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# Networked Music and Political Borders:

## Digital Locality in Palestine and the Middle East

### Música en xarxa i fronteres polítiques: Localitat digital a Palestina i l'Orient Mitjà

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#### ABSTRACT

This article analyses Instagram's impact on the Palestinian and Middle Eastern music scenes, particularly in rap and electronic music, showing how this platform allows artists to circumvent geopolitical obstacles related to the Israeli occupation and obstructed state borders. Based on ethnographic research conducted between 2022 and 2025, including numerous interviews with Palestinian, Jordanian, and Lebanese musicians, this study highlights Instagram as a pivotal space for collaboration, dissemination, promotion, and event organisation, despite constant prohibitions and risks. Through the example of the Doun Juthour collective, this article also illustrates the tactical adaptations of artists in the face of repression, their use of digital tools to maintain a vibrant and interconnected scene, even beyond borders. Furthermore, this work questions the dynamics of global hegemony embodied by Instagram, drawing on Gramsci's theory to understand the complex coexistence between domination—via norms, algorithms and censorship—and resistance, embodied in strategies of war of position. Artists adopt, negotiate and reinvent these tools, creating a form of Palestinian and Middle Eastern “digital locality” marked by tension between dependence and protest. It also highlights the paradoxes of digital technology, which broadens creative possibilities while weakening physical spaces and reproducing processes of marginalization. The article concludes that musicians' relationship with digital technology is ambivalent: combining constraints, innovations and resistance, it reveals a music scene that is both vulnerable and inventive in the midst of a violent political context.

#### RESUM

Aquest article analitza l'impacte d'Instagram en les escenes musicals palestines i de l'Orient Mitjà, particularment en el rap i la música electrònica, mostrant com aquesta plataforma permet als artistes sortejar els obstacles geopolítics relacionats amb l'ocupació israeliana i les fronteres estatals bloquejades. A partir d'una investigació etnogràfica realitzada entre el 2022 i el 2025, que inclou nombroses entrevistes amb músics palestins, jordans i libanesos, aquest estudi destaca el paper d'Instagram com un espai fonamental per a la col·laboració, la difusió, la promoció i l'organització d'esdeveniments, malgrat les prohibicions i els riscos constants. A través de l'exemple del col·lectiu Doun Juthour, l'article també il·lustra les adaptacions tàctiques dels artistes davant la repressió, el seu ús d'eines digitals per mantenir una escena vibrant i interconnectada, fins i tot més enllà de les fronteres. A més, aquest treball qüestiona la dinàmica de l'hegemonia global que encarna Instagram, recolzant-se en la teoria de Gramsci per entendre la complexa coexistència entre la dominació —a través de normes, algorismes i censura— i la resistència, encarnada en estratègies de guerra de posició. Els artistes adopten, negocien i reinventen aquestes eines, creant una forma de “localitat digital” palestina i de l'Orient Mitjà marcada per la tensió entre la dependència i la protesta. L'article també destaca les paradoxes de la tecnologia digital, que amplia les possibilitats creatives alhora que debilita els espais físics i reproduïx processos de marginalització. Conclou que la relació dels músics amb la tecnologia digital és ambivalent: tot combinant restriccions, innovacions i resistència, revela una escena musical que és alhora vulnerable i inventiva enmig d'un context polític violent.

## Introduction

In the digital age in which we live, it is important for rap and electronic musicians to find their place in digital communities that aim to establish networks of social interactions at the local, regional and international levels. These communities are both spaces for exchange and places for negotiation, where aesthetic choices, political positions and personal experiences intermingle. In the Palestinian and Middle Eastern context, these social interactions must be repositioned to define the extent to which they can transcend physical and political boundaries thanks to new technologies. Such a perspective allows us to question the balance between individual creativity and the collective dynamics promoted by different platform hegemonies. The aim of this article is then to focus on ethnographic and theoretical work devoted to networked music, such as rap and electronic music, through a study of the Instagram platform. Attention will thus be paid not only to content and practices, but also to modes of circulation, visibility algorithms and the conditions of possibility that shape artistic trajectories online. This will also provide an opportunity to address the various processes of music production, distribution and programming via this platform in the daily lives of artists and producers under occupation.

In that sense, the purpose of this article is to resituate the local Palestinian and Middle Eastern music scenes within the global practices of digital platforms such as Instagram. This implies examining simultaneously the technical infrastructures of the platform and the lived experiences of the artists who mobilize it under constraint. I hope it will contribute both to previous work on this phenomenon and to ongoing conversations in popular music studies, a field in which I aim to intervene with this contribution. As we will see in this study, placing the Palestinian case at the centre allows a deeper reflection on how power, technology and creativity interact in asymmetrical contexts. My objective is above all to give voice to musicians who deserve to be heard in this tough context, as a way of giving back what they gave me during my research survey.

## Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The current research is based on several ethnographic stays in Ramallah, Jerusalem and Amman between 2022 and 2025. I supplemented these with about 20 interviews with Lebanese, Jordanian and Palestinian artists and producers from the Middle Eastern scene, who were living in the region or part of the diaspora. Between 2022 and 2025, I was able to make several two-to-four-month trips to the occupied Palestinian territories, and a two-month stay in Amman, while constantly monitoring social media networks and engaging in informal discussions with Lebanese artists. I was only able to meet the latter online due to restrictions on entering Israel to access the Palestinian territories, which is mostly impossible due to the conflict between Israel and Lebanon. The route through Jordan, which I was able to take several times, is also blocked by Israeli controls that do not allow travel to Lebanon without taking the risk of being banned for many years. As a result, I was able to gath-

er a few interviews with Lebanese artists I met on social media, compared to more than a dozen on both sides of the Jordan River. I met the majority of artists through social media and then in social spaces such as bars and cafés in Amman and Ramallah. The Instagram accounts were chosen based on recommendations from my initial contacts and by discovering music on SoundCloud.

This work offers a glimpse of what actually resembles the Palestinian rap music scene under the Israeli occupation and across the political borders with the other countries of the Middle East. At the same time, it offers a broader view of what the Middle Eastern rap scene might look like, considering that a narrow view of a closed Palestinian scene would obscure the reality on the ground when studying from Palestine. It is through the different border representations of the artists themselves within the Levant that I decided to write this article, that is to say, to go beyond borders in order to bring to life a scene that is broader than that of the fragmented Palestinian territories.

For this purpose, I will focus on the practices of the producers who work together across different countries in the Middle East thanks to new technologies like Instagram and will examine how they are able to monetize and sell their art on the platform. Next, I propose some excerpts from my notebook dating from 2022, while I was attending a special gathering in Ramallah. This will provide an opportunity to discuss how social media are used within the musical and cultural spheres to organize, prevent and document different events within the Palestinian territories. Finally, I will aim to question the different forms of hegemony underlying the globalization of social media platforms and the situation of violent occupation in Palestine, using different academic notions such as Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to discuss the paradoxical discourses of the Palestinian and Middle Eastern artists using these platforms.

The theoretical framework of this article is grounded in popular music studies (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2014; Nowak, 2013) and informed by research I have conducted in recent years, notably on the emergence of streaming platforms such as SoundCloud (Allington, Dueck & Jordanous, 2015; Hesmondhalgh, Jones & Rauh, 2019; Michel, 2025), which have also enabled Palestinian artists to create, diffuse and program their music across political borders. Focusing on social media, this article also draws on studies of algorithms (Cotter, 2019; Gillespie, 2017) and social media activism (Caldeira, 2024; O'Meara, 2019), studies that question Western hegemony within such platforms. In this way, I will also consider the literature about the normalization of journalistic and information processes on Instagram (Perreault & Hanush, 2024), different articles about the social practices and discourses in the Western hegemonic public sphere (Dalibert et al., 2017), writings about Orientalism and the forms of power within social platforms (Hidayanto & Rifaldi Akbar, 2022), and about the limits and constraints in the approach of Instagram as a space of learning and critical distribution (Kunz, 2022). Finally, the literature used in this work also includes recent studies on Palestinian electronic music in the

digital age, particularly focusing on party venues and the social effects of music on young people (Karkabi, 2013 & 2020; Belkind, 2021; Withers, 2021), as well as older works on Palestinian hip-hop (McDonald, 2010; Maira, 2008 & 2013), and most generally Palestinian music and culture (Massad, 2005; Tawil-Souri, 2011). From a broader theoretical perspective, my work builds on scholarship on Western culture hegemony (Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000) and the countries of the Global South, notably recent works in ethnomusicology that consider the new digital developments to study social relations within the music industry (Olivier, 2017 & 2022).

Thus, based on these geographical and theoretical readings and on numerous field trips, this article will examine the role of digital technology in today's music scenes in the Middle East. How are such Western platforms being reappropriated by artists and producers in the countries of the Global South? And how do these dynamics relate to consented hegemony and the war of position defined in Gramscian theory? This will be an opportunity to review the creation of sound through social media, from collaborative creation to live performance, including broadcasting and distribution.

### **Collaborating as an Artist-Producer**

One of the main advantages Instagram offers producers is the unprecedented opportunity to collaborate and create with artists beyond political and geographical boundaries. Digital spaces make it possible to overcome territorial constraints, opening up a field of artistic interaction and dialogue that would otherwise be impossible due to material and institutional realities. They function as networking infrastructures, where ideas circulate in real time and forms of collective creation that do not necessarily involve physical co-presence emerge. For the majority of artists I met during my fieldwork, Instagram was the gateway to contacting producers and artists in order to secure collaborations. In this sense, Instagram provides a real space for interaction, mutual recognition and aesthetic negotiation in which musicians can experiment, share and join translocal networks. Huthaifa, a Palestinian-Jordanian producer now based in Amman, exemplifies this possibility:

There are various methods of collaboration, thankfully because of today's age of internet and social media. I can virtually work with anyone all over the world and in fact that was my case when I was in the US and I was working with artists in the Middle East like Syria, the West Bank, Gaza, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE, Jordan. And it was all online, social media, Discord, YouTube. Like I would find them on YouTube and SoundCloud, and I would reach them on Instagram, and I would have a Discord session, and I would have to make a beat, like I would make a beat while sharing my screen, or they would have an idea in mind and I would make a beat that fits with that idea, or sometimes they would send me a reference track on YouTube and I will re-make that shit on Ableton, using my own sounds and do my own touch to it, and we could make a song. (Interview with Huthaifa, Amman, August 14, 2024)

In a context where travel is often limited—particularly for Palestinian artists subject to travel restrictions by the State of Israel—digital platforms enable the circulation of ideas and collaborations that would otherwise have been difficult, if not impossible. The use of Discord, YouTube and SoundCloud, in addition to Instagram, indicates a hybridization of media and a reinvention of creative spaces. To these platforms can also be added Zoom, WhatsApp and the different mailboxes, which are primary tools for music production. In this context, Huthaifa shared with me his relationship with the rapper Alex, originally from Tulkarem in the West Bank, whom he was able to meet thanks to Instagram:

My main artist, Alex, I found him on SoundCloud then I found his Instagram, hit him up, then... It was during Covid... and we spoke every day for a year. And then I came back to Jordan, and I met him in Jordan. (Interview with Huthaifa, Amman, August 14, 2024)

In simple terms, artistic links and physical social relations can emerge from digital spaces before taking shape in the physical world, as here in Jordan, a privileged meeting place for artists from the Middle East facing political barriers and constraints. The example of Huthaifa and Alex illustrates a form of sociability specific to the digital age, where friendship and collaboration first arise online before materializing in reality. Some artists like Huthaifa see Instagram as a central tool, as is also the case for artists from the diaspora such as the Palestinian rapper Malkom, born and raised in the Netherlands, or Ramallaoui artists studying abroad on scholarships, such as Haykal. In the same vein, an album project I am working on with Palestinian and French rappers can only come to fruition thanks to a platform like Instagram; collaborations and contributions are easier, smoother and much faster than physical interactions when it comes to completing such a project between Middle Eastern and international artists.

However, other producers and rappers in the region, such as Charbel in Beirut, remain attached to face-to-face meetings. The fact is that real, physical encounters are still the best way to collaborate when it's possible, and also the best way to make friends, sharing a cup of coffee in front of a simple laptop and some good monitors.

In my other line of work, for example, we are talking about classical music and everything, Instagram, maybe I use it. But usually in hip-hop, honestly, I'm a bit inclined to use my face-to-face encounters. But I don't have a view on Instagram. (Interview with Charbel, Zoom, October 23, 2024)

Despite the importance of social media networks, part of the music scene still relies on local dynamics—on the recognition and legitimacy acquired in physical circles. This refusal of total digitalization is significant in a context where authenticity and direct connection with friends remain fundamental values, particularly in hip-hop and electronic cultures. In fact, in a region where rap and electronic gigs are rare and restricted compared to Europe, abandoning physical space involves a risk of disappearance from the scene and lack

of visibility for artists seeking to share their projects. This is also what Palestinian rapper Ruuq shared with me during our interview:

The best place to find me is in real life. After all, we're not just virtual. We are real people. We are real human beings. We think, we live, we die. We do everything that a human being or a creature does. (Interview with Ruuq, Ramallah, February 2, 2025)

This ambivalence is reflected in the strategies of artists such as Huthaifa and Alex, Charbel and Ruuq, who juggle with the immediacy and accessibility of social networks and the need to anchor themselves in physical spaces of sociability and creativity. For some, like Charbel and Ruuq, face-to-face meetings allow a form of authenticity and intimacy to be preserved in artistic collaboration, while for others, like Huthaifa, virtual connection becomes a means of transcending the geographical and political limitations that fragment the region.

In fact, friendship is actually the main gateway to collaboration between artists and producers. Haykal, another Palestinian rapper from Ramallah, explained to me how he got started creating and publishing music. In his story, it was all about sharing moments, drinks, coffees, cigarettes... while listening to their favourite music. At the same time, the opportunity to work with other rappers and producers outside Palestine remains important for an up-and-coming rapper. However, in the Middle East, it is still difficult to meet everyone face to face, even to take a simple train journey from one city to another. That is why, in the same conversation, Haykal gave me an example of the need for networks such as Instagram through this simple prism:

There are some producers I've never met face to face; that I've only talked online. Maybe zoomed with, but that's about it. And some people I've met online, and I meet them years after. And it happened with a lot of people I've worked with, other producers and rappers that I didn't see before and I saw them later in life. (Interview with Haykal, Zoom, July 8, 2024)

One of the best examples is his numerous collaborations with Lebanese rapper and producer El-Rass. Over the past ten years, the two artists have worked together on several projects, such as the recent "Fustic" and the earlier "6a77ana," which were produced entirely online, responding to the need for both artists to collaborate across the Middle East in order to expand their audience. In this sense, Instagram does not replace physical musical spaces but extends and complements them, facilitating transnational exchanges while maintaining the importance of the local. It acts as a catalyst for building connections that, in many cases, only take on their full meaning once they materialize in the real world.

### **Promoting and Distributing Music**

Another important point concerns the promotion of music through the platform. Instagram has become a real showcase for musicians and artists from all walks of life. This configuration can be put into perspective based on Antonio Gramsci's reflection on "spontaneous

consent” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12), understood as the way in which hegemony is maintained by shaping the culture, expectations and practices of individuals. This will be the main theoretical notion I will use throughout this article.

Instagram appears as the best way for musicians to make themselves known without going through traditional distributors, labels or paid online distribution platforms such as DistroKid or TuneCore. Instagram thus brings a certain independence to artists. However, the autonomy gained by them necessarily comes with a certain adaptation to the platform’s own logic, standards and algorithms, which ties in with Gramsci’s question about new forms of cultural domination. Furthermore, as we will see in the next sections, the platform is used to promote physical gatherings such as parties, concerts or rap battles, as well as simpler social celebrations centred around an artist, a band, or an album. These practices can also be understood through the concept of “war of position” developed by Gramsci, which refers to a gradual, underground struggle aimed at transforming ideological structures from within; This “war of position” involves subtle ideological work: building alternative common sense, counter-hegemonic narratives, and new moral and intellectual leadership.:

A “war of position” is possible in politics too, when, in the development of the ideological structure of a society, one passes from the structure to the superstructure. This is a difficult phase, and the correct theoretical and practical solution of the problem is crucial for the renewal of Marxism. The war of position demands enormous sacrifices by infinite masses of people. It requires greater intellectual and moral preparation, and it must be conducted with intense and patient efforts to organise and coordinate. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 243)

Artists’ use of Instagram illustrates less a head-on opposition than a process of appropriation and negotiation, which is part of the ambivalence of digital spaces, which are both places of hegemonic reproduction and spaces of diffuse resistance, as will be discussed throughout this article.

In this sense, despite his aversion to the platform in terms of socialization and collaboration, Charbel still shares his productions on Instagram and the usual music channels like SoundCloud because it seems to be essential for him. Indeed, it is generally obvious for artists to share their music on mainstream social networks in order to promote their songs and reach a larger number of people in their audience. In the particular case of Palestine and the Middle East, the fragmentation of the audience through political constraints and under the Israeli occupation is all the more significant as it legitimizes the use of social media networks to reach populations in the Arab world. In fact, these platforms allow artists to gain regional and international visibility without going through traditional labels and without the need to travel all around the different countries. Producer Ali, originally from Amman, shared his experience in this matter with me:

Most of the time I use social media to quote-unquote advertise my music. So if I release something on SoundCloud that I think people should, or that I want to share with people, I will put it on my story or in a post on Instagram or tweet links of the songs or albums or whatever I release on SoundCloud or Twitter. So these are the websites I use through the process of releasing and publishing and so on. (Interview with Ali, Amman, August 29, 2024)

This independent distribution on social media has also changed power dynamics in the music industry. Instead of relying on major record labels, artists can now build a fan base online, creating new forms of legitimacy and authenticity. During another interview with Boombox Studio's producer and manager Jad Kas, based in Beirut, he shared with me his views on this new wave of Middle Eastern artists who can collaborate and promote their sounds on a regional and international scale, in particular to monetize music and receive royalties thanks to new technologies:

In today's age, with technology you can collaborate from different countries very easily. And with Instagram and TikTok, you can sell it to the world. So in that case, yeah, I can see how our music can be collectively linked. (Interview with Jad Kas on Zoom, October 18, 2024)

This link is therefore forged across borders through platforms like Instagram, and in some cases it may even aim to reach "superstardom," as proven by certain local artists such as The Synaptik (Palestine), El-Rass (Lebanon), BLTNM (Palestine) and even older groups like Katibe Khamse (Lebanon) and DAM (Palestine), now renowned and benefiting from several tours within the Arab world and internationally. For Jad Kas, this reflects the potential of the platform to professionalize the Middle Eastern scene:

I think it is a good thing because people are able to harness [the global music industry]. They are able to get famous from TikTok, from Instagram, from one video that can propel you to superstardom. (Interview with Jad Kas on Zoom, October 18, 2024)

This testimony highlights how artists willingly adapt to the cultural logics of global digital platforms, embracing their values and mechanisms of visibility as a natural pathway to success. At the same time, using Instagram or TikTok does not necessarily mean passive submission to dominant structures, but can serve as a strategy to create alternative narratives, accumulate recognition and gain cultural space in settings otherwise experienced as dominated by Western industries. In this sense, what appears to be a simple exploitation of global music systems can also be interpreted as a negotiation of power, where artists simultaneously reproduce hegemonic norms and challenge them from within.

As another example, the group BLTNM solicited the fervour of the social networks for its music "Inn Ann" in 2021, during the uprisings in the Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan neighbourhoods in Jerusalem. Having become a phenomenon in the Arab world, this song still resonates on the networks and propelled the group into the mainstream media, as proven by

the March 2023 issue of the world-famous newspaper *GQ Middle East*, where the artist Shabjdeed sits accompanied by his producer Al-Nather on the cover. For Jad Kas, this promotion of the Palestinian and Middle Eastern music scene is primarily due to social media networks, their ratings and the number of music that can currently be shared on listening and sharing platforms:

And that was previously unavailable, right? And even if you look at my industry in particular, so recording, basically now, I saw this crazy number the other day. I can't remember if it was, what was it, 100,000 songs, I think. (Interview with Jad Kas on Zoom, October 18, 2024)

Thus, Instagram is a sharing and collaboration platform for producers, but also a space for promoting rap and electronic music in the Middle East and the Arab world. Mainstream platforms like Instagram then see themselves becoming leading institutions whose challenge is to overcome the coercion of political borders and the fragmentation of the audience in a desire for pan-Arab interaction whose fulfilment can give rise to fame and monetization. However, this new era of platforms raises questions about the fragmentation of audiences in the Middle East and the impact of globalization on local musical cultures. Social media helps to archive and disseminate Palestinian culture and artistic collaborations, creating a constantly evolving digital memory, while opening up greater opportunities for visibility and income. However, this emphasis on the virtual has a downside: it can weaken the embodied dimension of encounters and marginalise physical spaces, at the risk of leading to a form of symbolic erasure or disappearance. In this sense, we could say that social media undoubtedly broadens the scope of artistic practices but adds an extra layer of complexity to the already fragile and contested politics of gathering in physical spaces. Yet, as we will see in the next section, Instagram and most social media networks in Palestine are not in opposition to social gatherings and physical meetings. On the contrary, in the Palestinian music scene they are the most essential tool to organize a party safely, despite everything. This is why, to continue this article, I propose a story about one gig that happened in 2022 while I was conducting my first ethnographic fieldwork. This will be an opportunity to explore the issue of music distribution in the digital age in greater depth, before moving on to the final section on hegemony and Gramsci's theory.

### **Creating Physical Gatherings : The Example of Doun Juthour**

The day comes, and I get up around 11 a.m., excited at the idea of meeting well-known artists on the Palestinian scene, such as Muqata'a, Makkimakuk, or even the members of BLT-NM, whose music I have been listening to for several months. The event, led by Doun Juthour collective, must take place in a bar in Ramallah, after dark. I then open my phone to practice the daily ritual of finding out about the comings and goings of the Israeli army and the raids in different cities.<sup>1</sup> For someone living in Ramallah, this is less a security meas-

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<sup>1</sup> On the subject of information systems for the Palestinian population in the West Bank, read Bathaïe & Bontemps,

ure than a way of taking the pulse of the atmosphere that will reign in the city for the next 24 hours. With this recurring gesture, one already perceives what could be described as a digital adaptation specific to the Palestinian context—a kind of resilience mediated by Instagram and Telegram, where following the news feed replaces traditional ways of reading the public sphere. This time, in the numerous videos posted on popular media a few hours earlier, I recognize the street where I live, near the al-Manara roundabout, at dawn, with a procession of Israeli armoured vehicles and young Palestinians who throw stones at them. Then, it was Nablus' turn to invade my phone: a new raid had taken place there at the same time, and several Palestinians were wounded or killed there.

So I make my coffee, realize how deeply I sleep while looking out the window at the stones strewn on the road, and write down the day's events in my notebook:

I wake up and realize that dozens of videos are playing about what happened overnight during the morning in Nablus and Ramallah. In Nablus, armed clashes, one dead and four wounded, three of them serious, for the moment. In Ramallah, seven NGO offices were raided by the army and equipment confiscated. This follows the latest events in Hebron and Nablus, the latest of which was the death of Ibrahim Al-Nabulsi, the “lion” of the Al-Quds brigade who was assassinated during clashes. [...] in Nablus, posters were posted all over the streets warning tourists not to visit the city at the moment. (Field notes, August 18, 2022)

Instagram then becomes not just a communication medium but the very space where locality is redefined: the rhythm of life in Ramallah or Nablus is partly filtered through the real-time images circulating online. What could be called a “Palestinian digital locality” emerges here, where the collective atmosphere of a city is experienced through a screen before being lived on the ground.

So, I send a message to the Doun Juthour collective via Instagram to find out if the event is cancelled or not. They respond quickly, telling me that they have adapted and that the event is still taking place. Later in the day, towards the end of the afternoon, I decide to go there. It is then the first time I go to Shams bar. When I enter the terrace—a terrace in the form of a hidden garden, the presence of which we do not notice from the street, except for the dull noise of people talking loudly—I realize that the event also includes stands of artisanal embroidery, electronic vaping machines, T-shirts from young designers, vintage clothing, as well as a food stand serving “a salad with small tomatoes, pickles, eggplant, meat, all placed on a bun pita” (field notes, August 18, 2022). I also note that I recognize some faces from Haifa, notably the people at the stands who are in fact the same as those who participate in the Kabareet FleaMarket every Saturday.<sup>2</sup> People seem to know each other well and move from one table to another, mixing ages and alcoholic drinks. This circulation of people,

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2016.

2 Now closed, Kabareet, in Haifa, organized every Saturday afternoon and evening (until midnight) a market of this type on its terrace, with also a food stand and inside a line-up of techno DJs.

crafts and cultural goods between Haifa, Ramallah and Bethlehem, enabled by an organization fully via Instagram, shows how social media, as a coordination platform, enables not just mobility but cultural continuity across fragmented geographies.

So I enjoy the atmosphere, I eat the dish offered for the modest sum of 15 shekels, but I realize that, as the hours pass, there is still no concert. I look on the Instagram account and indeed, the organizers have just announced the cancellation of the concert. The three injured this morning died, making this day one of the deadliest of the entire year. A festive moment would be an affront to the martyrdom of these young Nabulsis, and it would attract the wrath of certain residents who would not hesitate to attack the place and the organizers.

If people see us partying, they won't understand. They will be angry with us and ask us why we are happy as people died today. (Interview with D,<sup>3</sup> Ramallah, September 20, 2022)

Here, Instagram is not only a tool of logistics but also a means of negotiating public sensitivities—it performs the work of cultural adaptation in real time, at the intersection of mourning, politics and art. The decision to cancel (or not) becomes a collective act inscribed in « spontaneous consent »: organizers internalize the cultural codes of their community and adapt to them, even without direct coercion.

But around 9 p.m., in the middle of the courtyard, a circle forms around a few rappers from the collective accompanied by a beatboxer. One of the singers and organizers of the collective, by her pseudonym GoldPanda, then calls on those in the evening to gather around the artists who are beginning their a cappella concert. Each rapper parades in a contest; some perform their pieces already published on music listening platforms (SoundCloud, Apple Music, Spotify, Deezer), others sing texts written on the go between two bursts of finger snaps:

We can't applaud, everyone "snaps" with their fingers. Even if each time we shout and we calm down directly because we must not make noise so as not to have a problem. They are passing out a fund to give to artists. 2-3 guys do beatboxing and 6-7 others do improvisations. Everyone stands in a circle, listening and reacting to the words. People are in harmony and listen to Salim/Ebn Hoari, a Syrian-Palestinian based in Berlin. I understand that he is talking about his condition as a Palestinian and his Syrian origins. The moment is very intimate. People kiss and hug him following a punchline. They listen, respond, react, sympathize and feel concerned by the words he says. Tears come to the eyes of some, and others are silent and contemplate the speech they feel. Even without understanding, I feel like I understand through people's eyes, or at least I imagine so. The moment gives me goosebumps, and even as a stranger, I feel I'm part of the circle. (Field notes, August 18, 2022)

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3 Name anonymized for the security of the speaker.

This micro-performance illustrates Gramsci's idea of a "war of position" cited before in the previous section: rather than openly confronting hegemony, artists carve out intimate spaces of counter-hegemonic meaning from within, appropriating both physical sites (a hidden garden) and digital circuits (the videos later shared on Instagram) to sustain a cultural life otherwise under siege.

Around midnight, when the bar closes, the evening ends peacefully and everyone leaves for the Masyoun district to finish the evening at the Radio or the Garage bars, which close later, around 2 a.m. The next day, the collective leaves for Bethlehem where the evening will take place after another day of doubts. Then, the tour will end in Haifa which, like Jaffa, due to its location within the 1948 occupied territories (Israel)<sup>4</sup>, is not affected by potential closures or cancellations linked to the *shuhada* (martyrs).

### Documenting Local Events

In the process that I have just listed in the previous section, the Instagram platform plays a leading role in the organization and communication of the Doun Juthour event, showing how Palestinian artists and collectives navigate in a context of occupation where uncertainty is omnipresent. First of all, as my first field extract shows, the platform serves as a real-time information channel. During my various stays in Palestine, I understood very quickly that before coming to an event it was necessary to consult social networks to assess the security situation, in particular via videos from Instagram pages such as @eye.on.pal-estine or @wissam.gaza, relaying Israeli raids in the West Bank and, more recently, the genocide in Gaza. This is a common phenomenon among Palestinian populations where residents use Instagram and other social networks (e.g., Telegram) to monitor military incursions and adjust their movements accordingly. This practice reflects both resilience and normalization: resilience, because it allows daily adaptation to raids and violence; normalization, because consulting Instagram has become as natural as checking the weather.

To go further, Perreault and Hanush manage to show how journalists normalize social media platforms such as Instagram with the support of the Normalization Process Theory, which "provides an avenue for understanding how new routines—which often result from new technologies—become embedded within everyday practice" (Perreault & Hanush, 2024, p. 414). They argue that "Instagram was used primarily as a means to reach a different audience, to highlight visual stories, and to identify future issues they should cover" (Perreault & Hanush, 2024, p. 421). In the context of the Palestinian routine, it allows a relatively larger audience to be informed of all the displacements of the Israeli army and the non-official news about martyrdom and imprisonment within the West Bank, Israel and Gaza. Furthermore, Perreault and Hanush argue that "journalists regarded Instagram as a part of their process that helped them identify new or elusive audiences, to better report

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4 The "1948 occupied territories (Israel)" refers to the territories taken by Israel in 1948, in contrast with the "1967 occupied territories" (West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem).

more visually oriented stories and as a tool for gaining information about their story and the stories they could be reporting” (2024, p. 422). In this way, Instagram presents a platform for what Perreault and Hanush consider a social norm of being informed nowadays. Instagram is then supposed to be “normalized into these new routines” (2024, p. 422) as here, in this context, the need for up-to-the-second information makes it crucial for the security of Palestinian people. Yet, in contrast to the journalists described by Perreault and Hanush, Palestinians use Instagram not only to identify audiences or stories but to materially navigate occupied space and avoid physical danger. This difference reconfigures the very meaning of “normalization.”

So, to return to the event, Instagram also presents itself as a key coordination and adaptation tool. In this way, faced with the morning’s events, I contacted the organizers directly via the platform’s messaging system. The rapid response illustrates how arts collectives leverage the platform to make real-time decisions and maintain fluid communication with audiences. Faced with the social and political instability in the region, Instagram allows them to quickly adapt to changes in the situation. On the other hand, when the organizers decide that the event cannot take place, the platform serves as an official channel to announce the cancellation. In the Palestinian case, cancellations are most often due to the martyrdom (al-istishhâd) of fighters and civilians, which leads to collective mourning and public celebration in the days that follow. In this extreme context, artists and collectives fear reprisals from part of the population. Several events like this, which were not cancelled, have proven the dangerousness of maintaining an event after a martyrdom, mostly private parties in Jericho villas where Palestinian youth used to gather for music parties.<sup>5</sup> In this situation, Instagram is then used not only to inform but also to manage public sensitivity and prevent possible local tensions with cancellation. It becomes a threshold where hegemony is both consented to (through adherence to collective mourning and its codes) and tactically renegotiated (through the choice to reframe the evening into improvisation rather than silence).

Finally, Instagram also plays a role in documenting and remembering the event. Indeed, although the formal concert was cancelled, a moment of *a cappella* improvisation took place in the garden, not visible from the street. The real moment of the evening was then relayed on the social networks in the form of stories and videos, a couple of days after the event. Instagram serves here not only as a logistics platform but also a storytelling space where music and Palestinian cultural resistance are highlighted despite restrictions and censorship, as Ruuq told me: “[Instagram] is not for musical performances, more for musical society.” (Interview with Ruuq, Ramallah, February 2, 2024)

Thus in a context where the Palestinian music scene is under surveillance and where physical spaces of expression are limited, Instagram appears as a tool of resilience, making it

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5 A friend I met in Jerusalem had organized an evening like this for New Year. The evening was quickly interrupted by a group of armed young people, the guests were locked in a room, and he had his leg broken by a rifle butt and his car was stolen. According to him, the group accused them of taking drugs and engaging in sexual practices.

possible to circumvent borders, to maintain cross-border links between artists and audiences, and to allow a scene to exist despite the occupation. If one follows Gramsci's framework, such uses of the digital can be seen as part of a patient war of position, appropriating the very platforms of local hegemony to construct an alternative sociality, rooted in Palestinian experiences but connected across fragmented territories.

### **Going Through Hegemony's "Spontaneous Consent"**

In the previous sections, I discussed the various uses of Instagram as a social platform for collaboration, dissemination, distribution and event organisation. I also mentioned the concept of hegemony through Gramsci's words in order to show the actual conditions of such a music scene in the Palestinian context of resilience under normalized violence and occupation. In this final section, I will focus on Instagram's international hegemonic dimension within the Palestinian scene, highlighting the value of the platform as an American social network, standardized within a global hegemonic trend in its current reach.

In that respect, the special journal issue titled "Social Relations and Hegemonic Discourses: Conflicts in the Public Sphere (2)" (Dalibert et al., 2017) explores power dynamics and discursive conflicts within current public spaces. Drawing on cultural studies, it analyses how social relations—particularly gender, class and race—structure the social world, establish hierarchies and regulate interactions between groups. The contributions highlight the presence of hegemonic discourses, ideologies and representations, in the face of which dissonant, alternative or oppositional voices emerge, often carried by minorities within public micro-spaces. These discursive confrontations reveal the mechanisms by which certain perspectives dominate the public space, while others are marginalized or contested. The issue also underlines the importance of comprehension to these conflicts, in order to understand minority struggles and social movements in contemporary societies. In a more theoretical perspective, Hidayanto & Rifaldi Akbar (2022) mention the strategies of advertising fashion brands on social media within the ethnographic context of Indonesia. They question the portrait of Orientalism and Western hegemony in fashion product brand advertisements on social media, using Michel Foucault's power theory (1977) as "not ownership but [...] practiced within a particular scope in which there are strategic positions that intersect with each other," and concluding that power is "based on certain knowledge and discourses that are created" (Hidayanto & Rifaldi Akbar, 2022, p. 8). They also use Edward Said's notion of Orientalism, saying that it contains "four power relations, namely political, intellectual, cultural, and moral" (Hidayanto & Rifaldi Akbar, 2022, p. 8) which are in relation with Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. For the rest of this article, I will discuss even further this last concept, taken from *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (1971) and already presented, since it appears to be the more reliable way to study the Palestinian music scene on the Instagram platform.

During my different interviews within the Middle Eastern scene, I was able to speak with different artists and producers about platforms like Instagram. These different interviews showed that a fundamental paradox existed in the use of social networks by artists from the Middle East. Indeed, even though they reject Western hegemony embodied by streaming platforms and social networks like Instagram, they nonetheless remain dependent on these tools for their visibility and collaboration.

Right now, I prefer Instagram. But after all, fuck Meta, fuck Mark Zuckerberg, fuck the Western ideologies that we fight for, that fight us actually. (Interview with Ruuq, Ramallah, February 2, 2025)

In this very explicit form of rejection, artists I met express a broader critique of digital colonialism through this type of infrastructure. Yet, in the same sentence, Ruuq admits his preference for the platform as a tool for interacting with his audience and promoting his music. It thus reveals an ambivalence between contestation of and consent within Western hegemony, recognizing the power of Western platforms while using them, failing to find a viable alternative. In this way, we could speak again of “spontaneous consent” of hegemony in the way in which a dominant class maintains its power not only through constraint, but above all by shaping the culture and ideas of the society in question, where the dominated adhere to the values of power without being aware of it. In the example of media and social networks, this concept questions the mechanisms of soft power and the domination of digital platforms like Instagram.

The other cited concept is that of “war of position,” a strategy of resistance which does not involve a direct confrontation with hegemony (“war of movement”), but a progressive and underground struggle aimed at transforming cultural and ideological structures from within. The use of Instagram by these artists is part of this logic on the global scene: they exploit the tools of the dominant system to promote alternative narratives and assert an artistic identity outside the Western hegemonic framework, but also outside the local occupied hegemony in which the scene exists.

Thus, about Western hegemony, rather than seeing this contradiction as a simple submission, it is more relevant to interpret it as a strategy of appropriation and negotiation in a digital space where the balance of power remains asymmetrical. In that way, Ruuq adopts a more nuanced vision, establishing that the omnipresence of Instagram has turned it into a global platform and no longer just Western:

Well, it became more global than Western because everybody has been using it. We try to expand as much as we could as artists. For me personally, I would love to expand from working with Russians, working with Americans, working with Germans, working with Africans, working with anybody all around the world. I’m not talking about individuals; I’m talking about people in general. (Interview with Ruuq, Ramallah, February 2, 2025)

This raises many questions about its massive appropriation and its capacity to go beyond its initial ideological anchoring, but also on its use by artists from the countries of the Global South as a space for cultural reappropriation. Can we then ask ourselves to what extent the American platform maintains a form of standardization of practices under Western logic? The ambivalence of Ruuq's speech also raises the question of the values that artists can convey within it and their mode of use. Indeed, despite its Western origin, the platform is the first place for media, influencers and artists who wish to share their opinions, particularly on the Israeli occupation, colonization and Western hegemony of large-scale media discourses. If artists from the Middle East work and share their content with artists from the rest of the Global South, this demonstrates a hybridization of discourse within these platforms, which could potentially weaken this hegemony. This primary paradox, far from being a contradiction, reflects a dynamic where artists navigate between constraint and autonomy, between dependence on Western digital infrastructures and attempts to create decentralized expression. This dynamics recalls Gramsci's notion of cultural translation. He points out the way in which dominant ideas are never imposed unequivocally. Indeed, they are constantly reinterpreted and adapted by local cultures. If Instagram is based on Western economic and ideological logics, its appropriation by artists from the countries of the Global South allows a certain relocation of hegemony, where marginal stories find unprecedented visibility.

Another perspective is the hegemony of the algorithms that limit this subversive way of thinking the platform. In fact, in Sara Kunz's interview with the scholar and essayist Sinthujan Varatharajah (Kunz, 2022), the latter explores Instagram as a tool of acknowledgment about colonialism, exile and migratory politics outside the traditional academic canals. The platform is described as a digital public "political learning and mobilising space," where engagement is more direct. But, despite this average use of Instagram, the platform presents limits and constraints through its algorithms that "punish" the users and force them to deploy some subterfuges to bypass its coercion: "Whenever I put out dense or intense critical leftist political content, the algorithm punishes you for that. So, what people have come to do now is to post selfies to refresh the algorithm, to trick the algorithm." (Kunz, 2022, p. 124).

In the example of the situation in Palestine, militants, journalists, artists and scholars use the signs "!" or "@" to talk about the ongoing genocide in Gaza perpetrated by Israël. They will then write "Genoc!de," "Isr@el" to bypass the algorithms of Instagram that could ask to delete the post, story, reels, or give it a reduced visibility. In that sense, Varatharajah then criticizes the uniformization of the discourses imposed by the moderation and optimization logics of the digital platforms. This last argument shows that we can question Instagram as a controlled space and hegemonic platform for Western ideologies and observe how engaged users—as here in the Palestinian music scene—must navigate between resistance and adaptation to use these digital tools.

Finally, among these various critiques of the hegemony of the platform for Palestinian and Middle Eastern artists, we can assimilate Instagram as a space, certainly controlled, but leaving significant freedom for the exercise of individual power. As the different practices of artists and producers in the region show, the platform serves above all a specific purpose, that of collaboration, promotion, as well as organization and broadcasting of events, without, however, imposing a hegemonic identity on the Palestinian and Middle Eastern music scene. It is therefore important to reconsider the scope of such a platform in physical reality as well as to question the real contribution of the digital age to the daily thoughts of artists. Hegemony on Instagram for Palestinian and Middle Eastern artists is then not experienced only as overt censorship but rather as a layered phenomenon combining unequal visibility, algorithmic bias, and a generalized feeling of discontent. As Gramsci suggests, domination here works less by direct repression than by encouraging users to internalize and reproduce the platform's cultural and technical codes, even as they reject its Western roots. The result is a paradoxical position: while algorithms and moderation practices silence or punish political content, artists simultaneously rely on Instagram as a vital infrastructure for visibility, collaboration, and survival. This produces a space of ambivalence where discontent coexists with consent, and where resistance takes the form of a tactical reappropriation of hegemonic tools to circulate alternative narratives within an asymmetrical digital terrain.

## Conclusion

As shown throughout this article, Instagram is a tool for production, dissemination and organisation, but also a space where the Palestinian and Middle Eastern music scene is reshaped on a daily basis. Artists use it to forge remote collaborations that transcend borders, organise events despite occupation and violence, and transform Instagram into a source of information and a place of memory when physical venues disappear or close. In this way, on the one hand, the platform allows users to engage, express themselves and devise collective strategies. On the other hand, it imposes its standards, algorithms and visibility dynamics, reproducing a global, commercialized hegemony where the dominant culture imposes its codes and dissenting voices can be rendered invisible or censored.

Palestinian and Middle Eastern artists navigate this ambiguity. Even when they denounce digital colonialism, they use Instagram as an essential infrastructure, for lack of a viable alternative. This ambivalence is at the heart of Gramsci's theory of hegemony where domination is imposed not only through coercion, but also through adherence—sometimes resigned—to the logic of a system that governs the circulation and existence of works. But everyday life on the ground also shows the vitality of Gramsci's war of position: publishing a song, organising an impromptu concert, circumventing algorithmic censorship, turning a cancellation into a collective performance—these are all discreet

tactics for creating an alternative scene, negotiating its margins and forging solidarity in a fragmented and uncertain context. From this perspective, Instagram becomes a terrain of micro-resistance, sometimes clandestine, where attempts are made to preserve a shared memory and circulate otherwise invisible narratives.

In short, digital technology does not eliminate antagonisms. It becomes a space where globalisation, appropriation, resistance and dependence intermingle; where communities are formed in times of crisis and where the art of surviving together despite everything is explored. Instagram reveals the inventiveness, contradictions and adaptability of artists who refuse to resign themselves to oblivion and who continue to invent ways of bringing music to life and circulating it, from wall to wall, screen to screen, city to city.

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