

On the Tracks of Muhammad Sadiq Hadid

Zeina Shahla

I visited the Syrian city of Salamiyah and its countryside, specifically the village of Barri Sharqi, for the first time in May 2023. I must admit that I knew very little about it and its culture—just a few general points and some stereotypes, which are likely shared by those who come from outside the region and have never visited it before. Nor did I anticipate the rich journey that awaited me, one that would extend over several months.

To the east of Salamiyah, about 15 kilometers away on the road leading to the Syrian desert, lies Barri Sharqi. I traveled the route in refreshing spring weather, with golden wheat fields stretching to the horizon on both sides. In the midst of other fields, shepherds with their flocks formed an essential part of the landscape, which, from a distance, appeared like a perfectly composed painting—complete with colors, details, and even sounds.

A large, worn-out iron arch announces the arrival: "Barri Sharqi welcomes you," written in bold letters. The village does not differ much from any other Syrian village—small, simple houses, various shops, dozens of people rushing to their work in the morning, and a comforting quietness enveloping the place. At the beginning of its main road, as I had learned beforehand, stands the house of Muhammad Sadiq Hadid, the "legend," who, along with his father, Sadiq Hadid before him, shaped the identity of folk singing in the entire region. The unique legacy he left behind would also shape my journey, guiding me through the history and stories of folk singing and music in the area, known by the locals as "Salamuni music."

Barri... The Little Legend

The doors of the village houses, in a place with a population of just over ten thousand, do not reveal the discoveries awaiting inside. The first home I entered was both a house and a workshop for making the rababa and mijwiz, owned by the artist Naqid Rahmeh. He had inherited both the craft and the talent from his maternal uncle at the age of ten. His uncle was a folk singer, musician, and traditional instrument maker from the renowned Maghribi family, known for their expertise in this art form.

Now in his forties, Rahmeh is one of the few remaining artisans who still master the traditional craftsmanship of local instruments. He is also a well-known musician and singer in the region. Surrounded by old tools and raw materials—wood, goatskin, reeds, and horsehair from the tails of purebred horses—he generously explained how he crafts these two instruments that are so dear to him. His skill and swiftness in working were striking, as was his deep love for every detail, knowing that each instrument would carry a piece of his soul. His generosity in teaching and explaining is a common trait among the people of Salamiyah; they cherish their knowledge and culture and share it with others without hesitation. Only their hospitality rivals this generosity.

This visit was just the beginning of my relationship with the town, which began to be developed in the mid-19th century. Many Ismaili families settled there, drawn by the fertility of its land,

forming an essential part of its identity and culture. The other part of its identity emerged from its interactions with the nearby desert region.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Barri Sharqi started to transform into a "source of Salamuni folklore." A kind of unique "school" was established there by prominent artists, most notably the singer and rababa player Sadiq Hadid. He, and later his son Muhammad Sadiq Hadid, elevated the rababa to new levels of finesse and mastery in both playing and accompanying singing, particularly in the styles of 'Ataba and Muwaliyya. Their influence even extended to the local dialect, which some began calling the "Hadid dialect." These artists collaborated closely with poets, foremost among them Ali Zeino, whom some refer to as "The Father of 'Ataba." He skillfully and sensitively merged Bedouin dialects with the Salamuni style, creating a unique blend that combined captivating poetic imagery with linguistic complexity.

In this art form, poetry and instrumental performance were never separate. The rababa transformed into a "speaking instrument," while the immense expressive power of words turned them into musical notes in a strange yet harmonious fusion. The singer was often described as "a poet on the rababa," not merely a performer but someone with a deep understanding and profound emotional connection to every word and its meaning. It was not uncommon for them to improvise lines of 'Ataba based on the moment's mood, despite the difficulty of doing so. The structure of these poetic verses, filled with intricate imagery and metaphors, did not allow for easy or spontaneous composition, unlike other musical styles.

Most of these verses carried a melancholic tone, especially when accompanied by the rababa—something that seemed somewhat contradictory to the spirit of humor and lightheartedness I had observed among the people.

This distinctive blend of urban and Bedouin influences is not exclusive to Barri Sharqi; it extends across the entire Salamiyah region, from Jabal al-Balaas in the east to the western towns of Talldara and Kafat. However, what unites it all is its deep connection to the **Hadid family**—a name whose echoes followed me wherever I set foot, in every home and shop I entered.

Many people affirmed that no traditional gathering is complete without listening to **Abu Sadiq's 'Atabas**—whether through old recordings or performances by singers who still keep this style alive. In numerous homes I visited, people took great pride in owning at least one cassette of a rare performance by him. Everyone spoke of his **extraordinary talent** and his ability to sing for hours without pause, captivating his audience—"as if he carried the 'Atabas in a secret pocket, pulling them out one by one." I listened to some of these old recordings, and at times, I imagined myself sitting among the audience in a small room, with the artist before us, his distinctive white headscarf on, as we cheered him between each verse of 'Ataba. The mournful strains of the rababa filled the space, and for a fleeting moment, it felt as though the entire universe had shrunk into that small gathering—a rare moment of stillness and solace.

Others shared stories that felt almost **legendary**—like the performances Hadid gave in Damascus and its countryside, where audiences would block the streets leading to the venue and carry him on their shoulders. People spoke of his kindness, humility, and closeness to

everyone, to the point that some outside Salamiyah could hardly believe that ****Abu Sadiq** was an ordinary man, living part of his life in his village, where anyone could greet him or take a photo with him. ****** One story, recounted by multiple sources, was that he never carried his own rababa to avoid being put on the spot to perform whenever he was recognized. Yet, many claimed to own a rababa that he had played at some point. ******This deep sense of pride surrounding him is truly mesmerizing.

Fortunately, Abu Sadiq's legacy, despite his passing nearly seventeen years ago, lives on through many artists, including his nephew Murhaf Hadid. For years, Murhaf has followed in his uncle's footsteps, masterfully performing a wide repertoire of ****his 'Atabas** and songs while playing the rababa. ****** He even shares many of his uncle's distinctive features. As he told me, Murhaf takes great pride in ****the rich and unique Salamuni musical tradition**, particularly the 'Ataba. ****** He considers it a style that must not be altered or tampered with, saying, ****"Every letter and every breath in it has its place and its own way of being delivered. It's not just about memorizing some words and melodies and performing them without fully understanding the meaning of each word, the placement of every pause, and every musical cue."**

The journey would not have been complete without meeting another pillar of folk singing in Barri Sharqi—one no less significant than the Hadid family: the Maghribi family. Some refer to the family's elder, Abu Khadr Maghribi, as the "Master of 'Ataba." He was known for his strong, beautiful voice, which distinguished him in the region during the same period as the Hadids. Though he passed away years ago, he left behind a new generation of folk artists—his two sons, the singer Hussein and the rababa player Amin.

Through a few low-resolution clips on YouTube, I memorized Abu Khadr's voice and some of his unique 'Ataba verses. When I sat down with Hussein and Amin in their home, I felt, for a moment, as though I had stepped into that tiny shop where their father appears in a ten-minute video, singing one 'Ataba verse after another with pure ease and spontaneity.

Hussein's voice bears a striking resemblance to his father's—he sings with the same power and precision. Perhaps the most remarkable part, however, is the accompaniment of his brother Amin, who plays the rababa with extraordinary sensitivity and mastery. Every time I met them and sat with other musicians, I couldn't help but think that for the people of Barri Sharqi, singing and playing the rababa is as natural and effortless as any daily activity. It is instinctive and spontaneous—'on the spot'—as if 'Atabas could emerge anywhere, at any time, flowing from them as naturally as casual conversation, requiring neither effort nor thought.

Salamiyah... "The Land of Thought and Poverty"

My journey, following the name of Muhammad Sadiq Hadid, eventually led me to Salamiyah, a city uniquely positioned between Hama, the provincial capital, and the desert. It feels like a mesmerizing blend of both—a bridge between urban and Bedouin cultures, or a gateway connecting the two worlds.

Today, this city is home to over 120,000 people. Between every singer, you can find a musician, a poet, or a writer. Locals often describe it as "the land of thought... and poverty," as most rely on simple jobs that provide only modest incomes. However, they take immense pride in their rich cultural and artistic heritage, their commitment to preserving it, and their high levels of

education, with almost no illiteracy among them. Like the rest of the region's people, they are known for their sharp wit and constant sense of humor.

As I entered the city from the west, leaving behind the shadows of Shmemis Castle, it wasn't difficult to find the home of Ayman Kahil, one of the most renowned folk singers in Salamiyah today. A businessman by profession, he had spent years accompanying Abu Sadiq at his performances decades ago, deeply influenced by him. After Abu Sadiq's passing, Kahil couldn't shake the echo of his mentor's words:

"You must learn to play the rababa—'Ataba is a responsibility on your shoulders."

That moment became a turning point for Kahil—he bought a rababa and began learning to play it, drawing on the melodies stored in his memory, the available recordings of Abu Sadiq's performances, and his own natural talent and deep, resonant voice. Today, he takes great pride in the style he performs, mastering 'Ataba and Salamuni Muwaliyya, alongside other traditional songs specific to the city. His dedication to the art extends beyond performance—he focuses on the precise pronunciation, phonetics, and dialect that define the genre, saying:

"Our 'Ataba is an art form—it is words, voice, and performance. And our Muwaliyya is intricate; it demands patience, composure, and a perfect command of the dialect."

While rababa playing is not as widespread in Salamiyah today, its craftsmanship has not faded. It wasn't difficult for me to meet several instrument makers, most notably Nazih Issa, an exceptional luthier and musician, known for his expertise in crafting traditional instruments from his large workshop in the heart of the city.

Nazih Issa, known as "Abu Al-Tayyib," has been in this craft for decades. In the past, rababas were made "the traditional way"—using goat skin, which was buried in the ground for days to dry out and remove excess material before being stretched over the instrument's body. Over time, Issa introduced innovations, developing a rababa with a body resembling that of a violin, producing a distinct sound.

When it comes to the oud, Issa is now one of the most prominent oud makers in the region and across Syria. He even pioneered a unique oud design with a soundboard made of leather.

Beyond instrument making, Issa possesses extraordinary musical talent. Whether playing the Salamuni folk style on the rababa or classical melodies on the oud, his mastery is undeniable. His deep musical knowledge extends to poetry and composition, making him a multi-faceted artist.

It's no surprise that the youth of Salamiyah affectionately call him "The Master." His name is constantly mentioned among musicians in the city, as he has guided and mentored many in music, playing, and singing.

Between Hama and Salamiyah... The "Encyclopedia" of Tall Al Durra

There was no harm in not ending my tour entirely in the city of Salamiyah and heading slightly westward, stopping halfway between Salamiyah and Hama. The area where the town of Tall Al Durra and the surrounding villages are located, with its vast fields of wheat, barley, olive trees, and other crops, gave me the impression, visit after visit, that I could spend hours and days

there, enjoying the tranquility and nature, where everything moves calmly, deliberately, and slowly, in contrast to the bustle just a few kilometers away.

This rare pleasure today was not the only thing that led my steps toward Tal Al Durra, or as its people call it, "Taldurra," named so due to the introduction of corn cultivation in its northern part in the mid-19th century. I had to meet one of its most significant figures, the historian and music researcher Ghassan Qaddour.

In a spacious house filled with details reflecting the spirit of the place and the region, I sat for nearly four hours with the "encyclopedia of Salamuni music." With great ease and calm, he was able to explain to me the essence of his deep understanding and long years of study in the details of Salamuni folklore, whether in terms of its evolution, lyrics, melodies, different styles, and the most important figures who have carried and continue to carry this heritage. I gained a deeper understanding of the region's history through him, learning how the folklore of the Ismailis who settled there in the mid-19th century merged with the Bedouin reality of the surrounding areas in customs and traditions. They preserved their Salamuni dialect while simultaneously developing the ability to understand and absorb the Bedouin language.

The researcher also explained to me about the "Salamuni soirées," whether in weddings or traditional nights held in guest houses locally known as "Al-Manzoul." In these gatherings, poets would compete through songs, where 'Ataba, Nayl, and Sweihli—long, rhythmic singing styles—were performed with the accompaniment of the rababa, along with different types of Muwaliyya such as Muwaliyya Al-Furuqat, Al-Muhawara, and Al-Zumr. All of these are unique to the Salamiyah region, each with a distinctive dialect, generally sung in the Maqams of Saba, Bayati, and Siga. Then, to "liven up the atmosphere," dabke dancing or Zumr playing would follow.

Naturally, we spoke about Muhammad Sadiq Hadid, his rababa, and how his fingers, when playing, seemed to be in direct dialogue with his voice, as well as Barri Sharqi, the birthplace of 'Ataba poets and Salamuni folklore.

For decades, Ghassan Qaddour, who is also a history teacher, has worked on meticulously archiving everything related to the region's music in an extremely organized manner, hoping to be able to publish this archive for public access soon. Recently, as he steps into his eighties with unwavering strength, he has begun forming a musical ensemble dedicated to reviving and preserving Salamiyah's heritage, working with musicians from the region, including oud player Jihad Shtayan and percussionist Ali Jammoul.

A Legacy Facing Extinction

Of the encounters that will never fade from my memory, a brief meeting with the artist Walid Zeino in the city of Salamiyah. He was the grandson of the poet Ali Zeino and the son of the folk artist and nay and mijwiz player Ahmed Zeino. He spoke to me about his rich experience in singing and playing the oud and nay, being considered one of the most important singers in the region and in Syria as a whole, and his time accompanying Muhammad Sadiq Hadid in several performances in Damascus. Many came to know him through his performance of the song "Habbat Huboub Al-Shamal," which he sang in the play "Shaqaiq Al-Numan," written by the late Muhammad Al-Maghout and starring Duraid Lahham.

He also confided in me about some of the disappointment that led him to step away from the artistic field in recent years:

"Today, there is no longer a major role for the singer, their voice, lyrics, and poetic imagery. Instead, the focus is on flavorless instrumental play, especially on the keyboard, and singing without a full understanding of pronunciation, melody, and all the details tied to it."

A large part of the artistic scene, he said, has become as they say "a mindless rush," and for him:

"If I cannot move myself, I cannot move others."

This meant holding on to inherited folklore and the legacy left by great artists like Abu Sadiq and others until the very last moment.

I say "until the very last moment" because Walid Zeino passed away just a few weeks after our meeting. The news saddened me greatly, and at the same time, made me feel the importance of every effort that can be made to document this invaluable heritage and the great individuals who carry it and continue to preserve it.

I did not meet anyone who did not, alongside their passion for music and Salamuni heritage, express their determination to develop this tradition in their own way and, at the same time, pass it on to the younger generations, encouraging them to continue practicing it in whatever way possible. Despite the declining space and attention given to this art on multiple levels, many fear that it is "in the danger zone," at risk of fading and being forgotten unless it is documented, passed down, and preserved.

The picture is not entirely bleak. In Salamiyah and Barri Sharqi, I met many young men and women who are still at the beginning of their artistic journeys, yet heritage holds an important place in their work. Naif Marra, who has a special love for Iraqi singing styles, yet at the same time performs the region's folklore with great precision. Fareeha Khabbaza, who founded the "Salamiyah Heritage Revival Ensemble", with a remarkable determination to teach the heritage of Salamiyah, including the legacy of Muhammad Sadiq Hadid and others, to a new generation that must be relied upon to keep even a fragment of hope alive.

Between the beginning and end of this journey, a lot changed within me, and I learned a great deal. Some of my friends joke that I should now "apply for Salamuni citizenship."

For me, this journey was not just about discovering the culture and music of the region through its people and practitioners—but about discovering a history of richness, generosity, kindness, and warmth that has become increasingly rare to find anywhere else.

The journey of discovery and learning is not over for me yet.