

The Third Identity: An Interview with Tareq Abu Kwaik



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by: An Interview with Tareq Abu Kwaik
An Interview by George Potter

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Before touring internationally with the band [47 Soul](#), Tareq Abu Kwaik worked at the heart of Amman's new music scene, performing hip hop under the name [El Far3i](#), rock with his previous band [El Morabba3](#), and a fusion of mijwiz, reggae, soul, and hip hop with the collective 47 Soul, whose name reflects the members' roots in the Palestinian diaspora. In February of 2014, Abu Kwaik and I spoke in front of a research methods class for Earlham College's study abroad program about topics ranging from musical traditions to cultural tensions and identity in the Middle East to the future of Jordan. The conversation below has been edited for clarity and style.

GP: In your song [Fitna](#), you talk about how there's a war on ideas. Is there any topic that you're concerned to discuss, that you're worried you can't get to?

TAK: When I say there's a *harb 'ala al-ifkaar*, which means like, "war on ideas," I don't necessarily

mean like a censorship kind of thing... When I wrote it, I was just kind of surprised that people do discuss the Sunni-Shi'a type conflict, that I don't recall even thinking about that ever growing up. Not because I was young and not exposed, because literally it wasn't apparent in the nineties, at least being in Amman. So it wasn't bumped up the way it became in the media after the war in Iraq. So I mean, it's there... It's like a little fire, and you pour some highly flammable thing on it... And I wrote it when I was in the States, in fact, and there was a big thing going on between Fatah and Hamas then. That was recent too. There's always been, of course, these two different parties, but I never knew that Fatah and Hamas would take it to that point. So that was happening. And, in front of me, there was a lot of students from Saudi Arabia who, I would notice that they do talk about the whole Sunni-Shi'a thing, and they're both from both sides, so I just felt this is new... so I wrote it.

So it's more saying that the hate and sectarianism that you feed on, they don't necessarily come only from your background and what you're told at home. Your parents might be racist, but that doesn't make you all the way this, unless you actually feed off of different things inside, if you don't notice and you can't help that and live by it, things like media and your parents and whatever.

GP: How do you feel your background, family, being in Amman, Palestinian-Jordanian, either gives you ideas or limits your ideas?

TAK: It gives me a lot of ideas. My parents are really pretty cool, especially my father. I look up to him. He's very rational. Speaking of family and ideas, I'll tell you something, my family in Jenin, before my uncle was assassinated, they weren't as superstitious Islamic as they are now. It's crazy. Now the entire thing is like, "Ah, the Prophet said that—" and they bring up a story from the Prophet that I've never heard. Things that you would see on these small little TV channels that feed people who are under the struggle of a lot of propaganda. Things just you wanna feed off, rather than think logically. And it wasn't this way before. Even in Jordan too. Right now, you might find more, it's not liberal, but more openness, a more exposed way, and you would find more of the extreme, hardcore dogma religion. But before, these were closer to each other. I think there is a war on ideas, yes I do. All these ideas get fed.

GP: Do you feel like the middle is disappearing here?

TAK: Oh yeah. But I think that the whole idea of alternative culture and alternative Arabic music is that search for identity, so this is what it is. Yeah, definitely. I think what we're trying to do in music right now, and similar artists, not only in music, but in different things, but that also goes for like bloggers and some new tech people. All that. Is searching for that third identity, even a fourth one. It's not like imported liberalism, and it's not imported extreme religion, but it's not like middle, pan-Arabist, Gamal Abdel Nasser-type thing, which was also kind of strained, but that's complicated. In general, it's a search for an identity.

GP: Do you think part of that is specifically Jordanian? I know you spend a lot of time with artists from '48 and '67 and Lebanon and Egypt? Do you feel like it happens differently here?

TAK: I feel like it's an Arab thing for sure. I'm really sure about that. Everybody that I meet anywhere, even North Africa, other really far away places, like Yemen, you would meet someone who will talk about this. People are aware of the two extremes because they can see it in their daily lives. When you see your cousins when they're young—I don't wanna use the word "normal" a lot because what's

normal—when you see them as, you can relate to them, then you grow up, and you can see these same two cousins. One of them is extremely open to everything, but you feel like they're not really digesting all these ideas that they're getting into, and they're just like looking for something new because they hate where they're from. And then you'll see the other extreme of people becoming extremely religious and extremely extreme about Arabic ideas—I don't know if they're Arab ideas. And I'm pretty sure that people see that around the world. I'm pretty sure that everyone has cousins, people they know in their lives, that they would go on these two extremes.

GP: I talked to a film producer once about filmmaking here who said they don't have script approval anymore because everyone knows what they can't say anyway, so the government doesn't worry about it.

TAK: Wow...yeah. Actually, that's kind of true, literally. That's true in Jordan. Say whatever you want. Just don't say it this way. And, honestly, I don't feel like it's a big problem because I'm not interested in that part. I've said it, and I will continue to say it. I mean, the government, I can criticize it as much as I want. And people know. Whatever you can't say, people know it. People who are with it or against it, they know it, so there's no point of saying it. There's a bigger elephant in the room.



47 Soul members

GP: So you think the issue is more engaging the ideas, rather than specific people or specific governments?

TAK: Oh yeah, definitely. And also, when you write something, you want to write it so that, if someone in the Philippines or someone in Argentina or Nebraska can feel it, if they understand the lyrics. So you

don't want to bring up anything too specific, but sometimes you want to bring up city names and all that to make them a symbol for the real idea. But that's also different if someone is writing hip-hop verses, because, in hip-hop, you wanna play with words, and sometimes it's funny to bring up someone's name, but I won't make a song when I make it about someone.

GP: You have a song, [Ya Zein](#), about depleted uranium that has become a dance song at your concerts.

TAK: Yeah, man, some people really hated it when we did that the first time.

GP: It's the closer now, right?

TAK: It's the closer. We start the dance part after the song is sort of done, so we kind of use it to go all over the place. It's kind of sick. But I just feel that—I don't know why; I wanna do—The solo is like depleted uranium falling on people. This is how we think of it. And then we just think that, yeah, well, dance it off. Can't do anything about it, just dance it off. I don't know if it's healthy to do that.

GP: I write in English, a lot for Americans. I teach Americans. You have a [song](#) about Americans in Jordan, and Europeans and so forth. Talk to me about that.

TAK: I think it's about Orientalists in general. It's not necessarily where they're from. And, by the way, I'm writing a song called, *Ishtaraak Dakhley* [Internal Orientalism], which I will play this Thursday, which is kind of the opposite. We'll talk about that.

The song talks about people didn't know why there are a lot of people in Jordan from different places. And there's nothing wrong with that, but you want the people to understand what it is. And I think a lot of people come here to understand this part of the world. At the end of the day, in this area of the world, there's occupation. There's an obvious conflict with—I don't wanna say—we live in postmodern times, so you can't really call things West. But if you wanna really get real into, the U.S. occupied Iraq. The U.S. is the biggest supporter of Israel, which occupies this area. And you never know who's an activist, who's someone who's just studying Arabic because they like the language, who's a potential CIA agent, who's being paid. I've had people tell me from Europe that you can give information and get paid, your university fund, if you wanna give like an exchange program. It's not a huge conspiracy. It's what countries do. So the song talks about, a kind of back and forth, every kind of person from whatever place, not in Jordan, 'cause it's a conversation between me and a Lebanese guy. It ends with my people are thinking that all these international companies are here to improve our life conditions, and people have the idea of Jordan becoming like Dubai. So it ends when we don't have water and we don't have a lot of resources, so get out of this weird, Gulf dream.

GP: You've got the tower [part of a construction project in central Amman].

TAK: Exactly. We've got the towers that are never done. And you've got the Hariri's project, which is never going to be done. It's just a bunch of people in the government, corrupt people, feeding off all these fake projects, getting the money and running away. That's literally what it is. Even though I like for my city to be diverse, it's just nice to understand why, if everyone is getting an opportunity in here, when you see that the people's life condition is not becoming better, you would feel like there is something

wrong. And that doesn't come from an idea of someone taking his job. It's not about that. It's more like, "What's the plan? Where are we at from all that?"

GP: So *Ishtaraak Dakhley*?

Ishtaraak Dakhley is about how we, as Arabs, view our things. I sort of criticize the BDS movement with it, even though I'm with it. I just don't like when people make rules and they become fascist about it. *Ishtaraak Dakhley* talks about our behaviors and how we try to look at ourselves from a Western perspective.

A lot of times, people will tell you, "Well Roger Waters boycotted Israel. How come you wanna go play there?" Stuff like that. And it's a totally different scenario when you are going to go play for Palestinians, and you are Palestinian. You wanna use that gap in the system where you actually get a visa. Whatever. When you talk about things that might end your career, these are the kind of issues.

If people get it, it's hard to be certain of where you stand from this, but I just don't like how a Western activist view on a struggle from here is different from you being from here. There's no difference in the energy or the ultimate goal, but you can't do that to yourself, to your struggle, you can't package it in a way that...unless you're communicating to a Western audience. But if you want to communicate to your people, you have to actually [use] their way or create that new way. And that's the problem, there is no way. There's only one way to do it.

GP: At the same time, you would never play a gig with an Israeli, right?

TAK: I would never do that because this is my only weapon, to boycott. And the reason is because I can't show there is coexistence when there isn't coexistence. Just think of that, every day there are people inside the circle of Israel being kicked out of their homes. Inside. I'm not even talking about taking land and settlements...colonies. When that's happening, and I know I am playing with an Israeli, I am showing that there is coexistence to the people of the world. And I'm sure that every Israeli person who is against the system fully understands what I am talking about when it comes to this because the Wall and media is much stronger. When I see Israelis outside, when I'm traveling, I try to talk to them a little more. I wanna see how you think and all that. But then you can't expect everyone to rip their passport and be against their system. So, yeah, these are rough ones. These are really hard things to explain.

GP: In a lot of your music there's this critique of imperialism, and there's also a lot of influence from Western styles of music.

TAK: I think my music is more about that contradiction because it's all about I hate the fact that's all I know, and I want to make it more my thing. It's like instead of playing *oud*, I play guitar, but I wanna make it *oud*. I hate the argument too because I believe the guitar is the ancestor of the *oud*. Everything is universal. There are so many answers to this question. Everything is for everyone. Music is for everyone. It's not globalization when everything you find in the shop is just an American or British product. If you can find music from Sri Lanka when you go to the music shop and everywhere else in the world plus that, then maybe that's globalization. So that's the difference between that and imperialism.

GP: You used the word “globalization.” One of the things that I think is interesting about your generation of artists here is that you guys sought out these influences. You weren’t somewhere where tons of mass American music and media was just dumped on you.

TAK: Studio Firas was a weird place. It’s closed right now in Jebel Hussein. You walk in, and on your left is all *khaleji* music from the Gulf, and on your right is all Egyptian music. But when you reach the end, they have a section, a big wall, and they draw on it, and it has all the really underground pop music. And you would buy all sorts of things that you won’t find [anywhere else]. So you had to be a searcher for these things. My generation definitely was the generation that looked for this, and it wasn’t all over the place. It wasn’t a trend to do that.

GP: How do you think satellite and radio and Internet are going to change this? I talk to young Jordanians now, and it’s like, “Who’s your favorite singer?” “Katy Perry.”

TAK: Yeah, yeah, they changed a lot, of course. Right now, you watch Fox Movies and MBC 2, so you watch the latest movies right now. Everything became Americanized, but you’re not really getting all the values of what is it, what really is the United States or the American people. Then, probably, for everyone in the world it would just be like this is a bad version of everything.

GP: You drop a line about “friends with benefits” in English in one of your [songs](#).

TAK: Exactly. That’s a perfect example. That’s a mockery of how, it’s a phrase that no one would even think about translating it. It’s just like, if people are talking, they would use that word in English. And, also, this language thing, war, is a beast. You fall into it. When I first came back from the States, maybe because I was too excited that I was away for a long time and a lot of things happening, and I was more aggressive about my music and how I deal with things, and I would refuse to talk to any of my friends in English. And I would be like, “Why are you talking to me in English, man? Why are you talking to me in English? Let’s talk in Arabic. Why did you say this word?” And now, it’s sucked me in again. I can’t control it. Not that I can’t control it, but it becomes, everybody is talking this way, so, you know... You go out in Amman, West Amman, that is what would end up happening to you.

GP: I talk to people here, and they hear about musical [trends](#) in the U.S. before I do. That probably says as much about me as it does about them. What do you think is going to happen with the music? Your generation was taking that and searching it out and combining it with things here. Where do you think things are going?

TAK: I think that, with pop music in the Arab world, it’s going really bad. When I listen to what used to be done in the nineties right now, which, at that point, we used to think it’s bad because we compared it to *tarab* [traditional Arabic music] and the eighties and all that, right now, I think it’s awesome, what they used to do in the nineties. When you hear what they used to do in the nineties, they have five- or six-minute songs. They actually do have more than three scales, and they have the *shaat al-maqam* come in. It’s one of the Arabic modes, which are seven. And you’d know that this is really Arabic. But, maybe, it was new for the electronic sounds, so the drums and the basses, the sound was bad.

Now that there’s a lot of alternative, people who came from rock music and all that, my generation, of alternative, they have the know-how of how to make more of a fat bass sound and drums and music that

bumps more for the kids who got used to that. But, also, they run away from this, and they move more toward the *shaat al-maqam*. So, right now, we have people playing Arabic scales on the guitar. I'm not talking about just playing an easy Arabic sounding mode. I'm talking about specific things that make it sound really, really Arabic. So if pop music is running away from using the *shaat al-maqam* and the alternative is running to it, then, soon enough, the regular Arabic ear of the people, the regular person who likes this kind of music, would feel that alternative is more Arabic than pop.

So if El Morabba3 would sound more Arabic than [Elissa](#), which will happen soon, then we would become the mainstream, hopefully, and it would be better. Not "we" as the band, but our generation, and I think this direction could be going there. Someone like [Tamer Abu Ghazaleh](#), his music is really, really Arabic, but it's also really, really crazy, rockish, youthful. But, also, it's very complicated. He's using seven hundred scales, and he's a really good singer and all that. So when he keeps simplifying, he's going to reach a formula where this becomes pop because it's good, and you can't not appreciate it. It would be hard to compare that to a [Tamer Hosny](#) song. I'm sure that the masses like that. It's just that they're not exposed to it.

GP: Do you feel like music has changed since 2011?

TAK: I feel like it's just larger numbers of people involved. That's good. More listenership. More bands coming out. And that's good. Because you have to go through the filtration. It used to be like, "Oh wow, you're doing some hip hop." Right now, it's like, "Oh please you don't tell me you are. Just please don't tell me that." And I don't want to hear anything that would make me feel like you haven't done your homework and listened to everyone else. At least surprise me.

GP: A lot of people are leaving Jordan or are trying to leave. What do you see as the political and artistic future here and your future here?

TAK: Honestly, as sad as it is, I don't think that there's any future for Jordan. I just don't see it. I've tried to see it. And I sang a lot for it. I kind of still sing for it, sing for the hope of it. But I just don't see it.

GP: In what context do you mean that: politically, economically, artistically?

TAK: They're all connected. I don't think anyone in this country cares, not because like, "Oh, we don't care." No, it's just everybody knows what the function of the country is. You wanna try to build? I mean, what do you wanna build? An empire called Jordan? You can't do that. You're not allowed to, literally. And if you grow in it as a citizen, also, that fact makes it not healthy for you. I don't know. I just don't see it. I can't see it.

I see like Monsanto, who owns the corn seed, literally, the biggest monopoly in the world opening in the airport road. I see like Ikea and more corporations. I just see it as like a military base with a bunch of entertainment for militaries from around the world, whether it be U.S., NATO, I don't know. I see it this way. And the people are seen as servants for that. So I don't see any future for Jordan, no.

GP: So are you going to stay?

TAK: Sometimes I feel like, you know what, we're meant to be here to say these things.

G.P. Because your music is here.

TAK: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, but then again, you know, you get all this feedback, you meet a lot of people who left and tell you like, "Man, it's great what you say," and it's like, "Man, every time I'm sitting in I don't know where, I'm listening to your music, and I miss Amman." And you feel like, "That's great, man. It's awesome. That's what I wanted to do. You didn't force me to do it. I did it." But then again, do you just wanna be that. It's a rough one. That's a rough question.

[47 Soul](#), that's kind of a direction where you can do everything local and everything international and make music that everyone gets. It's in English and in Arabic.

GP: That pushes you to perform bilingually.

TAK: Yeah, I was against that. If you asked me in 2008, I'd be like, "No."

It used to be that I felt that everybody is singing [covers](#) in English, and nobody is doing anything with an Ammani accent in Arabic and talking about anything important, so I had that feeling that we had to come and do this. We did it, and we're still doing it. Now there are tons of people who are doing that. So like, fine. We reached...that's an accomplishment. That's a step. That's what I think about music. That's why I don't like to answer any question in an absolute sense, like, "boom" that's it because you change.

Right now, really what I feel like doing is writing in English like I did fifteen years ago because I feel like, in Arabic, I can say a lot of things. And I've said something, a lot of things, and I want to say more. Fine. But, then, you know what? My ideas are not only in Arabic. And I should be making use of my English language. I shouldn't try to sound too deep or philosophical or funny in English because I won't be good at it, because it's not my first language. But I'm sure that I could get some ideas across and still make music that people can understand. Personally, that will reflect sort of the same ideas that we talk about.

George Potter is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Valparaiso University. Previously, he taught Middle Eastern film, literature, and culture at the Council for International Educational Exchange Study Center in Amman, Jordan, as well as a course on field methods for Earlham College's study abroad program in Jordan. He has published in The British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Arizona Quarterly, The Journal of American Drama and Theatre, and multiple book collections. His current research focuses on economic and social geography in Jordanian film. His directing credits include a production of Jamil Khoury's play Mosque Alert at Valparaiso University.



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