

**Singing *Hasta Siempre*, Comandante in Tunisia:
Images of Che Guevara after the Arab Spring**

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As most of you know I've been doing research in Tunisia for many years, but this is the first opportunity I've had to talk about my work within the context of a NEMLA or MLA meeting. The focus of this presentation is a specific aspect of my research, namely the image of Che Guevara within the Tunisian musical landscape; however, I'd like to just take a few minutes to give you a general overview of my research as a whole as a way of setting the stage for the subject discussion. Fundamentally, I am interested in the social function of music festivals and public music making in Tunisia. **[see PowerPoint slide #2, point out location of Tunisia]**

Festivals are an important part of Tunisian public life. Most towns, no matter how small, manage to have an annual festival, and in the capital, Tunis, there is at least one festival a month featuring music, theatre, poetry, film, comedy, or dance. Not only are they an important feature of social life, but festival performances also serve as opportunities for Tunisians to articulate their national, political, religious, and ethnic identities. The focus of my research has been the International Festival of the Sahara, also known as the "Douz Festival." It is the only Tunisian festival that simultaneously celebrates the culture of a town, its environs, and its early inhabitants, namely, the semi-nomadic Marazig people.

It takes place over four consecutive days during late December in Douz, which is a small town in southern Tunisia on the northern edge of the Sahara desert. **[see PowerPoint slides #3 (point out location of Douz) & #4 (typical festival scene)]** Founded in 1913 as the *Day of the Camel* while Tunisia was still a French colony, the Douz Festival is ostensibly the oldest of the country's 311 festivals. The early festivals, held before the start of World War I, were intended to bring together camel enthusiasts from among the French officers, residents of Douz, and nomadic groups from the region. They were one-day events featuring camel

rites and competitions. Despite the fact that no festivals were held for decades during, between, and after the world wars, the residents consider the early festival to be the same event as the current one. The festival resumed in 1967 with a multi-day format that resembles the current event. Beginning in 1981, per the directive of President Habib Bourguiba, the festival adopted an international dimension by inviting participants from other Arab and African countries (Wasallati 2003-2004:33). Although the current festival is held in late December, some of my informants claim that it used to be held in late November to correspond with the start of the date harvesting season. However, others claim it was moved to December to fall within the Christmas break for Western visitors and to make Douz an attractive holiday destination. Sadly, Douz's inadequate tourism infrastructure hinders festival organizers' efforts to make the festival attractive to a significant number of tourists; threats of terrorism now also keep tourists away.

The most important function of the festival appears to be its ability to serve as a forum for the residents of Douz to negotiate and process their identity as Marazig, or "of Douz". The festival is a public ritual that reflects the symbols, beliefs and values of the citizens of Douz. Through a wide variety of performances, it provides an opportunity for the residents to reassess their collective identity and conflicting ideas about what it means to be "of Douz". The demonstration of traditional hunting techniques reflects the Bedouin-like customs of the Marazig in the early twentieth century. Brass band performances evoke images of early twentieth-century colonial Tunisia. Folk dances depict mystical practices and sub-Saharan traditions. Lastly, the instant availability of festival DVDs reminds visitors that Douz is part of the modern world. It is these wide-ranging and sometimes-conflicting representations of Douz that reflect the primary tensions that are negotiated annually through festival performances. I'd like to show a short video to give you a sense of the festival.

[Show video: <https://alankarass.com/hasta-siempre/> (first video on page)].

Over the past ten years, I've spent considerable time in Tunis both before and after my trips to Douz. In Tunis, the musical landscape is very different—it is one that includes traditional and popular Tunisian genres along with the popular music of North America and Western Europe. I've been fortunate to meet many musicians in Tunis, and during a visit in 2009, a friend introduced me to singer-songwriter Yasser Jradi. [see PowerPoint slide #5] Since then, I've been privileged to spend many hours with him in his studio in the old quarter of Tunis, and in his home in the northern suburb of La Goulette. I've also had the opportunity to see him perform dozens of times in a wide variety of settings.

In this paper, I examine Jradi's music and how it is understood as a form of social protest by a particular group of listeners in Tunis. In particular, I focus on Jradi's performance of Carlos Puebla's 1965 classic, *Hasta Siempre, Comandante* (Farewell, Commander). Although this song was originally intended as a tribute to Che Guevara, I suggest that its performance by Jradi has taken on a new meaning in that it is understood as a rallying cry of affluent, politically engaged, liberal Tunisians. Jradi and his songs are associated with the expression of a progressive, pro-democracy, anti-corruption ideology held by wealthy and well-educated Tunisians. Although images of, and references to, Guevara can be found throughout Tunisia, most Tunisians are unaware of the details of his biography and legacy. This phenomenon of using Guevara's imagery without fully understanding its origin is not specific to Tunisia and is exhibited throughout the world. Alvaro Vargas Llosa has suggested that, beyond Guevara's political beliefs and activities, "people ... have recently brandished or invoked Guevara's likeness as a beacon of justice and rebellion against the abuse of power" (Vargas Llosa 2005). It appears that this is the case with Jradi and his audiences in Tunis. *Hasta Siempre* has become an anthem for Tunisians who wish to publicly express their rejection of all things related to the former corrupt and repressive regimes and their desire for the establishment of a more transparent, Western-style democracy. It is a

protest song against the government and policies of pre-revolution Tunisia. Ironically, most Tunisians do not know that Guevara was a staunch opponent of Western capitalist society.

In order to better understand the use of the image of Guevara in Tunisia, I begin with a description of a performance from the summer of 2013 that introduced me to the significance of the image of Guevara there. Just 5 miles north of Tunis, in the affluent northern suburb of Gammarth is *Espace Art Sadika*, a newly renovated art gallery and performance space. The evening of 8 June 2013 marked the opening of “Lights of Tunisia: A Forum for Collective and Contemporary Art”, a festival of contemporary Tunisian music, poetry, and art. Jradi encouraged me to attend, stating that many influential artists, writers, and musicians would be there. I was introduced to many of the artists whose works were installed in the gallery, and was encouraged by Jradi and the gallery’s director to stroll and mingle. After an hour, the director guided people to the rooftop terrace for the evening’s concert, drinks, and dessert. There were performances by well-known poets and singers from throughout Tunisia; Jradi was the featured performer.

I have seen Jradi perform numerous times, and can identify three songs that are staples of his performances: *Dima, Dima* (Always, Always), *Nisma Fi Ighanni* (I Hear Him Singing), and *Hasta Siempre, Comandante* (Farewell, Commander). The crowd demanded that Jradi sing *Hasta Siempre* at every concert I attended, including the one on June 8th, and many enthusiastically sing along in Spanish, despite it not being a widely spoken language in Tunisia. Not only is this song popular with Jradi’s listeners, the **image** of Guevara is found throughout Tunisia. Che’s image can be found on public buildings, articles of clothing, and ashtrays. Books about Guevara are plentiful in Tunis bookstores. Here, I will explore how his message is understood among a specific community of well-informed listeners. First, I will provide some brief background information on Guevara and *Haste Siempre*.

Ernesto Guevara de la Serna was born June 14, 1928 in Rosario, Argentina to a family with leftist leanings. In his early twenties, he travelled extensively through South and Central America, and was profoundly affected by the poverty and social inequalities that he witnessed. He blamed much of the ills of society on capitalism, imperialism, neo-colonialism, and US foreign policy. In the midst of his travels, he graduated from medical school in 1953. The next year, he visited Mexico City where he met Cuban brothers Fidel and Raul Castro, political exiles who were planning to overthrow the Cuba dictator Batista. The Castros recruited help in Mexico; Guevara was one of their most-trusted aides there. After they entered Havana in 1959 and established a Marxist government, Guevara became a Cuban citizen and a prominent figure in the Cuban government. By 1965, Guevara had dropped out of public life and went to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in order to participate in that country's civil war. The next year, he went to Bolivia in order to organize a guerrilla force with the hopes of organizing a revolution there. On October 8, 1967, with help from a CIA informant who had been tracking him, Bolivian Special Forces overtook his group and Guevara was captured. He was killed the next day. According to Fernando Rios, after his death, "[Guevara] became an antiestablishment martyr figure for young people around the world" (Rios 2008:162). As previously discussed, I argue that this is similar to how he is understood in Tunisia—the image of Guevara is used to represent a rejection of the regimes that have been in place since the 1950s. In Tunisia, however, it is not just young people who invoke the image—people of all ages are attracted to the Guevara mystique. We see this in the popularity of *Hasta Siempre*.

Hasta Siempre, Comandante is the tribute to Guevara written by Cuban singer, guitarist, and composer Carlos Puebla in 1965. It was intended as a reply to Che Guevara's farewell letter to Fidel Castro and the Cuban people when Guevara left Cuba (Washbourne 2013:462; Rosenberg 2013:180). Puebla composed the song after Castro publicly released

the letter (Perez 2003:3). Here is the opening of the original version performed by Puebla himself. [Show video: <https://alankarass.com/hasta-siempre/> (second video on page)].

The song exists in many versions including the Cuban revolutionary original as well as rock, Latino pop, jazz, salsa, bolero, reggae and hip-hop adaptations (Rosenberg 2013:180). Not only has the song been popular in Cuba since 1965, it has taken on meaning elsewhere. According to Rios, *Hasta Siempre* was an essential anti-establishment number in France in the late 1960s (Rios 2008:9). In order to understand why *Hasta Siempre* and the image of Guevara resonates so strongly in Tunisia, it is necessary to explore what has been the “establishment” there.

My informants have stated that Tunisia has always maintained a dialogue with both the Arabo-Islamic world and the West. They explained that the Roman, Phoenician, Ottoman, Spanish, and French settlements in, or occupation of, Tunisia have deeply influenced how citizens understand themselves and their relationship to the world. As Lisa Anderson suggests, Tunisia’s connection to these outside settlers is directly related to its national identity (Anderson 1991:254). She asserts that fundamentally the Tunisian people understand themselves as Arabo-Islamic; Arabic is unequivocally the national language and Islam is the dominant religion, even if it is very liberally interpreted (ibid.). However, both Presidents Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had spent time in France and had strong affinities with the West. They both wanted Tunisia to be closely allied with the West, especially France, and many social, economic, and educational policies were based on Western models (Jourchi 1999:116-117; Karass 2014:195-6; also see Perkins 2014). I argue that their administrations are responsible for the pervasive progressive pro-Western sentiment that can still be witnessed throughout the country today. Because of these administrations, Tunisians had favorable opinions of the West and their Arab neighbors; however, they

ultimately they grew bitterly dissatisfied with the rampant corruption in the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes. I will discuss this further momentarily.

Since the 2011 revolution, some Tunisians have expressed a desire for a government based on *sharia* law and a return to a more conservative practice of Islam in the country. However, this is not the position of the majority of the population as demonstrated by the fact that the political party aligned with conservative Islam did not win the most recent elections. Also, since the revolution and the introduction of freedom of speech in Tunisia, increasing numbers of musicians and artists have used music and art to express religious and political messages. A whole genre of Tunisian *chansons engagées*, songs about social and political issues, has developed since the end of the Ben Ali era. Yasser Jradi is undoubtedly the most visible and successful.

Jradi was born in 1970 in Gabes—an industrial seaside city in southern Tunisia. [see **PowerPoint slide #5**] Although he earned a Master's degree in Sculpture from the University of Tunis in 1998, he started receiving attention and awards for his calligraphy in the years following his graduation. His work has been featured at exhibits and galleries in Tunisia, the United States, South Korea, France, Switzerland, Spain, Egypt, and Algeria. [see **PowerPoint slides #6 & #7**]

He explained that, although he started playing guitar and singing while at university, he felt the need to express himself through song in the years before the 2011 Revolution. He stated that the final years of President Ben Ali's tenure were extremely repressive, especially for artists and musicians. Jradi explained that the government censored artists' work and the police often incarcerated them for creating art and music that criticized Ben Ali's administration and the state of the country.

During the revolution, Jradi wrote *Dima, Dima* (Always, Always), a song acknowledging the struggles of the Tunisian people and their love for their country. *Dima*,

Dima became an anthem for post-Ben Ali Tunisia in the months immediately following the revolution and was sung throughout Egypt as well during the revolution there. Although Jradi had been writing politically engaged songs before the revolution, his career as a musician was launched with the popularity of *Dima, Dima*. Along with *Hasta Siempre*, it is a staple of every performance by Jradi.

His songs—including *Dima, Dima*—sound remarkably similar to the Western pop folk song genre popularized by artists such as Bob Dylan, Neil Young, and Joni Mitchell. Indeed, Jradi relayed that during his years at university he listened extensively to Dylan, Young, and Mitchell as well as Woody Guthrie. Although Jradi is familiar with classical and popular Arabic music and traditional Tunisian genres, he stated that he feels the Western singer-songwriter idiom is the most appropriate one for the messages in his songs. Jradi added that the style is popular among young and middle-aged Tunisians; listeners understand that Western folk songs are often associated with political movements and social change. In recent years, his set list has included a folk-inspired rendition of *Hasta Siempre*.

I asked Jradi why *Hasta Siempre* is so popular and why it is consistently on his set list. He explained that Guevara has long been understood as an agent of change for the people. Jradi added that he is seen as a representation of the idea that the people can have a voice, protest unjust government, and rise up against injustice. I asked if Tunisians know his full story—he replied: “no, and they aren’t interested; what is important is the image.”

Many Tunisians have mixed feelings about the regimes of Presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali. On one hand their economic policies supported a stable economic base for decades while social policies allowed for women’s rights and effective education and health care systems. On the other hand, the government was rife with corruption and cronyism, and citizens—especially artists and journalists—were jailed for criticizing the government and its policies. Although Tunisia has technically been a democracy since Bourguiba’s presidency,

up until recently most Tunisians knew they had no voice because it was commonly believed that elections were fixed in order to secure re-election for all incumbents.

Since the 2011 revolution, the protection of free speech has allowed musicians to perform politically charged music in public. Although Tunisians of all ages and backgrounds appreciate Jradi's music, there is a tendency for well-educated, progressively minded, left-leaning, pro-Western Tunisians to gravitate to his concerts, visit his workshop, and learn all of his songs. These individuals have the education, background, and exposure to Western media to understand that, not only does Jradi intend for his music to be the voice of the people, but that the Western pop-folk genre that he uses has meaning. These Tunisians understand that Bob Dylan, Woodie Guthrie, Neil Young, and Joni Mitchell were part of a larger social movement to mobilize others to think about the current state of affairs in the world and act against social injustices. Despite what Guevara truly represents for Jradi's listeners, namely justice and the ability to fight against the abuse of power, *Hasta Siempre* encapsulates a vision of a new Tunisia that is truly democratic and free from corruption; a country liberated from the shackles of repression.

In recent years, Jradi has featured *Hasta Siempre* at events honoring the late Tunisian left-secular opposition leader Chokri Belaid. Belaid was a neighbor and good friend of Jradi who was assassinated outside of his home in 2013. Many Tunisians believe that he was killed by politicians in the interim government, Ben Ali supporters, or members of the Islamist party. There have been countless tributes to Belaid since his death; his assassination is seen as a symbol of the corruption and intolerance that exists in the Tunisian political system. Since his death, Belaid has been memorialized as a hero and the spokesman for the people—thus drawing comparisons to and associating him with Che Guevara. Here is a video of Jradi singing *Hasta Siempre* during a September 2014 concert held by the “Chokri Belaid

Association Against Violence” in Tunis. [Show video: <https://alankarass.com/hasta-siempre/> (fourth video on page)].

As I have mentioned in this paper, although most Tunisians are not familiar with the details of Guevara’s life and legacy, they are attracted to the image of a rebel who could lead others to fix the ills of society. He has come to represent the idea that the “power of the people” has the capacity to overthrow an oppressive government. Just as Guevara is remembered as a hero for the revolution in Cuba, it was the people of Tunisia who see themselves as heroes for inciting a revolution and forcing Ben Ali’s departure from power. *Hasta Siempre* has become an anthem for informed Tunisians who wish to publicly express their rejection of all things related to the former corrupt and repressive regimes. Jradi’s Western folk-inspired version of *Hasta Siempre* resonates with well-educated and well-informed Tunisians who understand that Western folk music has long been associated with protest and social change. For them, it is not only the song and its imagery that is meaningful; it is the performer and the performance as well.

Postlude

This past March, I returned to Tunisia to continue my research on Guevara and Jradi. Not only did Jradi invite me to a concert where he played from his usual set list, including *Hasta Siempre*, but I was also able to talk to Jradi and other informants about Guevara and the song. I would like to share some of the responses that I found interesting.

At the beginning of the trip, I visited with an informant, Marzoug, and his teenage daughter, Souhair, in Douz. I started our conversation by showing them a picture of Guevara. Marzoug identified the photo correctly and added that he was the great revolutionary; he didn’t know anything else about him. Souhair said that Guevara was included in the world history curriculum in school. Although she could not remember any details of his life, she did know that he was a great leader and was a key figure in the Cuban

revolution. Throughout the trip, when I told other informants that Guevara is included in the standard secondary school curriculum, they were shocked. Many people thought that he was strictly understood as a folk hero, and did not know that he is now in textbooks.

M'hamed, a sixty-year old high school principle in Douz suggested that most Tunisians know Guevara as the great Cuban revolutionary. He added that, although they might not know much about his politics or life story, his name and image is well known in Tunisia.

Omar, a twenty-eight year old graduate student in industrial design in Tunis had a very different perspective. He said that the image of Che Guevara, and the popularity of Jradi's rendition of *Hasta Siempre*, is solely about being hip. Omar added that many people do not know who Che was, what he did or what he stands for, but believe that brandishing his image is trendy. Omar—I should add is also a friend of Jradi— stated that people love *Hasta Siempre* because it sounds exotic and Yasser sings it. Omar continued, “People love anything that Yasser sings ... they may not fully understand what his songs mean ... they love him because he is charismatic.”

Several audience members at Yasser's concert commented that, for them, Che continues to represent the idea that ordinary people can rise up against oppressive regimes. For some, his image is a symbol of hope that the momentum behind the 2011 Revolution—a revolution started by ordinary citizens—can continue to root out corruption in the Tunisian government.

Based on numerous conversations and interviews, it became apparent that most Tunisians know who Che Guevara is, and identify him as a revolutionary and great leader even if they do not know what his political ideology was. Like Omar, some see Guevara strictly as a marker of hipness. However, for many of Yasser's regular listeners – educated,

pro-democracy, and pro-West Tunisians—Guevara and *Hasta Siempre* is still the rallying cry for their agenda for the new Tunisia.

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