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Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s

Zeina G. Halabi: The Day the Wandering Dreamer Became a Fida’i: Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and the Fashioning of Political Commitment

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The Day the Wandering Dreamer Became a Fida’i:
Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and the Fashioning of Political Commitment

Zeina G. Halabi

Events have become so momentous that all our faculties have shriveled up trying cope with them. The disasters we’ve suffered can’t be dealt with in verbal form; all the words have been pulverized.
(Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Walid Masoud 74)

Introduction

In April 2010, a car explosion in Princesses Street near the Egyptian embassy in Baghdad killed seventeen people. It also destroyed a deserted two-story house and all that it contained. In the rubble, there were plays by Anton Chekhov, novels by Ghassan Kanafani (Ghāṣṣān Kānāfānī), translations of Shakespeare and Faulkner, paintings by the Iraqi Shākir Hasan (Ṣhākir Ḥasan), sculptures by Muhammad Ghānī Ḥikmat (Muḥammad Ghanī Ḥikmat), countless classical music records, and a cornerstone brought from the debris of a home in Palestine (Shadid). Destroyed but not lifeless, the house spoke of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s (Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, 1920–1994) intellectual sophistication and trajectory from Palestine to his Iraqi exile. Originally from Bethlehem, Jabra pursued higher education in England, and eventually settled in Baghdad where, starting in the 1950s, he was at the center of the Arab and particularly Iraqi cultural vanguard. A novelist, poet, artist, critic, and translator, Jabra was, in the words of Issa Boullata “a true Renaissance man (who) has been rightly considered a strong force for modernism in the Arab world in the second half of the twentieth century” (215).

Jabra saw in the exilic intellectual’s liminality an advantage that reinforced his critical sensibilities and enabled him to lead the desired leap into the modern. In his numerous essays, novels, and poems Jabra engaged the themes of loss and displacement and represented exile, despite its tragic consequences, as the desired ethical position of an entire generation of Arab intellectuals, whether displaced or at home. Jabra’s literary discourse significantly drew on the archetype of the Palestinian intellectual, an exilic modern subject in a modernizing yet troubled Arab world. Specifically, Jabra’s characters in Al-safīna (1970; The Ship, 1985), Al-baḥth ʿan Waḥīd Masʿūd (1978; In Search for Walid Masoud, 2000), and Yawmīyāt sarāb ʿaffān (1992; The Journals of Sarab Affān, 2007) are exilic Palestinian intellectuals navigating an Arab world enchanted by the promises of modernity yet shackled by consecutive political setbacks.

Jabra’s oeuvre poses a set of critical questions: Why did Arabs lose Palestine in 1948? Why were they defeated again in 1967? And what exactly is the responsibility of the Palestinian exilic intellectuals toward Arab societies as they embrace modernization? Jabra searched for answers to the first question in Arab culture, specifically in the question of modernity and tradition. He observed that the nakba was symptomatic of the multifaceted Arab defeat that was not only political and military, but also cultural and epistemological. If Ar-
abs had lost Palestine, it was because they were “cheated and betrayed by a thousand years of decay” (“The Palestinian Exile” 82). Arabs, he thought, “had confronted a ruthless modern force with an outmoded tradition” (ibid.). Put differently, the Arabs’ retrograde political, cultural, and scientific institutions were accountable for the loss. Therefore, the problem was clear, and so was the solution: Arabs had to embrace modernity by inventing “a new way of looking at things. A new way of saying things. A new way of approaching and portraying man and the world” (ibid.). Jabra believed that it was the responsibility of Palestinian exiles to lead the way.

By the mid-1960s, the postcolonial hopes of modernization and emancipation were gradually thwarted by the militarization of regimes in Egypt, Iraq and Syria. The naksa in 1967 was thus the last installment of a series of consecutive political defeats that transformed the ways in which Arab authors conceived of themselves as agents of change. In what ways could these internal setbacks be explained? And what were the implications of these successive losses on the role of the Arab writer? Jabra conducted another project of introspection, which this time was more inward and personal. He probed, not the state of archaic Arab traditions, but his understanding of aesthetics and politics.

Jabra questioned the viability of his word-centered episteme and saw in his fascination with humanism, modernism, and aesthetics the cause for the renewed experience of defeat that his writings conveyed. In In Search of Walid Masoud, I suggest, Jabra articulates his growing ambivalence toward his own literary discourse and reconfigures the role of the politically committed intellectual.

In order to gauge the complexity of Jabra’s understanding of political commitment (iltizām), one needs to trace the multiple meanings of the concept in the context of the shifting ideological landscape of the Arab world from the 1920s to the 1970s. The commitment to a politically-oriented literature that engages the social and political realities of its time, had not been foreign to Jabra. It had been at the forefront of critical debates in Egypt and the Levant with the emergence of the nationalist anti-colonial cultural vanguard since the 1920s. The politically-driven writers of the time were predominantly nationalist intellectuals addressing the budding national community as they construed an anti-colonial rhetoric. Their poetry, Jabra notes, was “oratorical, militant, and of an instantaneous effect” (“The Rebels” 191).

The understanding of political commitment that we know today was popularized in the 1950s. Verena Klemm notes that iltizām became the governing literary ethos a few years following the 1948 publication of Sartre’s What is Literature? (51–52). Translated and debated on the pages of the Lebanese literary journal al-Ädāb, Sartre’s concept of littérature engagée provided the philosophical framework that positioned literature at the intersection of existentialism and emancipation ideologies. But the variant of iltizām that al-Ädāb promoted was continuously in dialogue with proponents of social realism who had been dissatisfied with the individualistic sensibility of existentialism. The naksa in 1967 radicalized the scope of criticism and engendered a literary and critical discourse that promoted Palestinian armed struggle against Israeli occupation, a brand of iltizām that Ghassan Kanafani (Ghassān Kanafānī) had coined ‘resistance literature’ (adab al-muqāwama) in his seminal book Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine 1948–1966 (1966). It is in the context of this shifting understanding of political commitment—from anti-colonial nationalist rhetoric, to social realism, and ultimately resistance literature—that Jabra’s Walid Masoud appeared.

The title character Walid Masoud is Jabra’s mirror image: an established Palestinian exilic intellectual who left Palestine in 1947 and later became a catalyst for change and innovation in Baghdad. Following the 1967 war, Walid witnessed the limits of the discursive sepa-
ration between aesthetics and politics. Unlike Jabra, who remained in Baghdad until his death in 1994, Walid disappeared a few years after the 1967 war amidst rumors that he had joined the Palestinian resistance in a refugee camp in Beirut. As such, the “mystique” of the Palestinian intellectual wandering in exile gave way to the Palestinian freedom fighter rooted in the refugee camp. As he reconstructs the disappearance of Walid Masoud, Jabra laments his alter ego and his own intellectual project that could not resist the political and epistemic aftershocks of the 1967 defeat. Furthermore, the novel reveals Jabra’s distinct understanding of political commitment in dialogue with—but also in opposition to—the multiple conceptions of ʿiltizām that his peers had fostered. In *Walid Masoud*, Jabra articulates a more idiosyncratic and nuanced conception of political commitment. By closely reading the discursive turn that the novel stages, I hope to show how Jabra challenges monolithic understandings of ʿiltizām and reveals the concept’s dynamic, adaptive, and pluralistic nature. The significance of Jabra’s fashioning of ʿiltizām in *Walid Masoud* becomes clear only when compared to his pre-1967 understanding of the role of the exilic Palestinian intellectual.

The Wanderers

In a seminal autobiographical essay, “The Palestinian Exile as Writer” (1979), Jabra reminisces on his displacement from Bethlehem, his exasperating journey through Damascus, Amman and Beirut, and his new life in Baghdad. Jabra remembers his indignation in 1948 when an Iraqi customs officer addressed him as a Palestinian refugee: “I was not a refugee, and I was proud as hell” (77). Jabra’s distinction between refugees and intellectuals, or asylum seekers and exiles, is central to his conception of the exiled Palestinian. He understands the paradox of the Palestinian exile as simultaneously tragic and empowering. The tragedy of the *nakba* that caused the dispersal of an entire people and the loss of historical Palestine was due to the inability of Arab traditions to withstand the thrust of modern colonizing forces. But that same tragedy was empowering because it scattered educated Palestinians all over the Arab world and transformed them into a leavening force in their new host societies (85).

The liminal state of being neither in Palestine nor entirely in Iraq fosters the exilic Palestinians’ mobility, both physical and intellectual. By means of their deracination, exilic intellectuals become permanent inhabitants of the border, a liminal space between political and intellectual identifications. Jabra’s description of this state of non-belonging caused by literal and metaphoric homelessness evokes Edward Said’s concept of “secular criticism,” a state of intellectual displacement that paradoxically enables critical and creative power. As secular critics, Said notes, exilic intellectuals embrace a paradigm that is “life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are non-coercive knowledge produced in the interest of human freedom” (29). Exploring the genealogy of exile in the Euro-American tradition, particularly in the representations of European intellectuals such as Adorno and Auerbach, Caren Kaplan builds on the Saidian archetype of the secular critic and argues that contemporary conceptions of exile draw on the necessary intertwining of three constructs: exile, intellectuals, and modernity. As such, in its celebration of singularity, solitude, and alienation, the concept of exile has defined modernist sensibilities and has been considered both the precursor and the outcome of a distinctively modern subject position (Kaplan 50). It is within this conceptual framework that Jabra understood the role of Palestinian exiles in the Arab world.

Jabra identifies himself and his educated peers, not as refugees in need of assistance, but as an emerging community of educated mobile intellectuals, navigating smoothly across po-
political and ideological borders. They are “wanderers” (“The Palestinian Exile” 77),⁶ “knowledge peddlers” (ibid.), exchanging knowledge for survival, all at the service of their host societies. Exile also signifies an elevated cultural capital, the holders of which are in command of their fate and a force of change in the lives of others. Jabra sees his Palestinian peers as a “leavening force for a meaningful future for Arabs everywhere” (85). Palestinians

[...] were suddenly everywhere: writing, teaching, talking, doing things, influencing a whole Arab society in most unexpected ways. They were coping with their sense of loss, turning their exile into a force, creating thereby a mystique of being Palestinian. (84)

Such was the Palestinians’ magic: their unmatched ability to transform the tragedy of dispossession into a mythical power of change that enabled Arab modernity. Jabra explains the bond that tied Palestinian exiles to the wider Arab world:

Right from the start Palestinians had declared that their fate and the fate of the Arab nation were interlocked, were in fact one. Palestinians could not fail, except by the failure of the whole Arab nation. But they also knew that so much depended on themselves: on their efficacy as a leavening force for a meaningful future for Arabs everywhere. (85)

By virtue of their education and displacement, which accelerated their dissociation from parochial identities, Palestinian intellectuals emerge as archetypical modern and humanist subjects. For Jabra, the exilic intellectuals’ border position and critical abilities are not only the precursors, but also the precondition for a modern and critical outlook on the world. In other words, only Palestinian intellectuals, who are endowed with intellectual liminality and critical sensibilities, are capable of ushering Arab societies into modernity.

By means of their physical and intellectual displacement and liminality, Jabra maintains, exilic intellectuals are catalysts for change, fully committed to the causes of their age. Their transnational identity structure and distance from centers of power facilitates their mission. But it is precisely the intellectuals’ lack of rootedness that points to their limitations. Kaplan argues that the defining yet problematic property of exile, as it appears in modernist literary traditions, is its favoring of theoretical constructs at the expense of its involvement in the material world. She notes that “the modernist trope of exile works to remove itself from any political or historically specific instances in order to generate aesthetic categories and ahistorical values” (28). Jabra’s notion of the politically-driven (Palestinian) intellectual enfolded tensions specifically in the intellectual’s word-centered epistemic model and its binary structure (theory and praxis; aesthetics and politics; intellectuals and refugees).

Whereas Jabra’s conception of the role of the intellectual, as I show below, was celebrated, it was also critiqued for its ahistorical and apolitical undertones, particularly in the wake of critical historical junctures such as the 1967 war.

The Dreamers

When Jabra settled in Iraq in 1948, the country was laying the ground for the two decisive decades that transformed the Iraqi political and cultural scenes. The Iraqi udabāʾ (men of letters) and artists, of which Jabra was the main figure, were searching for alternative modes of expression and experimenting with modernist tropes in art and literature in order to read the world anew. Poets of the New Verse Movement⁷ sought to modernize the classical Arabic ode (qasīda) by exploring new themes, imageries, and unconventional vocabulary.⁸ Despite its pioneering vision, the literary discourse of Jabra’s generation remained
elitist insofar as it pertained to art and literature alone (ʿAzzāwī 11). Although they had a clear modernizing project, the udabāʾ were far from espousing an explicit ideological discourse in which to frame it. In the aftermath of the two consecutive coups that ultimately led to the establishment of a violent and authoritarian Baath regime, Iraqi intellectuals were gradually polarized and the majority of the udabāʾ, including Jabra, withdrew further from the Iraqi political scene (13).

Jabra’s role in the vibrant Iraqi culture confounded his admirers. Although critics and a young generation of militants were moved by the depth of his innovation, they nevertheless astounded by his escapism regarding the critical Arab political juncture. For instance, the novelist ʿAbd al-Rahman Munīf (ʿAbd al-Rahmān Munīf), Jabra’s longtime friend, remembers: “The main concepts that motivated Jabra were innovation, critical rebellion, and his commitment to contemporary issues. Jabra achieved it all through knowledge and creativity” (Lawʿat al-ghiyāb 118). Munīf identifies his Palestinian friend as “one of the most prominent Arab intellectuals since the 1950s,” who “contributed to the genesis of Iraqi culture [takwīn al-thaqāfa]” and to laying “Iraq’s cultural foundations [al-taʾṣīs al-thaqāfī] by means of his translations, lectures, and theories on modern poetry” (Al-qalaq 74). Here, Munīf does not situate Jabra within the Iraqi cultural field, but historicizes Iraqi culture as a sub-narrative in Jabra’s long trajectory. Furthermore, Munīf does not shy away from placing Jabra on the level of the divine as he attributes to him the power of cultural genesis (takwīn al-thaqāfa), or the capacity to conceive the Iraqi cultural scene and lay its foundation. Munīf believes that the modernization of the Iraqi cultural scene would have been unimaginable without Jabra’s contributions and leadership. In this sense, Munīf’s depiction of Jabra is aligned with Jabra’s own vision of the exilic Palestinian, himself included, as a catalyst for change. But underneath Munīf’s admiration of Jabra, one can read the beginning of a generational dissent:

It was common for many, myself included, to cross al-Rashid Street daily and stand before Barāziliyya café in order to observe, and maybe hear, those dreamers [al-ḥālimūn], who wanted to transform not only Iraq, but the entire world. There were (Badr Shakir) al-Sayyab, (ʿAbd al-Wahhab) al-Bayati, Jawad Salim, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ismaʿīl, Qazim Jawad, (Buland) al-Haydari, Ḥusayn Mardan, … and in their midst was Jabra! […] We used to feel sorry for them for being dreamers, as opposed to us militants [al-siyāṣīyūn] who carried alone the burden of change and were the only ones qualified for this mission! Nevertheless, we used to share with our peers some of what we had heard from these artists and men of letters [adabātiyya] about their desire to change the world! (Lawʿat al-ghiyāb 111)

Central to Munīf’s recollection of Jabra and his generation is the allegory of the dreamers. Munīf refers to the intellectuals he used to admire as ḥālimūn, the quixotic characters that transform the Baraziliyya café—one of the most vibrant Baghdadi intellectual venues10—into a space where dreams, fantasies, and idealism were continuously performed, yet unrealized. Munīf’s ambivalence appears in his reference to the udabāʾ as adabātiyya (colloquial for ‘practitioners of adab’), which reveals a combination of deference and cynicism toward Jabra’s generation of udabāʾ. Whereas Munīf recognizes the importance of these intellectuals, he nevertheless associates them with bygone times when the political and the aesthetic were in fact distinct. Central to Munīf’s ambivalence towards Jabra is a different understanding of the role of the novel. As Sonja Mejcher-Atassi argues in her contribution to this volume, although both writers conceived of the novel as catalyst for change, Jabra foregrounded the aesthetic qualities of the novel and Munīf underscored its material, documentary qualities.
Halim Barakat (Ḥalīm Barakāt) voices a similar concern about the centrality of the word in Jabra’s oeuvre. He noted that before Walid Masoud, Jabra’s novels had been “novels of non-confrontation” (The Arab World 221) as they had avoided engaging the political struggles that marked Jabra’s times. Later he adds,

Jabra Ibrahim Jabra discovered that the Arab had been subject to all sorts of pressures, restraints, and oppression, until he became crushed and shackled by his reality. He therefore sought to free himself from his reality through fantasy, which has grown gigantic wings; fantasy that he has unleashed while remaining in place. Is this the tragedy of the contemporary Arab, I wonder? (‘Jabrā ʿIbrāhīm Jabrā’ 111)

If more accusatory than Munif, Barakat understands Jabra’s humanist sensibilities as fantasy, an escapist intellectual venture that fails to attend to the demands of the Arabs. Such was the predicament of Jabra and his generation: They were cultural innovators, idealists, and dreamers, whose modernizing power was undisputed; but they were also adabātiyya, not explicitly twining the literary to the political in a context of consecutive military coups and successive Arab political and military setbacks. In their recollections of Jabra, both Munif and Barakat expose the conceptual fault lines of Jabra’s early understanding of the role of the writer, a state that favors word over praxis. The dichotomy of dreamer/militant, to which Munif and Barakat point, will mature in the 1960s and explode following the 1967 defeat. As Walid Masoud reveals, Jabra captures the growing ambivalence toward his generation and channels its own anxieties as its role began to change. The novel also stages Jabra’s disillusionment with his word-centered episteme, reflected in the multiple narratives surrounding the disappearance of the title character Walid Masoud.

The Disappearance of the Intellectual

Rebecca Carol Johnson writes that Walid Masoud is about a search that is both a process (baḥth as investigation) and an outcome (baḥth as research) (178). It “brings into focus,” she adds, “both the product of intellectual inquiry and its process, as it takes as its object knowledge, the intellectual, and the very project of intellectual production itself” (ibid.). The search is revealed in a polyphonic, intertextual, and disconnected narrative, in which the reader witnesses the disillusionment of a group of Iraqi intellectuals and their shared guilt facing the tragic disappearance of their friend Walid Masoud in 1970s Baghdad. The novel portrays 1950s and 1960s Baghdad at the height of modernist trends in literature, architecture, and the arts. It is the city where western, particularly Anglophone literature and philosophy, are translated and debated by Walid’s Iraqi friends, all members of a rising class of scholars, doctors, journalists, financiers, artists, and bureaucrats who regularly challenge traditional values and celebrate their individualism. It is a circle of bourgeois intellectuals, all well-versed in the western humanist tradition and driven by the need to build and perform a modern Arab subjectivity. In their conversations and incessant debates, they reflect on the role of the intellectual in modern Arab societies, the importance of promoting vanguard art, and the aesthetic and ethical functions of modern poetic trends.

Walid’s car is discovered on the border road that links the Iraqi and Syrian customs stations. A tape is found in the abandoned car; on it Walid had recorded what seems like his last words: a stream of consciousness narrative depicting disconnected memories from his childhood in Palestine, his activities in the Palestinian resistance against the British mandate, and his Iraqi exile. Puzzled by the content of the tape, Dr. Jawad and his friend Amir
invite Walid’s closest friends to make sense of their disconcerting discovery. Together they listen to his voice as he reflects on his relationships with lovers, friends, and rivals. Walid also mourns in this tape his teenage son Marwan, a Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) fida’i who was killed in a military operation in the Galilee. Right before his disappearance, Walid had been outspoken against the complaisance of Arab regimes with the occupation of Palestine, which leads his friend Jawad to believe that he was assassinated. Another friend, the psychiatrist Tariq, who treats Walid’s female lovers, believes that Walid had been suffering from an acute bipolar disorder that may have driven him to commit suicide. However, Walid’s lover Wisal, who is familiar with his latest underground political activities, has evidence, undisclosed to the readers, that Walid neither killed himself nor was killed. She claims, that Walid had, in fact, staged his disappearance from Baghdad and joined the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon. In the absence of definitive answers, Walid’s friends conduct an internal search for all the reasons, personal and political, which may be behind his disappearance. The conflicting narratives of Walid’s disappearance, as Samira Aghacy argues, “provide[] a sense of deferred meaning in that each attempt to speak of him is not seen as the ultimate truth but, rather, of yet another in a series of multifarious discourses” (60).

As an exilic intellectual, Walid is a Saidian secular critic, a liminal subject drawing on his mastery of the literary and philosophical word to induce change. Walid’s friends remember him as the archetypical Renaissance man: a charismatic and wealthy Palestinian financier with an exquisite and eclectic cultural capital that materializes in his fine taste for Baroque music, contemporary English poetry, and modern Iraqi art. His confidant Ibrahim declares that Walid’s mission was to “foster the new spirit based on knowledge, freedom, love, and a revolt against looking back—all this was a means of achieving the complete Arab revolution” (Jabra, Walid Masoud 244). In addition to a collection of short stories as well as a first volume of an autobiography—incidentally bearing the same title as Jabra’s autobiography — Walid’s friends speak of his groundbreaking philosophical treatise entitled “Man and Civilization” (“Al-insān wa-l-ḥaḍāra”), in which he probes the essence of humanity, progress, and civilization (57). Walid was driven by the need to build a “new spirit,” a budding Arab subjectivity that stems from the rejection of backward traditional and metaphysical structures that impede the progress of Arabs toward modernity. In this sense, Walid was a man of his time, channeling the concerns of Arab thinkers and their debates on questions of authenticity, innovation, and the delicate equilibrium that constitutes the modern.

Both Jabra and Walid were depicted as Renaissance figures and both espoused a humanist and modernist conception of the role of the writer. As Palestinian exiles in Baghdad, they were both celebrated as catalysts for change. Ibrahim situates Walid as “one of those exiles” who “shake the Arab world” (244), establishing a causal relationship between the generation of Palestinian exilic intellectuals and Arab cultural innovation. Furthermore, like Munif, who situated Jabra at the core of the Iraqi cultural bloom of the 1950s, Ibrahim believes that:

Walid was the kind of Palestinian who rejected, pioneered, built, and united (if my [Iraqi] people can ever be united); he was a scholar, architect, technocrat, rebuildier, and violent goader of the Arab conscience. [...] Where you find outstanding achievement in science, finance, ideas, literature, or innovation, you’ll come across that exile Palestinian: he’ll be doing things, urging, theorizing, and achieving everything that’s different. Wherever there’s anything worthwhile, involving self-sacrifice, you’ll find the Palestinian. (ibid.)

When Munif remembers Jabra, as I have shown earlier, he associates him with Genesis (al-takwīn), or the moment of conception of the modern Iraqi cultural scene. Similarly, when
Ibrahim remembers Walid, he resorts to a semantic field that equally evokes creation and genesis. He imagines Walid as an “architect,” a “rebuilder,” a “violent goader,” and a source of “innovation” and “achievement.” Ibrahim also portrays Walid, as well as all exilic Palestinians, as messianic figures who sacrifice themselves for the salvation of all Arabs. Furthermore, Walid’s divine qualities become visible in his portrait as a forger of “Arab conscience,” or a man who has given Arabs a sense of self by means of his writings. Walid, however, was not the only holder of power; he was indeed a “kind of Palestinian,” or a member of a generation of exilic Palestinians possessing the power of genesis. But both Jabra and Walid experienced the limits of this discourse following the political turmoil of Iraq in the 1960s and the defeat of the naksa in 1967. Pondering on the collective despair surrounding him, Walid probes, for the last time, his role as an intellectual in exile:

Events have become so momentous that all our faculties have shriveled up [qazzamat] trying to cope with them. The disasters [fawājīʿ unā] we’ve suffered can’t be dealt with in verbal form; all the words have been pulverized. (274)

Walid’s modern Arab subject that he had conceptually forged as a sublime figure driven by humanist and ethical sensibilities, was suddenly dwarfed (qazzam), humiliated, and ridiculed. In the wake of the naksa, bereavements (fawājīʿ)—a term evoking disaster, the loss of loved ones, and insurmountable pain—have become a collective and unspeakable loss, so immense that it renders those driven by the power of the word irrelevant. Walid’s disappearance in 1971, a few months after the death of his son Marwan, differs from Jabra’s own exilic narrative. Whereas Jabra withstood Saddam’s repressive regime and remained in Baghdad until his death in 1994, his mirror image disappears, reportedly to join the Palestinian resistance in Beirut. “Similar to a black hole in which the novel’s protagonist disappears, together with the hopes and dreams attached to the role of the intellectual in the Arab world,” as Mejcher-Atassi astutely observes in her contribution, “the border crossing, and more specifically the no-man’s land between the borders, is the very opposite of the exile’s idealized homeland.” As such, in the context of ideological fissures and intellectual self-doubt, where did Walid go when he vanished? In Johnson’s succinct words, it is unclear whether Walid dropped “out of the world or into it” (186; my emphasis). In other words, what was more real, more urgent, and more consequential? Was it the world of ideals that the dreamers (ḥālimūn) of Baghdad had inhabited or the world of militants, refugees, and freedom fighters into which the naksa had propelled Walid?

The Emergence of the Fidaʿi

*Walid Masoud* appeared in 1978, at the critical historical juncture that saw the radicalization of Arab thought and poetics. The rapid defeat of Arab forces in 1967 as well as the militarization and bureaucratization of regimes in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq exposed the revolutionary dearth of postcolonial Arab regimes. The neutralization of the rhetoric of emancipation created an ideological void that led thinkers to expand their critical scope further by drawing on the radical and radicalizing force of the Palestinian cause. As such, Marxist and nationalist thinkers, who had been disenchanted with state-controlled agendas of emancipation, tied the Palestinian cause and armed struggle to their ideological agendas.13 They saw in the Palestinian resistance in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan a true revolutionary force of change that would ultimately trickle down to their respective states and societies. As they theorized and romanticized Palestinian armed struggle, Arab thinkers and novelists created a
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“mystique”—to retrieve Jabra’s own term—but this time of the figure of the fida’i. The fida’i emerged at this point as the more radical, more pragmatic, and less tainted voice of change coming from the refugee camps. Anouar Abdel-Malek describes this hopeful moment:

Everything indicated despair. And then, from the heart of the night, there came a gleam of hope. The people of the tents, the anonymous men and women, children and old people of Palestine embarked upon the only valid course open to a nation stripped of its homeland and faced with that ethnic, cultural and political racism which lies at the core of all imperialism. [...] The historical merit of the Palestinian resistance, led by Al-Fatah (founded by Yasser Arafat on 1 January 1964), is to have objectively shown the national movements of the Arab world that the time had come to replace the armony of criticism with the criticism of arms. (19)

The problem was thus in the “armory of criticism,” the critical corpus that had become withdrawn from the imperatives of the times. As such, the “criticism of arms,” or change induced by military force, became the Arab intellectual’s only remaining option. The power of this statement lies in Abdel-Malek’s ability to channel yet transcend Jabra. Retrieving Jabra’s old mantra, that the fate of the Palestinian exiles and the Arab world were intertwined, Abdel-Malek draws not on the intellectual in exile, but on the militant refugee. Hence, in the aftermath of the 1967 watershed, the fida’i became the new Arab hero. But Abdel-Malek was not alone in projecting onto the fida’i the anxieties and aspirations of his times. The fida’i also captured the imagination of other Arabs, particularly Iraqi, intellectuals. ‘Azzāwī remembers that the Palestinian fida’i was romanticized in popular imagination because “Palestinian guerilla fighters were not part of an organized army led by generals, but were young men like us with different revolutionary ethics,” and because they embodied the deep need to revolt against authority (190). He adds that his generation was hopeful that the fida’i (from the Arabic f-d-y), the freedom fighter, the redeemer, and the hero “will constitute the nucleus of a revolution that will change the Arab world in its entirety” (ibid.).

As the new Arab hero, the fida’i featured more and more in literature increasingly mobilized by the urgency and ideological valor of the Palestinian cause. The eminent Iraqi Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahirī (Muḥammad Mahdī al-Jawāhirī) turned an elegy to a fallen Palestinian leader to a panegyric of the fida’i in “Al-fīdāʾ wa-l-dam” (1968). In Syria, Nizar Qabbani (Nizār Qabbānī) wrote “Īfīdā fi māḥkamat al-shīr” (1969), while the Palestinians Fadwa Tuqan (Fadwā Ṭūqān), Mahmoud Darwish (Maḥmūd Darwīsh), Samih al-Qasim (Ṣāmīḥ al-Qāsim) among others, all saw in the salutary figure of the fida’i the hope of a renewed Palestinian and subsequently all-encompassing Arab revolution.15 The fida’i also enraptured novelists, including Halim Barakat in Days of Dust (1969, Eng. 1974), Tawfīq Yūsuf ‘Awwad (Tawfīq Yūsuf ‘Awwād) in Death in Beirut (1972, Eng. 1976) and more importantly, Jabra in his depiction of Walid Masoud and his son Marwan. Jabra’s fida’i appears in Walid Masoud in the wake of the 1967 war and its ensuing deep political and epistemological crises. A few months before he vanished, Walid hints at this own exit:

Speaking out is a completely foolish thing to do now, and convinces no one. No one even listens. It’s like beating a drum among the deaf. The only courage that deserves to be translated into action is challenging death with raised fists and violence, thereby using death itself to trample down death, as in the death of a freedom fighter [fidā’ī], for example. (Jabra, Walid Masoud 4)

In both Jabra’s and Walid’s post-1967 world, the word of the Palestinian intellectual in exile is no longer heard, as listeners have become deafened by the cacophony of futile intellectual debates. Now considering the intellectual’s critical agency of speaking truth to power
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(“speaking out”) a foolish act, Walid dramatically declares the demise of both his own intellectual project as well as that of an entire generation of Palestinian exiles. Courage, power, and change are no longer the privilege of the intellectual; they have been passed on to the Palestinian fida’i.

Following the 1967 war, Walid traveled to Lebanon to see his teenage son Marwan, who had abandoned his prestigious boarding school and moved to a Palestinian refugee camp. Marwan’s rebellion began when he rejected education, the cultural capital that distinguishes Palestinian exiles from refugees. In Marwan’s new world, only refugees are the catalysts for revolutionary change. Marwan tells his father that the refugee camp was the “forgotten essence [jawhar] of life” (211), and thus a stark contrast to his exilic father’s marginal, superficial, and ephemeral world of words. Marwan reminisces on his last conversation with his father, who had expressed his desire to join the Palestinian resistance:

Operations involve lots of hard training beforehand; they need young men who can run hard, jump, go hungry, and put up with hardship. My father thinks he’s still the young man he was twenty-five years ago. I told him if he wanted to commit suicide, to find some other way of doing it. He got very angry and we had a big fight; he swore at me and then went back to Baghdad. (213)

Although the binaries of refugee/exile and militant/intellectual persist, the power structure that governs them is now reversed. In a sober and assertive tone, Marwan inadvertently draws the portrait of the post-1967 Palestinian: The new revolutionary heroes are no longer the “knowledge peddlers,” the “dreamers,” and the “wanderers” who Jabra had eloquently represented and Walid had embodied; they are the militants emerging from the cultural and political margins of the refugee camps. Away from books, paintings, and class privileges, Marwan redefines masculinity in opposition to intellectual achievements and associates it with physical strength and endurance. Furthermore, unlike the intellectual defeated by the emasculating effects of exile and state persecution, the fida’i is portrayed as the embodiment of an idealized masculinity in comparison to the powerlessness of the exilic intellectual. Whereas Walid exhibits his masculinity discursively in male-centered intellectual circles and performatively with his lovers, Marwan’s masculinity materializes on the level of practice.16

As such, the exilic wanderer that Walid had enacted becomes redundant and ceases to be useful to the Palestinian cause. Following the stormy meeting with his son, Walid realizes that both his paternal authority and intellectual legitimacy have been severely damaged and that not only is he ineffective as a Palestinian intellectual, but he is also incompetent as a father. Walid realizes that he is incapable of conceiving (takwīn) the promised transition to the all-encompassing revolution that he has professed. In this moment of self-doubt, the fida’i, the rebellious son of the Palestinian exilic intellectual, emerges from the Palestinian refugee camp and revives the concept of the refugee that Jabra had rejected earlier in his career. The power of the fida’i is thus commensurate with his ability to expose the discursive shortcomings of his Palestinian other, the exilic intellectual. As the Palestinian exilic intellectual subsides and the freedom fighter emerges, Jabra’s understanding of iltizām materializes.

The Fashioning of iltizām

The disappearance of the intellectual and the emergence of the fida’i in Walid Masoud reveal Jabra’s nuanced conception not only of Palestinian displacement, but also of the role of the intellectual and literature of commitment. Jabra’s critics and peers saw in the fida’i of Walid Masoud Jabra’s long awaited embrace of revolutionary rhetoric. Whereas Barakat in-
terpreted Walid Masoud as a turning point in Jabra’s trajectory, Munif was delighted that Jabra had “at last thrust (his) hand into the fire of revolution” (Elgibali and Harlow 54), for it signaled that he had finally realized the importance of twining the literary to the political imperatives of his time. The welcoming of Jabra to the prolific and established community of writers of iltizām implied two critical points: First, that Jabra had not been a politically committed writer; second that Walid Masoud easily fits the common understanding of iltizām. Points to which Jabra responded:

   And as for my having thrust my hand decisively into the fire of revolution, this may be due to our having become, one and all, a part of this fire, a fire which we want to continue burning in the Arab mind. […] And perhaps the highest aim to which a novelist can aspire is to ignite this flame—this revolutionary fire which becomes a kind of immanence in man’s life. (ibid.)

Although he does not deny the revolutionary undertones of Walid Masoud and the need for an alternative and more radical mode of engagement in literature, Jabra articulates an ambivalent position toward the so-called “revolutionary fire.” By being “part of the fire,” Jabra acknowledges the revolution’s appeal, but also its power to set him and his generation of dreaming humanists on fire should they insist on remaining withdrawn from the demands of all that is urgent and real. In that sense, Walid Masoud, as Johnson argues, was indeed a novel of recognition, in which Jabra and his alter ego Walid identified and reconstructed the very moment they began experiencing the fallibility of their word-centered episteme. But Jabra’s response is not without paradox. Commenting on the discursive rupture that critics saw in this novel, Jabra downplayed the importance of this shift and argued that Walid Masoud is, in fact, part of his continuous project of questioning and exploring revolutionary modes of writing:

   Even if a given work of art seems a turning point in the thought and style of its author, it is in fact (once its implications and recesses are probed) part of an ascending line, which can be traced back to his starting point. (55)

Despite Jabra’s paradoxical interpretation of the significance of Walid Masoud and his ambivalence toward the concept of “revolution”—and by extension “commitment”—one could delineate his complex understanding of iltizām. In an essay entitled “The Rebels, the Committed, and the Others” (1980) Jabra returns to the pressing question: What is a committed writer? iltizām, he notes, had become the means for those living in exile, in the sense of exclusion and marginality, to break their intellectual isolation and rejoin their social and political community, or what Jabra derisively calls “the tribe” (195). Hence, the “committed” writers are for Jabra neither the Saidian secular critics nor the militant fida’is. They are the sellouts, the apologists, the partisans, and the regime sympathizers who fail to continuously engage in self-reflexive modes of writing. Jabra understands the “committed” writers in contrast to the “rebels” who entwine their sound critical sensibilities to an overarching concept of justice, creativity, and a disposition toward continuous opposition and dissent. Rebellion for Jabra entails “a moral and philosophical attitude adopted by an individual who aspires to effect a change in the lives of men as individuals” (ibid.). But this change cannot be organized, controlled, and dictated by a power or authority such as regimes, political parties, and institutions. It needs to continue to disrupt the hegemony of the dominant group. Thus, unlike the “committed” writer, the “rebel” for Jabra should preserve his individualism and stay “an undigested element: his concern remains with individual dignity and freedom whenever threatened, regardless of the source of such a threat” (196).
As such, the opposing poles of committed versus rebellious writers frame Jabra’s conception of itlizām. If itlizām, as it gradually grew to be, strictly conveys a close adherence to Arab nationalism and social realism, then before Walid Masoud Jabra had been a self-proclaimed “wanderer” and as Munif and Barakat saw him, “a dreamer.” However, if itlizām preserves the writer’s individualism and favors social emancipation and a commitment to society, then Jabra was right in claiming that he had already been at the forefront of the politically committed writers the moment he became an exile. Walid Masoud reveals how Jabra’s understanding of the role of the writer had come a long way: From his Palestinian exile, to his position in the Iraqi cultural vanguard, and all the way to the Lebanese refugee camps—Jabra’s itlizām was thus an intricate affair that involved the various ways he saw himself as a writer, the ways his critics saw him, and the transformation of the concept of itlizām, following the ideological fashions of Jabra’s time.

Notes
1 Taha Hussein (Tāhā Ḥusayn) was the first to coin the expression itlizām al-adab in a review of the debate on littérature engagée that appeared in Jean–Paul Sartre’s Les Temps Modernes. See Verena Klemm’s discussion of the etymology of the term in Klemm, “Different Notions.”
3 Verena Klemm discusses in detail the significance of al-Ādāb in the debate on political commitment (51–53).
4 Among them are Raif Khuri, Husayn Muruwwa (Ḥūsayn Murūwāḥ), Salama Musa (Ṣālāma Mūsā), Mahmoud Amin al-ʿAlīm (Māḥmūd Aṃīn al-ʿĀlīm), Muhammad Mandur (Muḥammad Mandūr), and Rajaʾ al-Naqqash (Rajāʾ al-Naqqāsh) (Klemm 54).
5 Although Jabra’s autobiographical essay appeared in 1979, or a year after the publication of In Search of Walid Masoud, its narrative time is set in the late 1940s and 1950s.
6 Jabra interestingly ties the notion of wandering to the Jewish experience of displacement: “Way back in 1952 I wrote about the Wandering Palestinian having replaced the Wandering Jew. A historical horror, which over the centuries had acquired the force of a myth, seemed after 1948 to come alive again. It was ironical that the new wanderers should be driven into the wilderness by the old wanderers themselves” (“Palestinian Exile” 77).
7 Not only was the nomination of the Free Verse Movement controversial, there were also different interpretations of the scope of its intellectual and poetic project. Whereas Nazik al-Malaʿika (Nāzīk al-Malāʾika) believed in the necessity of drawing on Arabic poetic classical tradition, Jabra called for a break with traditions and an embrace of contemporary western poetic trends. See al-Tami, Ahmad. “Arabic ‘Free Verse’: The Problem of Terminology.” Journal of Arabic Literature 24.2 (1993): 185–98. Print.
9 All translations from Al-qalaq wa-tamjīd al-hayāt and Lawʾat al-ghiyāb are my own.
10 Barāzīliyya café was a meeting point for college students, intellectuals, poets, and writers. The golden age of the café was during the 1950s when artists and writers such as Jabra presented some of their most creative works there. See ʿAzzāwī (197–204) for a brief survey of the most influential literary cafés in Baghdad.
11 All quotes from In Search of Walid Masoud are from Roger Allen’s and Adnan Haydar’s English translation. Specific Arabic key terms are from the original Arabic text.


See Samira Aghacy’s close analysis on the trope of masculinity, defeat, and the portrait of the intellectual in her analysis of *Walid Masoud* (59–68).

The interview with Jabra was originally conducted by Najman Yasin. It first appeared in Arabic in *al-Jāmiʿa* VIII: 4 (December, 1978) and was subsequently translated by Alaa Elgibali and Barbara Harlow.

Jabra is unequivocal about this kind of politically committed authors: “At best, nowadays, writers may be given directors’ appointments in the Ministry of Culture and Guidance or editorial posts on nationalized newspapers. Or they are adopted by political parties. Unless they have prodigious talent and originality, they soon become the apologists of prescribed policies and shifting ideologies. They become ‘committed’” ("The Rebels" 195).

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**Works Cited**


