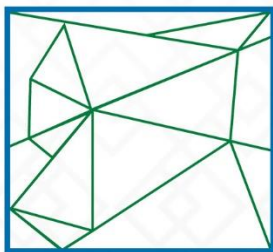


# How Can Folk Cultures Contribute Towards the Vision of a Pluralistic Syria?





## How Can Folk Cultures Contribute Towards the Vision of a Pluralistic Syria?

*STJ reviews musical projects which have attempted to bring different Syrian communities together and mend the country's torn identity*





## Introduction

In mid-2021, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) launched Tanaghum Project in Syria's Latakia province. The project aimed at supporting peace and community cohesion through music. In the context of the project, the Syrian Gardenia Choir staged a concert named "[Syrian folk medley](#)" in which it performed traditional Syrian Arabic songs of different Syrian provinces in their original dialects. In parallel, the Culture and Art Authority of the Autonomous Administration sponsored a project implemented by the Kurdish music academy 'Hunergeha Welat' (The Art Atelier of the Country). The project produced a medley named "[Lost Melodies](#)", which consist of traditional songs in the mother languages of Syria's northeast locals.

The Syrian uprising, which was a part of the so-called "Arab Spring", made an important contribution to the revival of historically marginalized cultures that successive governments tried to [obliterate](#) through discriminative polices. In 2011, Syrians shared national identity was thrown into question.

## Insincere Initiatives Towards Inclusiveness in Syria

Critiquing discrimination against Syrian national, ethnic, and religious minorities has been one of the basic tasks of the Syrian revolutionists since 2011. This has prompted all parties to the conflict to compete in showing interest in minorities' issues. Political parties have endeavored to include representatives of minorities in almost all Syrian crisis-related events, albeit formally most of the time.

Furthermore, in an attempt to prove goodwill towards minorities, pro-State television channels began airing Kurdish and Syriac songs and folk dance performances as well as shows on the Kurdish celebration of Nowruz and the Assyrian-Syriac Akitu Eid.

Syria's successive governments as well as the recent founded opposition political parties, failed to consider the Syrian people's diversity and thus to include effective representatives of minorities in their formations.

While the [political](#) system fell short in promoting the value of diversity, some private civilian cultural projects and civil society initiatives tried to achieve that with the aim to give an image of an inclusive Syria.

Recently, dozens of new private media outlets; radios, newspapers, magazines and websites, began operating in Syria using minority languages. The content of these outlets focused on the cultural values of the different ethnic, religious, and racial components of the Syrian people. However, proving the cultural diversity of Syria was not enough to improve its inclusivity amidst the conflicting political loyalties standing in the way of finding a common national identity.

## Musical Projects Bring Out Syrian Folk Diversity

Syria's media archive has a plethora of projects that reflect the country's cultural diversity. The importance of these works can be measured in terms of showing the real value of this diversity and in demonstrating its feasibility in the country.





In the present report, we review two musical projects that presented traditional songs of different Syrian communities. These projects tried to prove that the presence of different national, ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups within the borders of a country is not only an asset but also a source of social and cultural enrichment and that strengthening the cultural identity of minorities in no way endangers the common national identity.

The first project is a choir named “Syrian folk medley”, which is a part of broader cultural project named Tanaghum Project, sponsored by the UNDP.

The second project is a medley named “Lost Melodies”, produced by the the Kurdish music academy “Hunergeha Welat” (The Art Atelier of the Country), with support from the Culture and Art Authority of the Autonomous Administration.

## The “Syrian Folk Medley”

This medley was a part of the Tanaghum Project, which was carried out with sponsorship from the UNDP in cooperation with Gardenia Choir in Latakia. The Tanaghum Project was entitled “My voice and yours are heard” and it aimed to promote the values of peace and social forgiveness within war-ravaged Syrian society by performing diverse musical works with both artistic and humanitarian goals.

Preparations for the “Syrian folk medley” started by holding separate workshops for talented male and female singers in the provinces of Damascus, Daraa, As Suwayda, Rif-Dimashq, al-Qunaitra, Homs, Hama, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Qamishli, and al-Hasakah. Afterwards, leaders of the project selected several singers for a performance at the Damascus Opera House. As one of the project leaders said, Syria is a rainbow, and the diversity of its communities’ matters.

### STJ’s Evaluation of the “Syrian Folk Medley”

We recognize that the “Syrian folk medley” included traditional songs from all the Syrian provinces, but these songs; however, were all in Arabic. Consequently, the medley reflected only the culture of Syrian Arabs and ignored all other minority components. For example, from the tradition of Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and al-Hasakah provinces the medley contained the songs “Qoum Darijni wa Imshi Qudami”, “Rawah Youma Alhaleeb Rawahi”, “Bein al-Raqqa wa Deir ez-Zor”, and “Yardli Yardli Samra Qataltini”, which are all Arabic. This is even though these provinces have Kurds, Syriac, Armenian, Circassian, and Turkmen, who each have their own cultures and languages. Therefore, we see that the “Syrian folk medley” gave an incomplete picture of Syria’s cultural mosaic, failing to include the diversity which makes up the common national identity. We hope this will be considered in future projects.

## The “Lost Melodies” Medley

The “Lost Melodies” project was produced by the Hunergeha Welat with support from the Culture and Art Authority of the Autonomous Administration. Those who led the project said that the “Lost Melodies” medley represented the cultures of all Syria’s northeastern communities since it contains songs in Armenian, Kurdish, Circassian, Syriac, Arabic, and Turkmen. The medley was filmed as a video clip in which six folk dance groups of different cultures performed Dabke and other traditional dances. The “Lost Melodies” medley project,





according to its leaders, aimed at presenting the common features of different cultures and supporting the brotherhood of people for their common well-being and happy coexistence.

## STJ's Evaluation of the 'Lost Melodies' Medley

The "Lost Melodies" medley contained folkloric songs of Deir ez-Zor, al-Hasakah, and Raqqa in six languages. The songs were performed in a video clip with dances by folk groups of different cultures, including the Yartutha Syriac group, the Albruz Circassian group, the Raqqa and Tabqah for Folk Arts group, the Komina Kovinda Rojava group, the Jiyay Kermenj (Ciyaye Kurmenc), and Sarhad group.

Although the songs in the "Lost Melodies" medley were performed in the mother languages of Syria's minorities, they were limited to the tradition of northeastern Syria's provinces: Deir ez-Zor, al-Hasakah, and Raqqa. Moreover, the video clip of the medley did not show a folk dance group from Deir ez-Zor, which could have shown an aspect of the Euphrates culture different from that presented by the Raqqa and Tabqah group.

## How Syrian Political Parties Played the Greatest Role in Obliterating Diversity?

Nationalism emerged in Syria along with the emergence of ethnic parties, most notably the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. The latter's activity in Damascus led it to decision-making levels and thus to the helm in the early 1960s. The Ba'ath Party contributed to the rise of the Arab national movement, which was met by revolutionary reactions by minorities, including the Kurds, the Syriac, and the Assyrians.

However, the Ba'ath Party managed to Arabize the Syrian identity and to exclude and subjugate the cultures and languages of regional minorities. For instance, the Party prohibited teaching the Kurdish language and showed intolerance of diversity and rejection of manifestations of minorities' cultures in political and public life at all levels.

Successive governments failed to manage Syria's diversity and thus to take advantage of this diversity to enrich Syria's cultural identity. Instead, Syrian governments had a tendency towards unilateralism in all aspects of life in Syria. For example, the governments made Arabic the country's official language and the only one allowed in cultural circles, ignoring the existence of other languages like Kurdish and Syriac, whose use was restricted to churches. Moreover, the governments forced the use of the Damascene dialect of all others in media and official events. Referring to the independent cultures and languages of the Syrian minorities in official media outlets was wholly absent. Never in the history of the official Syrian radio has a Kurdish, Syriac, Turkmen, or Circassian song been broadcasted.

This leads us to conclude that successive Syrian governments never wanted to acknowledge Syria's diversity and thus never made efforts to promote it.

## Historical Background

The location of Syria, which was mapped following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the Sykes-Picot Agreement, is both naturally and ethnically diverse.





Geographically speaking, Syria has coasts, mountains, rivers, valleys, and deserts as well as rich natural resources. As for its people, Syrians are multireligious, multiethnic, and multicultural. In Syria, there are Arabs, Kurds, Syriacs, Assyrians, Armenians, Circassians and Turkmens. Syrians are Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, and Jews, who belong to various sects such as Sunnis, Alawites, Shiites, Ismailis, Murshidis, Druze, Catholic, and Orthodox. However, successive governments never dealt with Syria's human diversity as an aesthetic value and never considered it as an advantage, especially when it comes to the common national identity.

The independence of Syria from the French Mandate was accompanied by the rise of ultra-nationalist thought in the world, exemplified by the Nazi Party in Germany in 1933 and the fascism in Italy in 1922. Moreover, the period saw the rise of Turkish nationalism during the Kemalist period in 1923 and also the rise of Persian nationalism under the rule of the father and son Shah in the early 1920s. This movement affected the Arab world, especially Syria and Iraq where Arab nationalism became dominant and tried to fuse ethnic minorities into its pot.

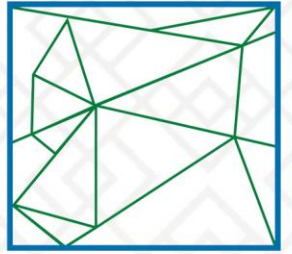
The cultural face of the modern Syrian state did not reflect all the cultures of Syria, which is a natural result of the non-recognition of the Syrian ethnicities and minorities. The one color culture of Syria made the Kurdish, Syriac, Assyrian, Armenian, Circassian and Turkmen cultures absent from theater, cinema and television, which evidences the cultural genocide exercised by Syria's successive governments since the 1950s.

## Conclusion

Managing cultural diversity, in all its complexity, is the key to tackling challenges to minority challenges, which will lead to the creation of a common national identity that maintains the specificity and richness of each component's culture. Reaching the democratic and pluralistic Syria requires the concerted efforts of all stakeholders.

Developing cultural and artistic projects is one of the most important initiatives that contribute to bring cultures together and ensure the integration of all communities. STJ sees that such convergence of cultures will enrich the country in many ways and will over time lead to acceptance and not mere tolerance of differences. We must prove to the world that Syria's diversity is a blessing, not a curse.





## About Us:

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization monitoring human rights violations in Syria. Founded in 2015, STJ has been based in France since 2019.

STJ is an impartial and independent Syrian human rights organization operating across Syria. Our network of field researchers monitor and report human rights violations occurring on the ground in Syria, while our international team of human rights experts, lawyers, and journalists gather evidence, examine emerging patterns of violations, and analyze how violations break domestic Syrian and international law.

We are committed to documenting violations of human rights committed by all parties in the Syrian conflict and elevating the voices of all Syrians victimized by human rights violations, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, class, and/or gender. Our commitment to human rights monitoring is founded on the idea that professional human rights documentation meeting international standards is the first step to uncovering the truth and achieving justice in Syria.



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