which a Turkish person wanted to join, given the fact that there is Kurdish member currently in the group. I could see that he was gazing away imagining the situation, then he eventually said ‘I would definitely accept him if he or she fits the criteria. As this has nothing to do with *dabke*. Outside the *dabke* context they are free to not talk to each other at all, but in *dabke* they have to cooperate and talk to each other normally. In case I sensed a problem emerging, and that problem is being caused by one person rather than the other, I will tell that person goodbye.’ When I finally asked what would he do if, hypothetically, one of those two people told you he would quit if the other stays? He told me ‘I do not know. If that person is good for the group, I cannot tell him to stay or leave. It eventually comes down to the greater good of the group. But as I said before, when we recruit someone, we make sure from the beginning that he or she will accept all sorts of things and different people.’ Ahmad did his best explaining that they aim to be a highly inclusive group. In other words, his vision alongside Abeer’s since they started the group, was to include and present the full spectrum of Arabs, all nationalities interested in joining, and most importantly all

religions, as they wanted to come out as a small sample of what a non-sectarian Levant would look like, and how similar its culture is. Through the implementation of this vision, they have to constantly remind people that the British and French mandate in the Levant is what separated the Levant into different countries, and that resulted in various outcomes and reflections among people and their culture, it could also be said that it was the main reason for sectarian conflicts to arise in the post-colonial context. That is to say, that the Sykes-Picot agreement to divide the Levant in 1916, left the people in this area influenced and politically driven by the nationalistic movements and identities created for each newly reformed country in the area.

In his theory, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman discusses *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Newman, O'Brien and Robertson, 2018: 120). The situation in which Ahmad expected two politically colliding nationals to co-exist in the group in peace is an application of *modus vivendi* on a smaller scale. Meaning, he expected any conflicting members to set aside their conflicts and maintain their professional relationship while being and performing in the Watan Dabke Group.

In this case, we have then a kind of interactional *modus vivendi*. Together the participants contribute to a single overall definition of the situation which involves not so much real agreement as to what exists, but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored. Real agreement will also exist concerning the desirability of avoiding an open conflict of definitions of the situation. I will refer to this level of agreement as a “working consensus” (Newman, O'Brien and Robertson, 2018: 122).

As part of the group's effort in containing the external factors that could influence their aims in an a-political *dabke*, recruitment and sponsorship play two main roles in influencing the internal and external policies, shape, and content this group can present. In the next section, I focus on the other external factor, which is sponsorship.

### **3.4. Sponsorship:**

‘We completely refuse this idea [sponsorship]. Our main concept was, (pause) we do not have any kind of sponsorship. We are financially, ideologically, politically,

religiously, and socially independent. The concept is: for us to stay independent and free we turned down any support from any political party, any embassy or association that had any agendas or propogandas behind it' (Ahmad, 2019).

That was the first reaction I got from Ahmad when asked about sponsorship. Ahmad and Abeer firmly believe that receiving any sort or form of support from any political party, especially Arab ones, would result in the loss of control over their own choices, presentation, choreography, and even the style of music they could use. Therefore, the sole choice they believe they had was to concede sponsorship and just get paid for what they actually offer and perform. On the other hand, both Ahmad and Abeer felt at ease receiving one sort of sponsorship -or we may call it support- from a Flemish cultural organisation at the beginning of their establishment as a group. They practise at a Flemish cultural organisation and use their space at least twice weekly, with full access to the venue's facilities. 'The venue we practise at is a Flemish cultural centre, supported by the Belgian government. Nevertheless, we currently pay rent. This happened while I was looking for a venue to practise when we first started the group, and I paid a visit to this cultural centre and presented to the organisers my idea and concept of Watan Dabke Group. They loved it! And they agreed to provide us with the studio for free for the first year as a form of support. In exchange, if they held an event and needed us to perform, we would do it for free even now. A few months later they offered me a place in the organising committee of their organisation. I have a vote now in proposals to be voted on in the organisation' (Ahmad, 2019).

I cannot deny I was a little puzzled when I discovered they did actually have support from an organisation, receiving a venue free of charge for a whole year, and later on keeping that venue reserved for them in exchange of rent. It is true, paying rent makes it an equal exchange, but not entirely in this case, as Ahmad himself said 'This is one of, if not the biggest, best dancing studios in Brussels. It is extremely difficult to find a studio as big and available as this one.' The reason I found this a paradox at the beginning is that the way Ahmad first responded to the idea of sponsorship was very sharp and strict. But it turned out they did in fact accept sponsorship or collaboration with a party that could not, in a cultural or political way, affect their entity. In other words, according to Ahmad, a

continuous collaboration with a cultural party that has no connection with any Levantine country seems like a safe idea, since no influence could be made on the core principal of this group.

### **3.5. Conducting workshops:**

As part of their activities, the Watan Dabke group conducts several workshops a year in several countries across Europe. This section will be focusing on the workshops' elements through which the group appears to be neutralising the image of *dabke* and the Levant.

The local workshops this group conducts in Belgium are usually organised by them, whilst they get officially invited by a hosting organisation for workshops conducted abroad, in most cases a cultural organisation. The one workshop I got to attend in my period of stay was held in Mechelen, Belgium. It was one of a kind to the attendees, as they had no clue they were going to attend a workshop. This event happened in a secret agreement between Watan Dabke Group and the bride and groom that have been mentioned in this chapter earlier; (S.E.) and (M.E.). According to the bride, she wanted to surprise her father -being half Iranian half Kurdish- by inviting a *dabke* group to perform at the wedding, as '*dabke* is a familiar type of folk dance, close to Kurdish dance style and I hoped I could make it a joyous surprise having a performance that relates to my dad's culture at my wedding' (S.E., 2019). In addition to the bride's wish to make the whole group's existence at her wedding a surprise, she also planned with them a workshop. One in which at the same wedding hall and after the full official ceremony, the group gathered the audience and taught them basic *dabke* styles. At first, Ahmad took the microphone and gave a very small brief about *dabke* to the audience in English. He mentioned that *dabke* comes from the whole Levant region, and while teaching every style he mentioned the style's name in every Levantine country. For example, he introduced a *dabke* style called *Shamali* in Jordan and Palestine, *Zahlawy* in Lebanon, and *Sahli* in Syria, although these three names belong to the same *dabke* style, only performed slightly with different variances in each country, and to different music. They then put on some upbeat folk songs from Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon, and as the audience got more excited and they were dancing in a big circle with Ahmad in the

middle, the DJ changed the music to a mix of Farsi and Kurdish songs with a similar beat and tune. Abeer was leading the *dabke* circle at all times, while Ahmad was mainly in the middle, giving instructions and demonstration to the dancers.



Figure 7. Ahmad conducting a *dabke* workshop at a wedding in Mechelen, Belgium.

It was a very fresh outlook to see that scene, as the audience was so diverse in their backgrounds, and age range. There were people from India, Iran, Belgium, Madagascar, Kuwait, United Kingdom, and Jordan. Age range was between little kids to people in their eighties. Older people were as excited as the youngsters, nonetheless, since *dabke* is a physically demanding dance, some of the older people sat down and watched and clapped for the rest of the people on the dance floor. The elements in this previous story which reflect on neutralising the folk of the Levant and westernising *dabke* aspects are not mutually exclusive. Although, I tried to highlight the part of that scene that reflects how Ahmad tried to present *dabke* styles in three different names, stressing on the fact that they come from the same origin, and therefore, giving the impression that *dabke* actually stems from the same origin and region. Nonetheless, markers and elements that reflect the group's efforts in westernising *dabke* in its application pervaded. In an attempt to separate the

spotlights for both aspects, I will elaborate on the elements of westernising through the same wedding scene in the next chapter.

This chapter discussed the elements through which Watan Dabke Group apply the strategy of westernising dabke, by making it more appealing to the west, more globalised, and promote it as a dance for any joyous celebration, whether Arab or non-Arab. The next chapter will be focusing on some elements mentioned in both this chapter and the previous, evaluating the extent to which this group was able to fully apply their strategies objectively.



## Chapter Four:

### 4. WESTERNISING *DABKE* AS A DANCE:

#### 4.1. Accessibility to workshops and performing at weddings:

‘The debate over whether, and how to adapt *dabke* in contemporary dance productions therefore, suggests how choreographers and their audiences negotiated shifting attitudes toward national identity and cultural heritage at the same time that they aspired toward more global imaginaries’ (Silverstein, 2015: 80).

The intended meaning of ‘westernising’ in this context is the adaptation of elements of a non-western dance or music to suit the general taste of western audiences, in this case Europeans. This notion is realised through the mixing of the original elements of the dance with elements from the intended west, thus producing a more western version of a Levantine folk dance and music by moulding the final product into a more globally, internationally communicative element.

The proposed meaning by the term “Accessibility to workshops” is the general public’s accessibility to workshops conducted by this group, whether organised by the group itself, or by another inviting party. At the same time, the group’s accessibility to taking part in workshops or weddings that are not exclusively Arab. Placing this subsection as the first in this chapter is a result of it being intertwined with the last sub-strategy in the previous chapter. Chapter three ended with an ethnographic record of a workshop conducted by the Watan Dabke Group at a hugely diverse wedding. Additionally, it explained that out of all the group’s activities, workshops tend to reflect efforts made by the group in both neutralising the image of the Levant *dabke*, while at the same time systematically westernising its application and aspects.

Elements the Watan Dabke group has portrayed in that workshop which weigh on their classification as westernising elements came from different directions; some of them specifically from that wedding workshop, and others from Ahmad and other members’ account on what they do at different workshops. From my own account as a *dabke*

performer, performing *dabke* at a social celebration is usually limited to Arab celebrations, more specifically, the Levantine region.

This group, slowly but effectively, started to establish, the suitability of this kind of Levantine folk dance at almost any occasion, more specifically, any non-Arab wedding occasion. The idea itself of having a *dabke* group performing at non-Arab weddings is in itself a new representation of how *dabke* is for everyone, regardless of their background. More so, it is an attempt to normalise dancing a folk dance like *dabke* within any cultural context or background. Thus, making it a suitable celebratory dance in a western context. Evidently, this wedding had neither the bride, or the groom, or their families coming from an Arab or even Levantine background. Nonetheless, the Watan Dabke Group were the bride and groom's first option for a performing dance group at their wedding.

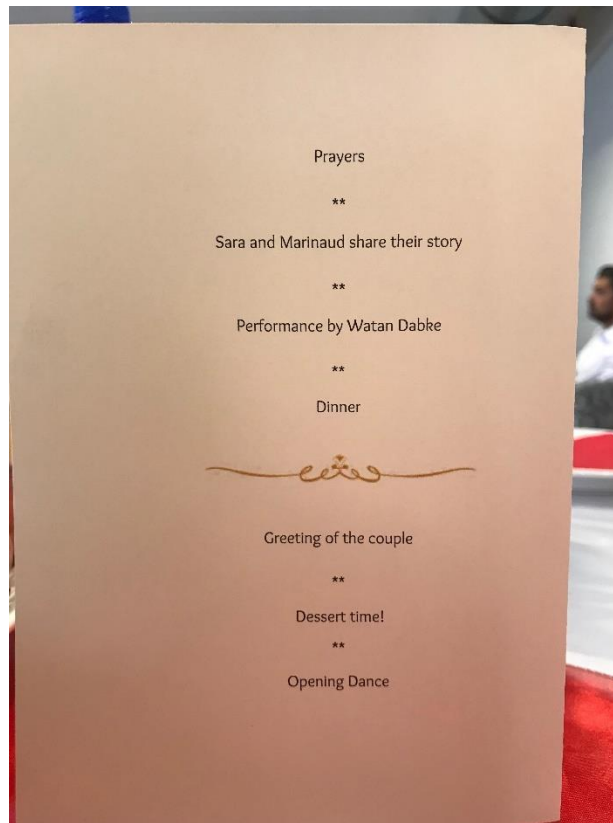


Figure 8. A schedule of the wedding in Mechelen, Belgium, showing “Performance by Watan Dabke” before the dinner



Figure 9. Watan Dabke Group performing a wedding entrance with the bride and groom. Mechelen, Belgium.

What is worth noting at this point is that both the bride and groom are of Baha'i religion<sup>8</sup>, and according to (S.E.) 'We are not politically involved in any political issue. As Baha'is are not supposed to have a political discussion about anything. They focus on unity only' (S.E., 2019), a statement which was put to test later. While the couple were presenting the story of how they met, they reached the part in which they were saying they had another wedding celebration before this one. The groom was saying they had it in "Haifa, Israel" and at the same moment the bride snatched the microphone and said: 'Or Palestine, we do not know.' Some of the audience laughed at that moment, and as I was sitting on the same table as the members, I could see the looks they gave each other, but the whole situation was disregarded quickly. When I asked the bride later on about the reason she corrected her husband's comment, she laughed a bit and said 'It was because I knew already that Ahmad is from Palestine, and I did not want him to feel bad or offended. It happened that the city of Haifa is the center of Baha'i's since the Ottoman Empire, but it has no political background to it' (S.E., 2019).

---

<sup>8</sup> Baha'i religion is one of the youngest religions in the world. It is an independent, separate religion that is recognised as such (Hatcher and Martin, 1985). Read more on Baha'ism faith on *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* by William S. Hatcher and J. Douglas Martin.

The reason this is highly relevant is the fact that the couple's political views aligned with their idea about the Watan Dabke Group, which for them had no political stance in the dance itself and no political agenda behind it. The couple claim to have chosen this group only because of how beautiful *dabke* is as a dance and how joyous they thought it would make the wedding celebration, which, according to the couple's feedback later on was confirmed. 'The whole dance was a surprise to everyone, and people really loved it. I have some Arabic speaking relatives and they were very pleased. Half of the guests did not know *dabke*, they were less familiar' (S.E. and M.E., 2019). I could give credit to the group specifically for this aspect, as they succeeded in spreading *dabke* as a dance in the minds of people of various backgrounds. While at the same time, normalising *dabke* as a celebratory dance not only for Levantine culture. Ahmad and Salim confirmed that they get invited to conduct workshops mostly by cultural organisations in and out of Belgium. Most of the time, these workshops include non-Arabs, who have never heard of *dabke*, or who have never practiced it and only knew of its existence as a dance that comes from the Middle-East.

We usually choose very basic and original *dabke* styles to teach novice people, such as "*dal'ouna*" (to be elaborated on in the music genre section), and "*dehhiyeh*"<sup>9</sup>. The reason we choose these styles is because they form the basis of most *dabke* styles and at the same time they are socially engaging, easy to learn, and "*dehhiyeh*" especially is a style we leave till the end, when people are more engaged and relaxed dancing, as it is easy, fun and really enjoyable to do in a circle of people (Ahmad, 2019).

At the workshops at which they are invited to teach *dabke*, Ahmad makes sure he introduces enough information and background on *dabke*.

'As we begin, I give a brief about the history of *dabke* in the Levant area. I mention how colonialism created these geographical and political boundaries, and stress on the fact that all styles of *dabke* come from the same origin "Greater Syria" historically. I tell them the story of "*dal'ouna*" and how this word originally meant for people in that area "come help us", and that was how *dabke* originated. We

---

<sup>9</sup> 'Deheyeh (Arabic: الدحية), Is a Bedouin dance practiced in Palestine, Jordan, northern Saudi Arabia, some of the Gulf states, the Syrian desert and Iraq. It was practiced before the wars to stir up enthusiasm among the members of the tribe, and at the end of the battles in ancient times describe the battle and the tournaments, but now it is practiced on occasions such as weddings, holidays and other celebrations.' Read more on: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oriental\\_folk\\_dances#Deheyeh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oriental_folk_dances#Deheyeh)

teach the styles I mentioned to you and mention that they sometimes have different names in Levantine countries nowadays; while they are in fact the same styles and movements, with slight modifications after the political separation of the Levant. On the other hand, we focus on the technicalities of people learning; shoulder movements, leg movements, tempo, and their ability to follow the beat. Overall people come out happy from these workshops, and when we are leaving the venue of the workshop, we sometimes find them dancing what they have learned in the street' (Ahmad, 2019).

By this whole dynamic, I could see how the group's accessibility to society in Europe was dependent on how much accessibility they gave this society to *dabke*. It could form a sort of a loop, where both the society and the group depend on each other continuously to allow more accessibility and spread of this dance in such a western society.

#### **4.2. Legal Registration:**

When the Watan Dabke Group became officially established, it was registered as a Non-Governmental Organisation "NGO". Therefore, it had and still has responsibilities, rules, and liabilities to go by. Some of these, concern the organisation and legal shape of this entity, while others are concerned with the money flow and how assets are being distributed. The Watan Dabke Group must have two or more founders, even if one founder quits the group someone else must replace them even if only as a legal entity. All members that join must be registered as volunteers paid by day, they can only get paid up to 1,400 Euro per year, and only for thirty days per year. Members of this group have to officially perform for more than thirty days per year, and so to solve this problem Ahmad, the founder, had to issue a permit called "Artist Card" for every active member in the group, to allow them to get paid up to 2,500 Euro per year. Any performance offers this group receives must be considered as a project, and every penny that is made from this project has to be registered and reported to the government annually.

Since this group is an NGO, they are not subject to tax and therefore the money that goes into the group has to match their spendings. In other words, no personal gain other than what the members' "Artist Card" allows can be made or benefited from by founders. On the other hand, this registration as an NGO allows the group to ask for governmental support, meaning they can ask for financial help, or for a venue to practice, and even submit

proposals for holding up special events nationally. This helped the group to be treated like any other local NGO in Belgium with all benefits and rights. The group became an official cultural group as a European NGO. Their representation, activities and ideologies must match and abide by European laws to be permitted to function and practice. In other words, the group cannot represent and express political ideologies that do not abide by European laws and regulations.

### **4.3. Music Styles and genres:**

Before embarking on the group's music styles, one should give a historical brief about the evolution of folk music in between Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine.

As a point of convergence of the ancient civilisations of the Mesopotamian, Assyrian-Babylonian, Christian and Arab-Islamic Orient, Syria-Lebanon-Palestine has always been presented in history as a cultural entity, in which a basic unity, forged in the course of centuries, was to create a community out of the spoken, written and sung language (Jargy, 1978: 79).

According to (Jargy, 1978), colonialism and geographic division later on gave prominence to the slight differences in the musical heritage to come out among different ethnics in historical Syria. Thus, referring to "Syrian" and "Lebanese" music became mutually exclusive matters. Nonetheless, these styles emerged from the same historical origins. He also argued that Christianity, as a religion that brought together the Levantine Mediterranean countries, left an ineffaceable impact on the folk music of that area. 'Its double heritage, Aramaean-Semitic and Hellenistic-Byzantine contributed to influencing the later evolution of the folk and art music of Syria and Lebanon in the Arab-Islamic era' (Jargy, 1978: 79).

I came to consider this part of the Watan Dabke Group's strategy of depoliticising *dabke* through westernising one of the most prominent elements in their representation. This is due to the weight this element carries in reflecting the group's modernity and image on stage. Simply put, music is one of the elements audiences can take in and receive immediately with their senses, without the need of intervention or explanation. Unlike

some of the other elements, which do not get through as depoliticisation elements without further explanation. The Watan Dabke Group puts high focus on choosing the suitable music, Ahmad and Abeer work hard even on remixing some songs, whether folk or contemporary, in order to make it more upbeat and catchier to the European audiences. For Ahmad and Abeer, music style was one of the main reasons they quit their previous group and came up with this idea to create the Watan Dabke Group.

One of our biggest motive to quit and start this group was the songs. In our previous group, we felt that the music we are presenting to our audience is not relevant to them, especially in a European society. When you play a folk song with no tune to attract the listener, especially if this listener does not understand Arabic, it just does not work. Precisely, it lacks drums, org, and those kinds of instruments a lot. Instead, it depends on *oud*, *darabuka*, *shabbabeh* [to be clarified next paragraph], and those kinds of instruments. Thus, it does not thrill and excite (Ahmad, 2019).

To put more context on the instruments and their sound effect I will use (Simon Jargy, 1978: 89)'s definition of Levantine folk instrument, through his paper 'The Folk Music of Syria and Lebanon'.

The folk music instruments used in Syria and Lebanon are the same as those found in the ensemble of Arab-Islamic countries of the Near East, with the usual variety of terminology and in some cases in the modes of execution. They are not, then, exclusive to one or the other of the two countries but predominate in the case of some of them in one or another region according to the socio ethnic function of the instrument itself.

[F]irst of all, the *durbakkeh* (*darabukkah*), the cup-drum, made of clay or sometimes metal and its broadest opening covered with skin: it is beaten with the fingers in a way which makes its tones clear and hollow-sounding. As in the case of the *durbakkeh*, but to a lesser degree, the *daft*, a sort of tambourine, also serves to accent the dance rhythms. Two wind instruments complete the assortment: the *shebbabeh*, which is simply a variant of the classic *nay* (reed flute); and the *mizmār*, a sort of double reed oboe which, in Syria, is made with two reed pipes and is there called *mezwecj* or *arghūt*. Its special characteristic is its ability to produce simultaneously a drone bass and a highly ornamented melody, whose range is usually limited (Jargy, 1978: 89).

From the way it was described, it seems like Ahmad and Abeer condemned folk music as boring and unattractive to a foreign society that does not speak Arabic. Thus, in order to keep *dabke* engaging and interesting to those societies, it is necessary to keep up with their

preferences in what they like to hear, even if this means changing the instruments used, and using western instruments instead, to appeal and relate to their target audience, while still presenting to them the same folk dances- *dabke*. As I began attending practices and performances of different kinds, I noticed what Ahmad has said in our first interview about the music composition. Basically, this group has a collection of songs with choreographies designed for them. Each piece of choreography is designed by Ahmad and Abeer after choosing a song or a piece of music. I will refer to this combination of choreography to a music piece as a *lawha* (dance portrait). In order to make the distinction between music genres this group uses clear, I will break them down into four categories, and elaborate on each kind and its implementation in this group separately:

1. Folk music remastered using western and eastern instruments and upbeat tunes; usually edited by Ahmad and Abeer personally.
2. Modern songs from Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine; these kinds of songs are already made with use of upbeat music and western instruments.
3. Arabic electronic dance music (EDM); this genre of music is relatively new in the Middle-East and more commonly produced by contemporary music bands. Lyrics are usually loaded with political meanings, both directly and indirectly. Nonetheless, its music is very western, modern, and made with high-tech equipment.
4. Foreign songs in foreign languages; During some performances in and out of Belgium, the group tends to use local music of the country they are visiting and choreograph suitable *dabke* styles to it.

Those four categories of music were defined based on analysing inputs from Ahmad himself, but most dominantly by drawing patterns from watching and documenting the group's rehearsals and practices, along with their choices of picking dance portraits for performances on stage and at weddings.

The first category of music listed above is paired by Ahmad and Abeer with traditional folk *dabke*. They remaster folk music from Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine; remixing these



original instruments with western instruments to produce a more relevant style to Europeans. They then choreograph traditional *dabke* styles from the whole Levantine region. At times, traditional as the line dance, and at other times they add a bit of movement formations in the dance portrait between every couple of dancers. One of the most famous common style between the Levantine countries up to this day is “*dal’ouna*<sup>10</sup>”, which was mentioned in an earlier section in this chapter. It is a line dance usually performed by the people attending a social celebratory event (McDonald, 2006). The only difference in dancing this style between Levantine countries nowadays is the lyrics of the music accompanying the dance, each country has lyrics that reflect and express parts of their post-mandate culture. When they are performing solely traditional line *dabke* they tend to create more solos in order to create more movement liveliness and vigor on stage, while tending to engage the audience with them and inciting them to the line dance in case of performing at weddings, where they want to make it festive and energetic, or workshops where they are teaching people traditional styles of *dabke*. The point of line dance serves more as social than performative and thus, the group uses it mainly at socially engaging events rather than at a stage performance where the audience are mainly spectators. During my presence with this group, I noticed that not only they use this kind of music in socially engaging events, such as weddings and celebrations, but also they use it as the primary source of teaching *dabke* to newcomers, and most importantly in workshops they conduct or get invited to.

The second category of music needs less work, as in most songs they choose from the contemporary singers have upbeat tunes and western instruments used in them; which makes the song already suited with the needed speed and beat to choreograph to, without the need to edit or remix. On the other hand, those songs are modern, made by singers from either Lebanon, Palestine or Syria, and since the songs usually speak of one country or the other, carrying words and references of nationalism and belonging to either one of these countries, Ahmad and Abeer decided to do a twist here. When they bring in any of these songs from a singular country, they create a joint piece of music that combines one song

---

<sup>10</sup> Dal’ouna’s Labanotation analysis can be found in Jana Al Obeidyine’s dissertation “Folk Dancing in the City” (2014).

from every single country and create choreography to it as a whole. For example, if they liked a Lebanese song and wanted to make a dance portrait out of it, they match it with another two songs; one from Syria and one from Lebanon and produce them as one music piece. Namely, they came up with a mix of three songs “Lebnani, Falastini, Souri”, which include three modern songs made by three different singers from each of the three Levantine countries, they merged the three songs together and created this one piece that presents them all in one joint dance portrait.

As for the third category of music styles they use- EDM; it is one of the most prominent music styles this group uses and takes pride in using it. Even with the songs they remaster and remix themselves, they try to add elements of EDM to make them sound closer to what Europeans enjoy hearing, and for the overall coolness and modernity of using such music by Alternative Arab bands in recent years. To properly elaborate on this type of music and its role in westernising for a *dabke* group with a vision like Watan, I have to start by presenting and discussing the idea behind the most famous bands that create this music in the Middle-east, and their actual purpose(s), in order to align their ideologies to what Watan is trying to prove using their music in performances.

Around a decade ago, *dabke* joined the ‘global music industry’ (Karkabi: 2018: 173) in producing fused electronic styles. With the growing interest in electronic *dabke* and its success in Europe through the wedding singer from Syria; Omar Souleyman, the Palestinian bands like Ministry of Dub-Key and 47Soul joined this trend to present Levantine dance music electronically. This genre of music became known as “Electro *Dabke*”; which presents a globalised version of Arab folklore, using English and Arabic lyrics with an originally political context. This genre became widespread and felicitous both in the Middle-East and Europe (Karkabi, 2018).

Whereas Palestinian cultural performance has focused in the past on heroic struggle or victimized suffering (Allen 2009, 2013; McDonald 2013a), Palestinian electro-*dabke* bands evoke both localised sentiments of national pride in refashioned cosmopolitan folklore and international political solidarity based on human similarity and the shared experience of joy (Karkabi, 2018: 174).

Lastly, the fourth music category this group uses, is less frequent to be presented but they also take pride in such an “innovative” composition in dance portraits in which they combine completely western music -most of the time folkloric- with *dabke* dance styles that are infused with performative elements as explained in the previous chapter, where they combine traditional *dabke* styles with formations and assortments to make the scene more vigour and appealing on stage. ‘We came up with a new concept for *dabke*. For example, we now do *dabke* (nedbek) [nedbek literally translates to the act of dancing *dabke* as a group of people] to western music. We were in Napoli, Italy a few months ago as we had a performance. As a surprise, we performed *dabke* to Italian “*Tarantella*” music. People were dazzled by how we danced something completely eastern to western music. There is a video of that on our Facebook page. We also choreographed a *dabke* dance to the Italian “*Bella Ciao* ” music. Nonetheless “*Tarantella*” is the famous folk music in Napoli, and the purpose of that mix we did was to attract people more to *dabke*. Which we believe we did’ (Ahmad, 2019).

#### **4.4. Performative elements:**

In this section, I focus on the parts of choreography this group creates and performs, which are not directly related to any *dabke* style, rather than to adding more fluidity and motion to the original shape of *dabke* styles. As stage performance is different in context and appearance from social *dabke*, and since this group is producing *dabke* for a more western culture, they sought a way to present something attractive and appealing in its shape to their audiences, without the need to let go of the traditional and original *dabke* styles. As a result, they began creating choreography that goes along with *dabke* movements, while combining contemporary gestures and adding eye-catching assortments and divisions of dancers on stage. Nadeem Karkabi, in his article ‘*Electro-Dabke: Performing Cosmopolitan Nationalism and Borderless Humanity*’ debates the concept of contemporary dance being inserted into staged *dabke*. He mentions that contemporary dance has been introduced to staged *dabke* in Palestine, making this version of *dabke* undergo stylistic modification to accommodate cultured spectators, both in Palestine and internationally (Karkabi, 2018). I would say the group inserted some elements of

contemporary dance to create motion, harmony, and an attractive flow. To amplify *dabke* styles and some specific gestures, I saw, from my experience as a staged *dabke* performer, that they tend to exaggerate the original gesture or style, add hand and arm movements, while attaching to the girls outfits thin, long veils to aid in creating the wave of motion they desire on stage.

As a result, the flow of choreography and transitions between gestures become more malleable. The same applies to the formations and solos they do, I could see a smooth, or slick transitions some would say in how dancers detach and reintegrate in the line of dance when it is a line dance they are performing, or how they move smoothly across the space available dancing separately, in couples, or as small groups on stage. I would say, the Watan Dabke Group cares about the aesthetics of the outer shape of their final product in the eyes of their audience, just as much as they attend to the technicalities of presenting the fusion of different Levantine *dabke* styles.

#### **4.5. Conducting Practices/ Rehearsals:**

Attending *dabke* practices in a language other than Arabic did come to me as a shock. During all practice sessions I have witnessed there was a common fixed behavior that was recurring- adapting language use to members attending. The first practice I attended and got officially introduced during was, by pure chance, exclusively attended by the Arab members. Therefore, no language issue caught my attention, it was smoothly held in Arabic. However, Ahmad needed to address the members, and whenever members needed to comment, discuss, or joke with each other, it would be in Arabic. Nonetheless, from the second practice session on, there would be at least one non-Arab member present, which changed some dynamics of communication and speech among members. At the beginning, and when conversations were being held on a one-to-one basis, I noticed that Arab members would speak Arabic to each other, but would speak French to non-Arabs. I came to know that most members in the group, whether Arab or not, already spoke fluent French due to the fact that they resided in Brussels. Except for two members at the time I was there, Manuela who is from Venezuela, and another Spanish member I will call (P.A.)

for privacy purposes. Those members did not speak French and their second language is English. For most of the remaining members, French was their second language.

Most of the Syrian and Lebanese members started learning French back in their home countries. As it was for them, the second language in schools after Arabic, due to the post-colonial French mandate and its reflections on educational systems in both Lebanon and Syria. Contrary to that, in Palestine and Jordan, the second language taught at schools is English, due to the post-colonial British mandate and its reflections on those countries' educational systems. During my time in the field, there was only one Palestinian member- Ahmad who is the founder, two Lebanese members; including Abeer the co-founder, three non-Arab members, and all the rest were Syrians, Except for one Syrian girl who is half Palestinian. Thus, the only members who had his second language as English were Ahmad, Manuela, and (P.A.). Nonetheless, Ahmad speaks fluent French that it became his second language instead of English.

From what I saw, members preferred to use French only when non-Arab members were there, but it felt to me that the reason they chose French is because they themselves are more comfortable with it as a second language than English. At times, Ahmad would say the same piece of information or instruction in Arabic, French, and in English to address Manuela and (P.A.) when he was present. Once, a Syrian member made a joke in Arabic and immediately translated it to French, then paused for a moment and said it in English in order for Manuela to understand, in case she did not get the French version, even though she was the only non-Arab member present at that practice session.

There was a constant awareness from the members of the need to include everyone in whatever is happening. It became even more noticeable when Manuela was the only non-Arab present -due to the coincidence that all non-Arabs were either working or on vacation-. The whole atmosphere of the group would be focused on not excluding that one non-Arab present. To my concern, it seemed like a conscious pattern of behavior members chose to adopt. This explained to me later and with time, over several practice sessions what Manuela told me in my interview with her, when I asked her about her feeling being

the only non-Arab sometimes in practices and rehearsals and about her feeling being part of this group. ‘When I started, I was fresh in Belgium so I could not speak French, I could speak a little Dutch and I could speak English. They were speaking Arabic but they were explaining everything in English to me and I don’t understand what they’re saying when speaking Arabic but I can understand their gestures and if it’s a joke or if somebody’s angry or somebody’s worried so I think in sometime I could learn Arabic I hope by osmosis I hope –laughter- Also, I do not know if you know but they do it [the practices] mainly in English because there’s also a man from Spain so they make it in English for us and they translate everything, even the jokes’ (Manuela, 2019).

Overall, wanting to recruit non-Arabs and having the desire to spread *dabke* and make it accessible to Europeans came with some obligations, among them is the duty to make the atmosphere of the group all-inclusive at least when it comes to practices, rehearsals, and performances.

This chapter discussed the elements through which the Watan Dabke Group apply the strategy of westernising *dabke*, by making it more appealing to the west, more globalised, and promote it as a dance for any joyous celebration, whether Arab or non-Arab. The next chapter will be focusing on some elements mentioned in both this chapter and the previous, evaluating the extent to which this group was able to fully apply their strategies objectively.

## Chapter Five:

### 5. REFLECTIONS ON DEPOLITICISING STRATEGIES:

#### 5.1. About Recruitment Policies:

As previously mentioned in my methodology, finding out the process of recruitment made a shift in what I was looking for in my field. It all started when I had a one-time conversation with one of the early members of the group, Salim.

One night, and after some bonding and hangouts, I was hanging out at Salim and Fadi's apartment with some of their friends. I had earned a constant place in Salim and Fadi's every night hangouts. The days on which I did not show up, they would call and ask what is holding me back, asking me to come spend time. Even if I expressed a concern that it would already be too late for me to walk back home at night, they would offer me one of their rooms to sleep or offer to walk me home.

On the night of 1st of August, I insisted on going back to my room in the shared house where I lived during the fieldwork. Salim then insisted on walking me back to where I lived. I said good night to everyone and promised to come the next day. Salim and I started walking and it was approximately a fifteen-minute walk from their place to mine. It was a peaceful and very quiet night. Thus, we took our time walking. He was asking me about my history with *dabke*; how, when and where I have learned, and asking a bit more in-depth about the reasons the group I used to dance with stopped performing. I started answering openly. As I mentioned before, Salim and I come from high-context cultures; in which personal bonding affects the ease and openness, and at times the quality of conversations.

A few minutes into our conversation, I asked him if the current nationalities in the group are all the nationalities that ever joined the group. He said that for a brief time they had other nationalities that for various reasons are not in the group anymore. But on the level of training –as the group holds training courses in *dabke* for beginners- they have had

far more nationalities enrolling to learn *dabke*. Less than halfway through, and after I have asked this question, the following question popped up in my mind: ‘Why aren’t there any more Palestinians in the group other than Ahmad’ -who is the co-founder-? At this point, Salim hesitated for few seconds, while slowing down his pace of walking I could sense a change in his tone of voice, as if he was about to say something of some importance, I could see he was trying to put his thoughts into the right words, then he said: ‘The reason not lots of Palestinians are in the group is because every Palestinian we have encountered wanted to have their own group or start a group with their own friends.’ This was a new insight to me. I asked him to elaborate more, all he said is that Ahmad and Abeer were extra careful about Palestinians wanting to join, especially if they used to perform in other *dabke* groups in Belgium, as they have had some history with Palestinians joining and then asking them to leave for some reasons. Reasons varied between wanting to promote certain political views among the overall culture of the group or, trying to steal their style and choreography to take them back to their previous group, or establish a new group with these new styles. When I asked how they knew which people qualify to join, he said they run interviews and background checks of applicants.

It did seem to me as if Ahmad and Abeer were very careful with their process of accepting newcomers that had either or both profiles in order to maintain a certain image of the group. I was a little surprised. The first thing that crossed my mind that moment but did not ask was: ‘What if someone with great experience in dancing *dabke* and good stamina, but matches the undesirable profiles Salim had just mentioned, and another person with no dancing history were to ask to join the group at the same time, who would Ahmad and Abeer pick and for what purpose?’

With further encounters with Ahmad, and by observing the group dynamics, I was able to figure out the answer to the question I asked myself at that moment after Salim’s answer; Ahmad and Abeer would rather recruit novice people, who are motivated and willing to learn, invest time and energy in them to make them good dancers, rather than recruiting professionals who fit the two profiles Salim mentioned.



On its own, what Salim said could be perceived as a generalisation or prejudice. Considering that this group promotes themselves as “apolitical”, all-inclusive Levantine *dabke* group, does seem to contradict some of their policies in recruiting new members.

On the other hand, and after a second interview with Ahmad, I was able to align some reasons for this strict policy with Palestinians joining the group. I asked him to point out some point out some dissimilarities between the Watan Dabke Group and another specific group in Belgium -with reservation to its name I will call it the “Dabeekeh”- after he mentioned some of those dissimilarities concerning music styles mainly and the fact that this group performs only to Palestinian music, he went on and said ‘they are all Palestinians, mainly from Palestine and Gaza. They also get invited and perform at exclusively Palestinian events.’ When I asked if this is a policy they follow, he laughed a little and said ‘I do not know, I cannot intervene in that. I may have some information, but I cannot share it. Sure you do understand right?’ I will not lie, I felt even more inclined to know more about that; in my mind it had a direct connection to the reasons this group might not be recruiting Palestinians, even if not completely intentional.

Therefore, I tried to reformulate my question in order for the answer to be less about the “Dabeekeh” itself and more about the policies of recruitment in general among *dabke* groups in Belgium. Are there any specific criteria? Is there a *dabke* group you are aware of that would accept or reject applicants based on their nationalities or backgrounds?

‘Us? No, we do not refuse any applicant based on his or her nationality. But I do not know (laughter), If I answer you, I will be going into a lot of detail. But I heard from someone, who wanted to join our group a while ago, their own experience, and what they felt being in that the “Dabeekeh” group. She was not comfortable at all, she was from another nationality [not Palestinian], and she felt there was some sort of an awkward interaction with her. I am speaking on the level of gender now, so far, I had three different girls from that group reaching out to me to join us. They said they feel uncomfortable in that group, especially with so many men around, the whole atmosphere became unsettling for them. Therefore, they called me, and we are supposed to meet up and talk further about this. I actually have to do it soon’ (Ahmad, 2019).

I asked why he thought those girls would be more comfortable in an atmosphere like Watan Dabke Group’s, and he told me:

First, diversity. You can see the almost equal number of men and women in the group. Second, the nature of relationships among the two genders in our group, we do not have walls and boundaries, okay? We never make any woman feel any less than any man. Third, the mentalities of the men in our group are very open and progressive and accepting of the other. If you give any man any sort of criticism, he takes it openly. Therefore, it is a more comfortable atmosphere for a woman or a girl. Nonetheless, we have met some people who wanted to join us recently, and their nature and social character did not seem fit, so we did turn down some people or told them to leave after a practice or two (Ahmad, 2019).

Certainly, there was no direct implication from Ahmad on not recruiting Palestinians on purpose. What seems to be the case is that due to the internal culture of an exclusively Palestinian group like the “Dabeekeh” in Belgium, recruitment preferences were in fact, influenced towards being extra cautious with Palestinians asking to join the Watan Dabke Group, more specifically, Palestinian men. It is highly important to point out that this is a very subjective narrative from my field, and to me, the fact that Ahmad did not confirm what Salim said using explicit words, reflects how inconvenient for such a generalisation to come out from him. The way I perceive this paradox begins with Salim drawing patterns from a repetitive behavior Ahmad or Abeer might have shown towards a certain nationality -in this case Palestinian- when recruiting people into the group. It could or could not be the full truth for a number of reasons; The first is that Ahmad never put those words together and instead he said that the nationality of any applicant does not in any way affect their recruitment process. The second goes back to the point that Salim’s conclusion about recruiting Palestinians could be solely dependent on singular cases that have occurred while he is around. The third reason is that my research is solely concerning the Watan Dabke Group, and I never got the chance to actually validate what I have been told about the “Dabeekeh” group myself, and therefore, the only version I have regarding their internal culture comes from Ahmad’s point of view and some ex-members of the “Dabeekeh” group.

Considering the Watan Dabke Group’s side of the story, it could demonstrate, to a certain extent, a contradiction between their fixed values and their actions in applying them. Through their aim to present a unified, harmonised image of the Levant, these policies, in case true, do in fact contradict, to a certain extent, their aim. As the culture they promote and try to reflect about the Levant has no national or sectarian attachments to it, and

therefore, should not have any nationality restriction hung on it. At the same time, it appears to be systematic hard work, whether personally preferred by them or not, in order not to jeopardise their “apolitical” inner culture by allowing what seemed to be a political and social influence that comes with recruiting Palestinians, especially from another Palestinian *dabke* group. As those groups, according to Ahmad, serve only the Palestinian case, folk, and politics, and agree to perform only at Palestinian causes or events. These judgements seem to have emerged from their own experience and their surrounding environment, especially from the *dabke* scene in Belgium.

This is the exact reason why such a policy of recruitment, if true, could be perceived as both: a paradox between the values they promote, and their own behavior towards them. Therefore, this could indicate failing to match up to their own depoliticising, non-sectarian values. Or in fact, an automatic, systemised method to avoid any political influence specific Palestinian dancers hold when entering the Watan Dabke Group, therefore, affecting the general culture, stances, social environment, and purpose of the members of the group themselves.

To elaborate more on that same paradox, I will bring in an example from an interview I had in the field, with fewer layers and interpretations to it. For my own account, it is one of the incidents that boil down the answer to my question of, how far and to which extent can such a heavily politicised dance break out of its political ties while its performers cannot detach themselves from their political and national realities. To maintain discreteness, I will avoid mentioning the interviewee’s name.

One day after a practice session the group had, I had arranged an interview with one of the members, a Syrian Kurdish. I will refer to as (X.Y.). During our conversation, he was telling me exactly how he ended up in Belgium fleeing the war in Syria, and his family’s immigration story. He also started talking about the war and attacks happening from Turkey against Kurds in northern Syria, and how he is always present at protests held in Brussels by Kurds against these attacks. (X.Y.) started explaining to me what happens at those protests and how some Turks try to sabotage them. At this point I was inclined to ask about his reaction in case a Turkish person were to join the Watan Dabke Group. His

initial reaction was ‘I would leave.’ I asked him why? Is it a grudge against the whole Turkish nation? And then he went and explained: ‘It is hard to describe that way. When you see your own people being killed and attacked, innocent people, it is not easy to ignore that and be okay with Turks. I know that politics is something different, and you might think that not all Turks hate Kurds. But they do. At least all the ones I have met! Turks have always denied our right to exist and have our separate nation, and they want to abolish us. How can I ever dance next to someone who denies my right to exist?’ After I asked him whether he would change his mind in case the Turkish member avoided politics or sincerely did not hold those ideologies, he said ‘In that case I can think about it. Although I think it is hard.’ ((X.Y.), 2019)

The very fact that this kind of political conflicts are taking place in the Middle-East and neighbouring countries make it so difficult for individuals, who have seen the outcomes of these conflicts and their consequences on them, their people and homelands, to ignore that and keep up with the ideology of an a-political, completely detached state of mind from reality. So long as all parties involved in the group inflict no harm -even ideological and especially political- it felt safe and reasonable to be a-political and avoid any political talk. However, as soon as there might exist two people from different ends of the same conflict, it becomes -in the best case- blurry when it comes to testing that a-political mentality of members.

## **5.2. About Sponsorships and Political Agendas:**

The role of sponsorship can play out a huge part of a cultural initiative’s prospects. As the Watan Dabke Group is registered as a cultural NGO in Belgium, its income could come from embassies, cultural organisations, political parties, or, to a limited extent, from their own shows, performances, and workshops. In order for a cultural initiative like the Watan Dabke Group to be sponsored by the previously mentioned parties, they would have to agree with their views, political stances, social stances, and most importantly their cultural agendas. According to Ahmad, this could have been one of the easiest ways to get funding, exposure, and to ensure the continuity of the group. Nonetheless, due to the strict ideology himself and Abeer have towards what they want to represent, they decided to not

take funding or even ask for sponsorships from any political, cultural party, especially if it was an Arab, or more specifically Levantine organisation/ embassy/ party (Ahmad, 2019). The way Ahmad described it when asked about the reason they could not find a cheaper, or a free-of-charge place for them to hold their practices boiled down to one reason: ‘We did not want to be sponsored by any Arab organisation/ embassy or centre, especially if it functions on certain agendas. We are independent ideologically, politically, socially, religiously, and financially’ (Ahmad, 2019), therefore, the group had to establish itself as an independent Non-Governmental Organisation and earn its own money to sustain itself.

The founders had to invest their own personal money to make this group functional and support its basic needs, until they were able to make a revenue out of their performances. From further conversations with Ahmad, I got more acquainted with the sponsorship dynamic which usually occurs between *dabke* groups and any sort of Arab party in Belgium. From his previous experience, Ahmad was sure about the inevitability to represent the exact ideologies of the sponsoring party, regardless whether the group does in fact represent it on their own. For a simple example, if the group becomes sponsored by the Lebanese Embassy in Belgium, they will have to perform solely Lebanese *dabke* styles -as they are considered post-colonially- to exclusively Lebanese music, whether folk or modern. ‘This is exactly what we are trying to avoid. Any single representation of any Levantine country is out of the question to us’ (Ahmad, 2019).

On the other hand, and as mentioned in chapter three in the sponsorship section, Abeer and Ahmad felt comfortable receiving support, even logistically from a Flemish cultural centre in Brussels. In fact, Ahmad was looking for venues or studios to practice, and he intentionally came to this centre, knowing that it is a cultural centre, to see if an arrangement can be made between them and the group. The group was granted a one-year free practice venue, and later on Ahmad gained a place in the organising committee of this centre. The point of paradox that grew on me in this dynamic is the fact that the founders avoided any Arab-funded support at all costs, while at the same time, they worked hard on gaining any sort of support from a local cultural centre that was concerned ideologically with Flemish culture in Brussels. This could make sense to the group; as it relates to the irrelevance of a cultural centre as such towards affecting any manifestation

or ideology the group represents. In other words, any party or cultural organisation that is not Arab, had little to no effect on the representations, ideologies, politics, or events the group could ever reflect or perform.

This could, to a good extent, showcase the group's constant and hard work in trying to represent a new concept about the Levant stripped out of its heavily loaded political context and geographical borders, while fighting against the current of the norm of politicisation, and the singularity of every Levantine country in reality. Therefore, the Watan Dabke Group could be considered a new phenomenon in the arena of folk dance in its modern concept.

### **5.3. About Designated Appearance on Stage:**

Up until the last interview I made in my field, which was the second interview with Ahmad, I was perceiving all sorts of information that supports this group's claim of presenting the Levant as whole, focusing on its mutual history as Greater Syria. However, some answers Ahmad provided on that interview sort of created another bubble or a paradox between the claim of depoliticisation, and the real application at some occasions. That aspect is mainly concerned with the group's actual performances, music, and outfits they use on those specific occasions.

In the part of the conversation where we were discussing the "Dabeekeh" group and their activities and culture, Ahmad told me directly:

The "Dabeekeh" are very driven towards the Palestinian cause only through certain political parties, and not just slightly. This group has made clear its political stances, at least I know for sure. (...) The only show they have performed at internationally was in Germany, and it was a launching ceremony of a specific Palestinian political party. We had been invited also to a similar kind of ceremony to perform at. However, (hesitation) internally I mean, regarding the Palestinian issue, this ceremony would have affected our image hugely. As when it comes to the Palestinian issue, not a single political party resonates or agrees with that inviting political party which invited us. So, we turned it down, and another group took the offer instead. We do not belong or follow any political group, (hesitation) if some party has some sort of clamor around it (Ahmad, 2019).

The hard work into avoiding politics was coming to surface after that conversation. The group is more concerned with being linked to a faulty, unpopular political party than getting linked to any political party whatsoever.

Up to this point, things were aligning between the values the group promotes and what they actually do. The contradiction that appealed to me was a little later through this conversation. When I asked Ahmad whether or not the group has been invited to a solely Palestinian or Lebanese event, and actually accepted the invitation. What he said had several dimensions in my mind, as I believe it could go in multiple directions regarding aligning or contradicting their own aim and values. ‘Mostly, we have been invited to Palestinian festivals and events. The last one was in Berlin. It was the “Palestinian Heritage Week”. Unfortunately, time did not play on our side, but we were going to go for sure if we had the time.’ ‘Were you going to perform only Palestinian styles and to Palestinian music?’ (Amawi, 2019)

Yes, we do have Palestinian, Lebanese, and Syrian songs, like a good variety. So, when the event is purely Palestinian, we try to play only Palestinian songs. If it was Lebanese, we play Lebanese songs, same for if it was Syrian. Also, we perform to the mix we have personally made of three songs “Lebnani, Falastini, Sourî”, This one unites all three countries together, and so we always perform to it (Ahmad, 2019).

What left me puzzled with his answer is the fact that they would accept performing at an exclusive singular event for one country without the other, and even tailor their performances to them. To those occasions they would also wear the outfit the hosting organisation requests. Due to the extensive reassurance I received about being consistent with their values and turning down any show or even sponsorship from any Arab party, this left me with doubts. Is this a consistent sort of action to agree to or even like, bearing in mind the constant claims of cutting threads with singular representations whether political or cultural? Adding to the group’s abidance with their host’s preference of outfit, it is worth noting here the heavy political references the *Keffiyeh* this group’s men wear, almost always, represents. Which, as mentioned in previous chapters, is a white and black scarf that can be wrapped around the neck, but through time and due to its long history, it became a very popular symbol for resistance, especially in Palestine up to this day.

Palestinian rebels used to wear *keffiyeh* during the 1936 Arab Revolt to hide their identities, and this was during the British Mandate. Thus, [w]hen British Mandate authorities banned *keffiyeh*, All Palestinians started wearing it to make it harder to identify the rebels' (Habash, 2018).

After some reflection, and going back to the show the group turned down due to the bad political reputation of the hosting party, it appeared to me as if the group had no issues representing a single Levantine country when the event was mainly cultural, and would raise cultural awareness about any Levantine country. In a matter of fact, during an interview I had with one of the members; Abdalla, he frankly expressed that even though he loves the idea of performing to music and styles from Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, he confessed how special it feels when he is performing to Syrian songs specifically.

There is a feeling of pride and rush I feel when I am performing to a Syrian song. I do not think I can help it. It is irrelevant to any sort of racism or sectarian ideas. It is just a national pride, this is where I was born and raised, and the specific Syrian folk and music is just part of who I am. I love all Levantine folk and specially *dabke* part of that folk, but there is just a special feeling that comes up when I hear a Syrian *dabke* song. It is part of my personal history on that land I cannot go back to now (Abdalla, 2019).

On the other hand, the main stigma this group is trying to avoid is being politically representative of any of these countries or taking any political stance that could affect the overall image and reputation of the Watan Dabke Group. This group, on one hand, tends to separate culture from politics of the post-mandate separate countries of the Levant. This group had no problem being more lenient with performing for one single country, embodying exclusively that country's post-colonial folk and music. On the other hand, they refuse and avoid a representation that comes with any political stance or tie to any party or country of the Levant without the other.

From all that has been discussed in this chapter, there is a notable amount of negotiation taking place both; externally between the group members and the inviting parties, sponsors, or hosts; and internally on the level of the member's will to represent a neutralised, westernised, modern *dabke*, and his/her own previous ascriptions to the heavily



politicised backgrounds each of them comes from. This is not a to generalise this statement on each and every member of this group, but to reflect the paradox that was found evident in the space between what specifically the Levantine members stand for and how they feel and relate to their own nationalistic backgrounds, without being aware of it at times. As those thoughts and preferences mentioned earlier in this chapter coming from different members about how they feel when they perform to a song from their own country, or how they would react if a national from a politically opposing country joined the group, they are not preferences made loud and clear in the internal culture of the group. Rather, it is found on a sometimes subliminal or unconscious level and come to surface when provoked.

The next and final chapter is going to begin by putting these paradoxes under spotlight, debating their relation to answer the research questions proposed, and how significant this study and those results are to the future studies of modern *dabke*. Finally, the discussion and conclusion will epitomise all the previous chapters and their content, which lead up to the final conclusion.

## Discussion and Conclusion:

‘As an embodiment of cultural heritage, the dancer becomes inscribed in nationalist histories and is refigured to conform to those histories, yet ambivalence about the dancers and their practices is often evident because the practices themselves often resist being fully incorporated into nationalist discourses’ (Reed, 1998: 511).

Reed’s argument takes two opposite directions when it comes to this *dabke* group’s practice. In one way, a practice such as *dabke* can -to a certain extent- resist being inscribed to one national representation of a Levantine country over the other, due to its history of creation in Greater Syria. On the other hand, *dabke* had already been made national, sectarian, political to large extents over years post-colonially. Henceforth, disregarding the fact that the dancers come from fully loaded political realities in the Levant, with pre-constructed cultural nationalism and political stances, creates a collision and some sort of resistance, even on small scales, between what this group aims to represent, and the reality of the Levantine people and their countries. My argument here is not aiming to demean the efforts of depoliticising *dabke*. On the contrary, it is to acknowledge the complex process, and the time it could take to reach this apolitical manifestation of such a dance while acknowledging what Levantine youth believe could be the right strategies in order to achieve that.

To begin, “Introduction” chapter introduced an overview of the field, in addition to the research focus. “Methodology” clarified the field roles and positions, how dynamic they were and how adaptive I consequently had to be in shifting between data collection methods and negotiating my own intimacy and friendship with the informants, using it as an advantage. The chapter included Edward T. Hall’s theory in ‘High versus Low context cultures’, indicating the situations in which this theory was relevant in my field and with whom.

In order to be able to analyse and give context to the aim of the dissertation, “Literature Review & Personal Stage Experience” set forth the background and the history

of both the dance, and the region of the world in which it was created and became a social dance. Afterwards, through some dance and politics theories, mainly by Susan Reed's work, express the notion through which this dance began manifesting as a symbol of nationalism and creating separate national identities for the reformed Levantine countries post-colonially, or post the French and British Mandates over the region which resulted in the Sykes-Picot Agreement, depending on Shayna Silverstein's researches. The chapter brought into light the main aspects of these political/ national manifestations through the researcher's own experience as a stage *dabke* dancer for a Palestinian *dabke* group in Jordan in the past. Eventually, it provided an insight about the special case of Palestine as the only Levantine country under occupation in this era of time. This insight was to capitalise on the bigger role a dance like *dabke* could play in such a situation for Palestinians.

The dissertation aimed to first investigate the elements through which this group aims to depoliticise *dabke*. These elements according to my analysis are divided between two strategies and distributed through chapters three and four: The first, "Neutralising the Levant's cultural Heritage" through creating a fusion in the choreography and *dabke* styles, through the outfits of mixed Levantine elements used to appear on stage, through the group's designated recruitment policies, through their choices of sponsorship sought and accepted, and finally through how they conduct their workshops in Europe. The second strategy is "Westernising *dabke* as a dance", through achieving a sort of preferred accessibility to dance workshops in Europe and to performing and conducting workshops at Arab and non-Arab weddings. In addition to the legal registration as an NGO in Belgium, which aided in forming a cultural neutral image about the group. Another element is their reliance on certain music styles and genres perceived as contemporary and global. Moreover, the creation of performative elements that add up to the appeal of the dance and dancers on stage. Finally, through the ways in which their rehearsals and practices are conducted, in other words, their internal culture.

Chapters three and four strategies which have been recapped earlier, both were subject to examining and evaluating, through different methods, the extent to which they are applied in their purest, apolitical form on the real actions and feelings and stances the members of this group have. This evaluation took place in chapter five 'Reflections and Evaluation of depoliticising'. This chapter brought back some previously mentioned elements, specifically the ones which in my own research generated some paradoxes in the space between the group's strategies and the application of these strategies. The result of these paradoxes is what gave out the answers to the research question about the consistency of this group in building an apolitical image about *dabke* proposed in the introduction of this dissertation. That is not to say that *dabke* cannot be depicted as a-political on stage, rather than stressing on the complexities of achieving that aim fully. I argue that *dabke*, evidently, has a chance in getting depicted and presented as a purely social dance free of any political ties and stances even on stage. Nonetheless, it needs efforts and extensive systematic hard work in detaching not just the dance, but the dancers from their previously generated national and political stances they grew up with.

To end, it is a phenomena worth being recognised and researched. The attempt to strip away the systematic political ties made throughout history to the same dance that has been extensively used to create those political ties and nationalisms in the first place is a process of several levels of work on both the dance, and the people of the dance. What has been introduced in this dissertation is a systematic conscious attempt on several levels to depoliticise this dance, while at the same time reflecting some of the paradoxes or inconsistencies that come along the way during this strenuous process.

Future studies carried in the field of *dabke* can start shifting focus to the modern *dabke* dance and its representations, covering this modern era's youth manifestations of their cultures, especially in diasporic communities.

## Bibliography:

Ahdia, T. (2015) *DABKE: Cultural Background and Preparing for Arab-American Wedding Season*. Available at: <https://www.arabamerica.com/dabke-cultural-background-preparing-arab-american-wedding-season/>

Al Obeidyne, J. (2014) *Folk Dancing in the City. Individuality, Innovation and Hybridity of Tradition among Folk Dancers and Members of a Young NGO in Beirut-Lebanon*. Choreomundus, International Master's in Dance Knowledge, Practice, and Heritage.

Al-Mukhtar Rima (2012) *Traditional & Modern: The Saudi Man's Bisht*. Available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/fashion/traditional-modern-saudi-mans-bisht>.

Amawi Sarah (2020) *Dabke: From Social Dance to Political Stance*. Available at: <https://britishmuseumpohproject.weebly.com/sarah-amawi> (Accessed: 25 July 2020).

American Folklore Society 1974 "Proceedings of the Annual Business Meeting of the American Folklore Society." *The Journal of American Folklore* 87/Supplement: 3–59

Anon. 2008. "Qassab Hassan: Celebrating Damascus as Capital of Arab Culture was the Brainchild of the Syrian First Lady." *Forward Magazine*.

Arab America (2015) *DABKE: Cultural Background and Preparing for Arab-American Wedding Season*. Available at: <https://www.arabamerica.com/> (Accessed: 24 February 2020).

Austerlitz P. 1997. *Merengue: Dominican music and Dominican identity*. Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press.

Barghouthi (1996) *Palestinian Songs*. Available at: <http://www.barghouti.com/folklore/songs/zareef.html>.

Beauchamp and Zack (2018) *What is the Nakba?* Available at: <https://www.vox.com/2018/11/20/18080030/israel-palestine-nakba>.

Bell, V. (1999). "Performativity and Belonging: An Introduction." *Theory, Culture & Society* 16 (2): 1–10.

Carso, A. (2017) *Dabke Dance: A Symbol of Love, Life, and Struggle*. Available at: <http://www.griotsrepublic.com/dabke-dance-a-symbol-of-love-life-and-struggle/>.

Chahine, M. (2015) *The Saudi Man's Bisht*. Available at: [desertmoonsdiary.blogspot.com](http://desertmoonsdiary.blogspot.com)

Collins Dictionary (2014) *English Translation of 'Prova'*. Available at: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/portuguese-english/prova>.

Daniel YP. 1991. Changing values in Cuban rumba: a lower class black dance appropriated by the Cuban revolution. *Dance Res. J.* 23(2):1-10.

Encyclopedia.com (2020) *GreaterSyria*. Available at: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/greater-syria>. (Accessed: 5 May 2020).

Fortier, A.-M. (1999). "Re-Membering Places and the Performance of Belonging(s)." *Theory, Culture & Society* 16 (2): 41–64.

Gelvin, James L. 1998. *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Gill, N.S. "Maps of the Levant." ThoughtCo, Feb. 11, 2020, [thoughtco.com/maps-of-the-levant-119279](https://www.thoughtco.com/maps-of-the-levant-119279).

Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Pine Forge Press.

Gudykunst, W. B. & Ting-Toomey, S. (1988). *Culture and interpersonal communication*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Guilbault, Jocelyne. 2010. "Politics through Pleasure: Party Music in Trinidad." *In Music Traditions, Cultures & Contexts*, 279-294. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier University Press.

Habash Majd (2018) *The History of Keffiyeh: A Traditional Scarf from Palestine*. Available at: <https://handmadepalestine.com/blogs/news/history-of-keffiyeh-the-traditional-palestinian-headress>.

Hall, E. (1976). *Beyond culture*. New York: Doubleday.

Handler, R. (1984). "On Sociocultural Discontinuity: Nationalism and Cultural Objectification in Quebec." *Current Anthropology* 25: 55–71.

Hatcher, W.S. and Martin, J.D. (1985) *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion*.

History.com (2019) *Britain and France conclude Sykes-Picot agreement*. Available at: <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/britain-and-france-conclude-sykes-picot-agreement> (Accessed: 5 May 2020).

Hughes-Freeland F. 1997. Art and politics: from Javanese court dance to Indonesian art. *J. R. Anthropol. Inst. (NS)* 3:473-95.

Jargy, S. (1978) The folk music of Syria and Lebanon. *World of Music*. 20(1) pp.79.

Kaeppler AL. 1993a. *Poetry in Motion: Studies of Tongan Dance*. Nuku alofa, Tonga: Vava u Press.

Karkabi, N. (2018) Electro-dabke: Performing cosmopolitan nationalism and borderless humanity. *Public Culture*. 30(1) pp.173-196. DOI: 10.1215/08992363-4189215.

Kaschl, E. (2014) *Dance and Authenticity in Israel and Palestine*. Scottsdale Community College - Library Website Scottsdale Community College Home.

Kim, D., Pan, Y. & Park, H. S. (1998). High-versus low-context culture: A comparison of Chinese, Korean and American cultures. *Psychology & Marketing*, 15(6), pp. 507–521.

Manning S. 1993. *Ecstasy and the Demon: Feminism and Nationalism in the Dances of Mary Wigman*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. Calif. Press.

Manning S. 1995. Modern dance in the Third Reich: six positions and a coda. See Foster 1995a, pp. 165-76

McDonald, D.A. (2006) *Music, Nationalism, and the Poetics of Palestinian Resistance*. Duke University Press: Durham and London.

Meyer M. 1995. Dance and the politics of orality: a study of the Irish *scoil rince*. *Dance Res. J.* 27(1):25-39.

Moeran Brian (2009) *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexity of Everyday Life*. SAGE Publications.

Mohd AMN. 1993. *Zapin: Folk Dance of the Malay World*. Singapore: Oxford Univ. Press.

Newman, D., O'Brien, J. and Robertson, M. (2018). *Sociology*. 7th ed. Pine Forge Press, an imprint of Sage Publications, Inc., p.122.

Paliroots (2018) *The History of the Palestinian Dabka and National Roof Over Your Head Day*. Available at: <https://www.paliroots.com/blogs/news/the-history-of-the-palestinian-dabka-and-national-roof-over-your-head-day>.

Ramsey K. 1997. Vodou, nationalism and performance: the staging of folklore in mid twentieth century Haiti. See Desmond 1997, pp. 345-78.

Reed SA. 1991. *The Transformation of Ritual and Dance in Sri Lanka: Kohomba Kankariya and the Kandvan Dance*. PhD thesis. Brown Univ., Providence, RI.

Reed, S.A. (1998) The politics and poetics of dance. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 27(1) pp.503-532. DOI: 10.1146/annurev.anthro.27.1.503.

RNZ (2019) Raising the Bar: cultural appropriation is always political, says Nicholas Rowe. Available at: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/raising-the-bar/audio/2018685657/raising-the-bar-cultural-appropriation-is-always-political-says-nicholas-rowe> (Accessed: 22 February 2020).

Rowe, N. (2011) Dance and Political Credibility: The Appropriation of Dabkeh by Zionism, Pan-Arabism, and Palestinian Nationalism. *The Middle East Journal*. Volume 65, Number 3, pp. 363-380.

Rowe, N. (2011) *Dancing for Hope* (2011)

Sala Veysel (2018) *All about Darbuka Instrument*. Available at: <https://salamuzik.com/blogs/news/all-about-darbuka-instrument>

Shomali Majdi (2001) *Land Identity Heritage of Pal People*. *Palestine-Israel Journal, of Politics, Economics, and Culture*. Pp.155-163

Silverstein, S.M. (2012) *Mobilizing Bodies in Syria: Dabke, Popular Culture, and the Politics of Belonging*. The University of Chicago. Available at: <http://www.riss.kr/pdu/ddodLink.do?id=T13048792>.

Silverstein, S.M. (2015) Cultural liberalization or marginalization? In: Anonymous *Syria from Reform to Revolt*. Syracuse University Press. pp.77-91.

Strauss G. 1977. Dance and ideology in China, past and present: a study of ballet in the People's Republic. *Asian and Pacific Dance: Selected Papers for the CORD and SEM Conference, 1974, CORD Annual 8:19-54*. New York: Comm. Res. Dance.

Taylor, J. (2011) The intimate insider: Negotiating the ethics of friendship when doing insider research. *Qualitative Research: QR*. 11(1) pp.3-22. DOI: 10.1177/1468794110384447.



The British Museum (2020) *Ancient Levant*. Available at:  
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/galleries/ancient-levant>. (Accessed: 6 May 2020)

Wien, Peter. 2011a. "Preface: Relocating Arab Nationalism." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43 (2): 203-204.

Wikipedia *Oriental Folk Dances*. Available at:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oriental\\_folk\\_dances#Deheyeh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oriental_folk_dances#Deheyeh)

## **Interviews and Conversations Cited:**

Abdalla, S. (2019) Interviewed by S. Amawi, 20 August.

Ahmad, M. (2019) Interviewed by S. Amawi, 18 July.

Manuela, S. (2019) Interviewed by S. Amawi, 7 August.

Salim, H. (2019) Personal communication with S. Amawi, July-August.

(S.E., 2019) Interviewed by S. Amawi, 1 August.

(M.E., 2019) Interviewed by S. Amawi, 1 August.

(X.Y., 2019) Interviewed by S. Amawi. 25 August.

## **Appendix:**

### **Database of all research material constructed through fieldwork:**

Below are screenshots of the full database organised on Microsoft Excel

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
1	Type of material	Title	Date	Place	Description	Event/Context	Key actors	Key words	Supporting documents	Format	Duration	Device
2	Audio	1st Ahmad interview	18-Jul	Brussels	Informative interview	In a café near practicing venue	Ahmad, myself	Idealistic, discreet, waiting for Abeer	Transcripts	mp3	26:41	iPhone7s
3	Image	first meeting 1	23-Jul	Park, Brussels	Picnic in a park	Meeting with some members and their friends	Saleem, Fadi, Ahmad, Reem, Imen, Lina, Margherita	Picnic, Shisha, Informal	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
4	Image	first meeting 2	23-Jul	Park, Brussels	Picnic in a park	Meeting with some members and their friends	Saleem, Margharita, myself	Picnic, Shisha, Informal	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
5	Image	first meeting 3	23-Jul	Park, Brussels	Picnic in a park	Meeting with some members and their friends	Saleem, Fadi, Imen, Reem	Picnic, Shisha, Informal	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
6	Image	Lake 1	24-Jul	Flemish Brabant, Brussels	Day at the lake	Hangout to swim with some members	Saleem, Fadi, Ahmad	Hangout, process of immigration	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
7	Image	Lake 2	24-Jul	Flemish Brabant, Brussels	Day at the lake	Hangout to swim with some members	Saleem, Fadi, Ahmad	Hangout, process of immigration	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
8	Image	Lake 3	24-Jul	Flemish Brabant, Brussels	Day at the lake	Hangout to swim with some members	Saleem, Fadi, Ahmad, myself	Hangout, process of immigration	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
9	Image	Lake 4	24-Jul	Flemish Brabant, Brussels	Day at the lake	Hangout to swim with some members	Saleem, Fadi, Ahmad	Hangout, process of immigration	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
10	Image	Saleem and Fadi's 1	25-Jul	Shaerbeek, Brussels	Hangout	Friendly hangout, get to know each other	Saleem, Nour, Fadi, Reem	Champagne, Shisha, Snacks, background chats	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
11	Image	Sushi Day 1	26-Jul	Brussels	Lunch	Friendly hangout, get to know each other	Saleem, Nour, Fadi	Expensive water bottle, expression of liking me	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
12	Image	Fireworks 1	26-Jul	Atomium, Brussels	Firework picnic	Talking then watching fireworks	Ahmad, Saleem, Fadi, Ammar, Lina, Imen, Myself	Investigating mindsets	Videos	jpg		iPhone7s
13	Video	Fireworks 2	26-Jul	Atomium, Brussels	Firework picnic	Talking then watching fireworks	Ahmad, Saleem, Fadi, Ammar, Lina, Imen, Myself	Investigating mindsets	Images	mp4	0:39	iPhone7s
14	Video	Fireworks 3	26-Jul	Atomium, Brussels	Firework picnic	Talking then watching fireworks	Ahmad, Saleem, Fadi, Ammar, Lina, Imen, Myself	Investigating mindsets	Images	mp4	0:16	iPhone7s
15	Video	Fireworks 4	26-Jul	Atomium, Brussels	Firework picnic	Talking then watching fireworks	Ahmad, Saleem, Fadi, Ammar, Lina, Imen, Myself	Investigating mindsets	Images	mp4	0:52	iPhone7s
16	Image	Salsa workshop 1	28-Jul	Cinquantenaire, Brussels	Salsa workshop	Saleem and I	Saleem, myself	Other dance type	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
17	Video	Salsa workshop 2	28-Jul	Cinquantenaire, Brussels	Salsa workshop	Dancing with someone	Myself with an old man	Other dance type	N/A	mp4	1:19	iPhone7s
18	Video	Salsa workshop 3	28-Jul	Cinquantenaire, Brussels	Salsa workshop	Dancing with Saleem	Saleem and myself	Other dance type	N/A	mp4	0:16	iPhone7s
19	Image	Interview with Lina	29-Jul	Ixelle, Brussels	Bar	Interview	Lina, Myself	Casual, drink, discuss	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
20	Video	Rehearsal 1	30-Jul	Brussels, Dutch cultural center	Rehearsal for wedding	Practice	8 members	Dancing dabke	Images	mp4	3:45	iPhone7s
21	Video	Rehearsal 2	30-Jul	Brussels, Dutch cultural center	Rehearsal for wedding	Practice	8 members	Dancing dabke	Images	mp4	3:01	iPhone7s
22	Video	Rehearsal 3	30-Jul	Brussels, Dutch cultural center	Rehearsal for wedding	Practice	8 members	Dancing dabke	Images	mp4	3:27	iPhone7s

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
23	Video	Rehearsal 4	30-Jul	Brussels, Dutch cultural center	Rehearsal for wedding	Practice	8 members	Dancing dabke	Images	mp4	5:44	iPhone7s
24	Image	Rehearsal 5	30-Jul	Brussels, Dutch cultural center	Rehearsal for wedding	Practice	8 members	Posing for new t-shirts photoshoot	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
25	Image	Rehearsal 6	30-Jul	Brussels, Dutch cultural center	Rehearsal for wedding	Practice	8 members	Posing for new t-shirts photoshoot	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
26	Image	Rehearsal 7	30-Jul	Brussels, Dutch cultural center	Rehearsal for wedding	Practice	8 members	Posing for new t-shirts photoshoot	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
27	Image	Rehearsal 8	30-Jul	Brussels, Dutch cultural center	Rehearsal for wedding	Practice	8 members	Posing for new t-shirts photoshoot	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
28	Image	Hangout 1	30-Jul	Brussels	Dinner after practice	Dinner	Saleem, Fadi, Hashem, myself	Casual dinner to get to know Hashem	N/A	jpg		iPhone7s
	Image	Dentist 1	2-Aug	Brussels	Company to densit	Building trust	Saleem	Saleem helping out,	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
29	Image	Dentist 1	2-Aug	Brussels	Company to densit	Building trust	Saleem	Saleem helping out, more insights	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
30	Image	Dinner 1	2-Aug	Brussels	Dinner by Ahmad	Treat	Fadi, Ahmad, Saleem	Cooking Palestinian	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
31	Image	Bahai Wedding 1	3-Aug	Mechelen	Selfie in the car	Heading to the wedding venue	Hashem, Saleem, myself	Car, music, preparation	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
32	Image	Bahai Wedding 2	3-Aug	Mechelen	Wedding schedule	Our wedding table	Schedule	Schedule on every table	Field notes, videos	jpg		iPhone7s
33	Image	Bahai Wedding 3	3-Aug	Mechelen	Watan Ad stand	Promoting Watan on etrnace of venue	Roller	Contact info, pride, obvious	Field notes	jpg		iPhone7s
34	Video	Bahai Wedding 4	3-Aug	Mechelen	First entrance	Group without bride and groom	Abeer, Ahmad, Sara, Saleem, Hashem	Drum, enthusiasm, music	Field notes, images	mp4	2:26	iPhone7s
35	Video	Bahai Wedding 5	3-Aug	Mechelen	Second entrance	Group with bride and groom	Abeer, Ahmad, Sara, Saleem, Hashem, Bride, Groom	Drum, (zaffeh) music, engaging bride and groom	Field notes, images	mp4	5:28	iPhoneX
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
36	Video	Bahai Wedding 6	3-Aug	Mechelen	Third dance	Group engaging with audience	Group+Bride and groom+Audience	Circle, teaching, cheering	Field notes, images	mp4	3:27	iPhoneX
37	Video	Bahai Wedding 7	3-Aug	Mechelen	Prayers	Group sitting on their table	Chosen relatives praying or singing	Guitar, singer, parentsm chants and verses	Field notes, images	mp4	1:11	iPhoneX
38	Video	Bahai Wedding 8	3-Aug	Mechelen	Fourth dance	Group performing alone, old lady interferences	Group, old lady	Shaabi dabkeh with lively music	Field notes, images	mp4	5:42	iPhoneX
39	Video	Bahai Wedding 9	3-Aug	Mechelen	Fifth dance	Group doing electro dabke	Group members	Engagement, enthusiasm, electro dabke	Field notes, images	mp4	1:58	iPhoneX
40	Video	Bahai Wedding 10	3-Aug	Mechelen	Fifth dance	Group doing electro dabke	Group members, old lady dancing in place	Engagement, enthusiasm, electro dabke	Field notes, images	mp4	4:00	iPhoneX
41	Video	Bahai Wedding 11	3-Aug	Mechelen	Workshop	Group teaching people in a circle while music is playing and Hashem is on the drum	Group members, 90% of the audience	Engagement, teaching, all ages	Field notes, images	mp4	2:23	iPhoneX

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
42	Video	Bahai Wedding 12	3-Aug	Mechelen	Workshop	Group teaching people in a circle while music is playing and Hashem is on the drum, Ahmad explaining in English the moves on microphone	Group members, 90% of the audience	Engagement, teaching, all ages	Field notes, images	mp4	3:19	iPhoneX
43	Video	Bahai Wedding 13	3-Aug	Mechelen	Audience from around the world dancing	Dancing with music from all over the world	All audience+ group members engaging in other dances	Harmony, diversity	Field notes, images	mp4	0:34	iPhoneX
44	Video	Bahai Wedding 14	3-Aug	Mechelen	Audience from around the world dancing	Dancing with music from all over the world	All audience+ group members engaging in other dances	Harmony, diversity	Field notes, images	mp4	0:15	iPhoneX
45	Image	Souvenir	3-Aug	Mechelen	Fadi made me a souvenir	Received a text with image of a handmade souvenir	Fadi	Belonging, trust	Fieldnotes	jpg		iPhone7s
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
46	Image	Prison performance	4-Aug	Louven	Before performance	Posing wearing Watan t-shirts	Saleem, Ahmad, Abeer, Abdalla, myself	Belonging, promotion	Fieldnotes	jpg		iPhoneX
47	Audio	Interview with Manuela	7-Aug	Brussels	Before Practice	Before practice, just outside of venue, welcoming, wanting to help	Manuela, myself	Diversity, belonging, expressive, motives, opinions, background, fitting in	Transcriptions, fieldnotes	mp3	Originally 16:00 minutes, with recorded only 6:00	iPhone7s
48	Audio	Interview with Abdalla	20-Aug	Brussels	After Practice	After practice, wanting to get in over with	Abdalla, myself	Motives, belonging, opinion, progress	Transcription	mp3	10:09	iPhone7s
49	Video	Fireworks 5	16-Aug	Brussels Atomium	Fireworks and the part of group and friends that came	Hangout to watch fireworks and drink (for people who drink)	Ahmad, Fadi, Saleem, Reem, Naya, Kenza, Ammar	Personal gossip, politics, wine, stereotypes	Fieldnotes	mp4	1:01	iPhone7s
50	Audio	Interview with Ahmad (Kurdish)	25-Aug	Brussels	After practice	Excited to tell his story and opinions	Ahmad k. myself	Politics, belonging, story, background	Transcription	mp3	20:21	iPhone7s
51	Audio	2nd Interview with Ahmad	28-Aug	Brussels	At Hashem's place	Asking for more info regarding new perspective	Ahmad, myself	Policies of joining, other groups in Brussels, compare and contrast	Transcription	mp3	15:55	iPhone7s

Snapshots of the database organised on Excel sheet.