At the time of writing, it has been almost two years that the second intifada started. Relations between Israelis and Palestinians have once again deteriorated. The Oslo process has been proclaimed dead, Israel has moved back into the autonomous territories and the violence is escalating. Daily, the news are filled with reports of suicide bombings, the suffocating Israeli curfew on once autonomous Palestinian towns and villages, the rising death toll on both sides, unspeakable fear. Just recently, a promising attempt at resuming political negotiations was buried in the scrubble of the building block which the Israeli army left after its deadly operation against Hamas leader Salah Shehadeh on the night of 22 July 2002, an operation which killed 14 Palestinian civilians and left some 150 injured. In response, Hamas launched a new series of attacks and exploded a bomb at Hebrew University, killing 7, wounding 85 and adding fuel to the fire of Israeli retaliation. There seems no end in sight. ‘Us’ versus ‘them’ once again rules the rhetoric in the Near East. ‘Israeli’ and ‘Palestinian’ have reemerged as two mutually exclusive categories, a dichotomy, where fear and hatred of the ‘Other’ have turned essential and differences seem unbridgeable.

Yet despite the rhetoric that has come to rule official discourse, the current escalation in Israel and Palestine is not about clashing cultures or civilizations. On the contrary. As this study sets out to show, the seemingly essential difference between Israelis and Palestinians is constructed. And it is constructed through processes that define the exclusivity of Israeli and Palestinian collective identities not through opposition, but through the multiple and complex ways in which these identities are inter-related.

Take dabkeh/debkah as an example of the interconnectedness of Israeli and Palestinian identity constructions. Dabkeh is an Arab dance event that historically formed part of village festivities throughout the Levant. Its performance is easily distinguished from other kinds of Arab dancing. A line of men moves counter-clockwise in a circle to the melody of a single flute and the rhythm of a drum. Their style of moving is forceful, with leg stomping and jumps characterizing the various step patterns that the leader of the line indicates to the
rest. They move in unison, closely linked to one another, with only
the leader every now and then separating from the group to show
off his special skill by improvising in their midst.

Zionist leaders in mandatory Palestine in the 1920s and 30s showed
themselves to be fascinated by dabkeh as performed at Arab wed­
ddings and social gatherings. They cherished what they perceived as
the simplicity and rootedness of the Arab dabkeh as a village dance,
the strength inherent in its movements and the ideals of group sol­
solidarity expressed through the line of bodies moving as one. Search­ing
for cultural practices that would serve to bestow senses of cohesive­
ness and belonging on the Jewish national community emerging at
the time, the Zionist leaders thus turned to dabkeh as a stylistic model
for creating their own, new folk dances. The Arab dabkeh became
an Israeli debkah, a defining element of the newly constituting Israeli
folk dance tradition after 1948 and means of national identification
for Israeli Jewish citizens in the newly founded state.

The Israeli turning of dabkeh into debkah did not go unchallenged.
Also in an Arab context, dabkeh turned into folk dance and national
symbol with the emergence of folklore movements in the surround­
ing Arab countries and, in particular, among Palestinians in the con­
text of reconstituting their nationalist movement after 1967. No more
simply a shared Arab Levantine cultural practice, dabkeh now came
to be performed as specifically Palestinian.1 Distinguished by its specific
songs, movement patterns and style of dress, dabkeh thus turned into
a means of establishing and defending an independent Palestinian
presence vis-à-vis the surrounding Arab states and, in particular, in
relation to Israel.

This study zooms in on dabkeh/debkah as a contested cultural essence
of both Israeli and Palestinian nationalism. Tracing the ways in which
both sides differently staged the same dance form, I show how the
performance of Israeli and Palestinian nationalism is not informed
by an unbridgeable difference of clashing cultures, as nationalist dis­
courses maintain. Rather, I argue that it is various and complex
relationships of unequal power that set the tone for the specific ways
of staging the Palestinian dabkeh, respectively the Israeli debkah within

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1 Processes of turning dabkeh into a national folklore also occurred in Lebanon,
Syria and Jordan. Yet, for the purpose of my study, I solely focus on dabkeh in a
Palestinian context. For debkeh in other national contexts, see for instance (Dharil
1992; Traboulsi 1996; Ladkani 2000). For a dabkeh line dance in Iraq performed
under the name of al-jūbī see (al-Sāmarraʿī 1990).
their different contexts of presentation: It is the ways in which Zionism not only functioned as an emancipatory movement of European Jews, but simultaneously worked to establish new forms of domination between Jewish immigrants/Israelis and the indigenous Palestinian population that shaped the performance of both the Palestinian *dabkeh* and the Israeli *debkah*, not any essentially inherent cultural trait.

In this study, *dabkeh/debkah* performs the nation both in theory and in actual practice. The concept of performance as used here thus carries a double meaning. For one thing, as I elaborate in the first chapter, performance describes a discursive approach to studying nationalism that is derived from current scholarship on performance as permeated by Judith Butler’s critical perspective. Yet, performance as used here not only connotes the ‘theoretical lens’ through which the meanings of *dabkeh/debkah* as a national symbol can be accessed, but also refers to the ‘artistic stage presentations’ as the actual production site of these meanings. This tension between performance as a key concept of discourse theory, on the one hand, and, on the other, as a commonly used term of everyday speech runs through this study and is intended. It is as a result of this tension that theory meets empirical data in this study and the material remains connected to the discursive: As *dabkeh/debkah* performs the nation on stage, it is from within this tension-filled space that cultural meanings emerge, are consolidated and challenged.

So far, this space in between *dabkeh/debkah* performances alluded to here by the slash has not received much attention. Little has been written on *dabkeh/debkah*, especially concerning its meanings as a contemporary stage presentation in both Israel and Palestine. Outside the circle of its practitioners, information on the doing of *dabkeh/debkah* is thus sparse, with little known on its practice leave alone its meanings as a performance site of the nation. Seeking to close this gap, this study presents to the reader the ‘thick description’ of its performance, delving into the material as well as the discursive details of *dabkeh/debkah* as presented by three contemporary dance groups on stage: the Palestinian *El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe*.

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2 It is beyond the scope of this study to delve into a discussion about the ways in which Judith Butler’s concept of performance as used here relates to performance as theorized by scholars such as John L. Austin, Ludwig J. W. Wittgenstein and John R. Searle in the context of psycholinguism, speech act theory and ordinary language philosophy. Considering the surge of attention bestowed on performance in contemporary theoretical discourse, this issue, however, would merit closer investigation.
(Firqat al-funūn al-sha'biyyah al-nilastīniyyah)\(^3\) from Ramallah/al-Bireh, West Bank, the Israeli Jewish folk dance troupe Karmei Makhol from Karmī‘el in the Galilee and the Israeli Arab dabkeh troupe Al-Asayyel (al-aṣā‘īl) from the Galilean village Dayr al-Asad.

Concentrating my analysis on the activities of these three ensembles, I do not mean to suggest that their work is representative of contemporary dabkeh/debkah activities in general. In both Israel and the occupied, respectively the autonomous territories, numerous folk dance groups have performed and continue to perform dabkeh/debkah in ever different and interesting ways during the past two decades. Besides, the performance of dabkeh/debkah throughout the 1980s and 90s was not limited to stage presentations of organized troupes, but continued to take place in various forms and contexts, such as in the traditional social context of Arab weddings as well as in the context of the Israeli Jewish harkadot, that is, weekly gatherings of Israeli folk dancing. Yet at the time of my research, all three ensembles, El-Funoun, Karmei Makhol and Al-Asayyel, counted as prominent dance groups in their respective national contexts and an analysis of their activities well illustrates some of the major issues at play in staging dabkeh/debkah as a contested performance of nationalism in between Israel and Palestine.

Starting out in 1979 as only one among numerous dabkeh troupes that sprouted in the occupied territories in the seventies and eighties, El-Funoun soon emerged as a major driving force behind the institutionalization of Palestinian folklore. Managing to establish its place as a prominent Palestinian cultural institution in the West Bank, the ensemble’s activities demonstrated great stylistic changes throughout the more than twenty years of its existence. Starting out by presenting ‘authentic’ dabkeh, El-Funoun with the early 90s became increasingly oriented towards the international dance scene, seeking new stylistic inspiration from ballet and modern dance.

The Israeli Jewish group Karmei Makhol was founded as an average, low profile Israeli folk dance group in the new Jewish development town Karmi‘el in the Galilee in 1982. Reflecting Karmi‘el’s transition in the eighties from a ‘pioneer’s periphery’ to a bustling center of high tech and tourism, Karmei Makhol was revamped in

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\(^3\) In the following referred to as El-Funoun, a short form commonly used by the dancers and audience of the troupe.
1988 and emerged in the early 90s as one of Israel’s leading folk dance ensembles. Until today, the group continues to stage debkah as one of its trademark choreographies among the mix of ethnic dances that make up its standard repertoire.

In the same year in which Karmi’el’s officials launched the reorganisation of Karnei Makhol, the Israeli Arab dabkeh group Al-Asayyel was founded in Dayr al-Asad, an urbanized Arab ‘village’ just across the street whose olive groves had been expropriated for the establishment of the Jewish settlement. Overcoming initial difficulties, Al-Asayyel during the early 90s succeeded in establishing its position and gaining recognition among Israeli Jewish, Israeli Arab as well as Palestinian audiences. Not straying too far from the conventional, Al-Asayyel throughout the nineties continued to stage choreographies that closely resembled dabkeh as performed in the traditional context of Palestinian village weddings.

My analysis of the activities of these three groups is divided into six chapters. Setting the frame for my analysis, the first chapter discusses issues of theory, method and data acquisition. I outline my theoretical framework for examining the performance of nationalism as a relational process between Israel and Palestine through folk dance. I locate this approach within current theorizing on the nation as well as contemporary research on Israel and Palestine. I address issues of method, showing what my analysis of staged dabkeh/debkah presentations concretely entailed. Finally, I describe how I proceeded in gathering the data for my study.

The second chapter establishes the historic context of staged dabkeh/debkah performances in Israel and Palestine, tracing the relationality of Israeli and Palestinian nationalism through the double invention of the Arab dabkeh as an authentic tradition that performed modern nationhood twice behind the backdrop of an unfolding Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I first show how Zionist cultural leaders in mandatory Palestine during the late 1930s and early 40s used the Arab dabkeh as a stylistic model for the folk dances which they had set out to newly create as a performance of the Sabra, the emancipated, modern Jew in Palestine/Israel. I then turn to the Palestinian context. I investigate how, in opposition to Israeli occupational policies, dabkeh was made into folk dance in the context of the reconstitution of the Palestinian national movement during the late sixties and early seventies, and thus gained new meanings as a performance of modern Palestinianess.
The third, fourth and fifth chapters are each devoted to a detailed analysis of one of the dance groups under investigation in this study. I first explore the performance of Palestinian identity through the work of the dance ensemble El-Funoun. I trace El-Funoun’s artistic activities from the group’s foundation in 1979 until the end of my fieldwork in 1999. I highlight the changes that the group underwent during this time in terms of movement styles on stage and show how, against the background of an ongoing Israeli occupation of the West Bank, these changes continued to occur only within the parameters staked out by Israeli-Palestinian relations.

I then turn to analyzing the performance of contemporary Israeli Jewishness through the work of Karmei Makhol. I show how the foundation, development and artistic activity of this dance group and especially also its performance of dekah were intimately connected to official Israeli strategies of turning ‘hostile’ Arab ‘spaces’ into Israeli Jewish ‘place’ within the context of a large-scale settlement program known as ‘Judaizing the Galilee.’

Examining the performance of contemporary Israeli Arabness through the ensemble Al-Asayyel, the fifth chapter seeks to complicate any simple dichotomy of Israeli Jewish and Palestinian performances of national identity. Operating inside Israel as a non-Jewish Arab dance group that identified with the Palestinian nation and performed for Jewish, Arab and Palestinian audiences alike, Al-Asayyel’s activities were subject to various, often conflicting relationships. Outlining the ways in which these relationships impacted on the ensemble’s work, I show how the group responded by adapting its performance to context, thus improvising identity in between.

Finally, the closing sixth chapter again shortly summarizes how dabkeh/debkah in both Israeli and Palestinian contexts performed relational nationalism in Israel and Palestine.

As a contested performance of nationalism, dabkeh/debkah so far has mostly served to separate, lay claim and defend one’s own presence against the Other. Maybe one day in the not all too distant future, dabkeh/debkah will perform an identity that is not exclusively one or the Other, but can actually be both in a context of just peace.