

TINATIN KAROSANIDZE

FREE UNIVERSITY OF TBILISI  
t.karosanidze@freeuni.edu.ge

## MUSIC AND RELIGION IN ISLAM

### Abstract

A ban on music has become the norm among radical Islamic groups. Music was considered a part of Western ideology, which poses a threat to the Islamic State. Members of the radical group, so-called Islamic State (IS), publicly destroyed musical instruments; the Taliban in Afghanistan banned music, cinema, and television.

Jihadist Islamic groups justify the ban on music with the Islamic “rules”, citing interpretations from certain Islamic sects that support the legitimacy of such prohibitions. The study analyzes the history of music prohibitions in Islam. It also explores the role of music in the Islamic Caliphate and the historical evolution of music bans.

**Keywords:** Music, Islam, Sufism, religion, Nasheed, Jihad.

In 1996, when the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, they ordered the local population to open the cages and release birds. This order seemed unusual at first, although as it became clear, the population of Afghanistan was banned from listening to the birds singing and enjoying them (Shiloah 1997, 143). The Taliban adopted new laws “based” on Islam in Afghanistan, including the banning of music in the country. They shut down radio stations that broadcast musical programs, confiscated musical instruments, and banned forms of cultural expression, such as cinema and television. “Bombs attacked musical shops. Singing and dancing were prohibited, and we stopped attending parties out of fear of Fazlullah’s supporters,” – says an Afghan girl under the pseudonym Nagina, as quoted by Bruneri (Bruneri 2011, 75).

The banning of music also became a standard practice in Jihadist organizations. Members of these groups destroy musical instruments as symbols of Western culture. For example, in 2015, after the capture of Damascus, representatives of the IS publicly burned the piano of Syrian-Palestinian musician Aeham Ahmad<sup>1</sup> in Yarmouk (Dick and Fuhrmann 2020, 303). For them, music represented a part of Western ideology that posed a threat to the Islamic state. However, they introduced alternative forms of music, such as rhythmic singing or *nasheed*<sup>2</sup> – the vocalization of hymns.

Radical Islamic groups based their decisions on interpretations from certain Islamic sects. In Islam, Wahhabism opposes music as *bid'ah* (innovation), viewing it as *haram* (forbidden), since it is believed to lead people toward sin. However, it is important to note that other Islamic sects do not prohibit music. Shi'ism, for instance, also uses music during its rituals, such as *ta'ziyyah*<sup>3</sup> and *Ashura*<sup>4</sup>. Sufism incorporates *sama'* – the listening to music – as part of its rituals. Also, music and dance form parts of Sufi practices (Shiloah 1980, 41; Gribetz 1991, 43). One of the prominent figures of Sufism, Al-Ghazali, categorized people based on how they respond to music: the first group included those who

<sup>1</sup> Aeham Ahmad – a Palestinian musician living in Syria, has played the piano on the streets of Damascus since the war, encouraging the local population. He carried his own piano in public places and streets and organized musical events.

<sup>2</sup> *Nasheed* (pl. *anasheed*) – Arabic word which means hymn or song. *Nasheed* is typically performed a cappella or with limited accompaniment from musical instruments, among which only a few are usually used. *Nasheeds* are mainly religious hymns, performed to praise God or express religious emotions.

<sup>3</sup> *Ta'ziyyah* – the Shiite ritual of mourning, which is dedicated to the martyrdom of the third Imam and the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. It is performed during the first ten days of the month of Muharram during Ashura (Japaridze et al. 1999, 69).

<sup>4</sup> *Ashura* – During the Ashura holiday, members of radical groups such as Hezbollah do not sing *nasheeds* but rather perform those religious songs that are associated with the ritual dedicated to Imam Husayn (Berg 2018, 441).

listened to music merely as physical sound, while the second group consisted of those who listened not just to melody or rhythm, but to music itself (Farmer 1952, 64-65).

The term “music”, which entered the Arabic language from Greek, was introduced into the Islamic Caliphate by Muslim theologians during the 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries, and it was used to denote secular musical genres. As for terms related to music in the Arabic language, the most commonly used were: *ghina*’ (singing), which generally refers to singing accompanied by musical instruments; *sama*’ (listening to music); and *tatrib* (singing) (Nielson 2012, 238).

“Classical Islamic music” has its roots in pre-Islamic Arab music. This period is associated with the development of musical instruments. Various forms of music were developed in the Arabian Peninsula. In Yemen, within the Sabaean Kingdom, musicians enjoyed the Kings’ patronage, which contributed to the flourishing of music. Yemeni musicians were also well-known in the region of Hijaz.

In the pre-Islamic period, poets who were called the poets of *Jahiliyyah* (ignorance) recited their poems aloud. As for singing, this was not considered the domain of poet-intellectuals. Instead, it was entrusted to women with good voices. Women studied to play various musical instruments and performed compositions while adhering to poetic meter. Each composition was easy to perform, and poets would recite *maqamahs* – poems to their accompaniment. This *maqamah* system later formed the foundation of traditional Arabic music during the Islamic period. Alongside these women, *qiyana*t – singing girls – often participated in family celebrations. Every Arab household typically had such a singing girl, which indicated the household’s high social status. The *qiyana*t of that era represented a distinct social class (Shiloah 1997, 147; Nielson 2012, 237; Montgomery 2006). Poets and soothsayers usually performed their poetry and prophecies through singing. Such performances were later prohibited in Islam. Dancing was also banned, which Ibn Taymiyyah referred to as “walking proudly” upon the earth<sup>5</sup> (Farmer, 1952, 61).

In pre-Islamic Arabia, music was often connected to magic or various religious rituals. The city of Mecca was already an important place for pilgrimage at that time. Pagan Arab pilgrims visited the Kaaba temple to worship, which was accompanied by chanting. Arabs in Northern Arabia walked around the sacrificial stone named *Nusub* singing during the ritual. According to Farmer, the form of the song known as *nasb* may be derived from the name of this stone and the ritual associated with it (Farmer 1952, 60).

After the spread of Islam, music was not totally prohibited in the Islamic Caliphate. This is evidenced by the flourishing of music in certain regions of the Umayyad Caliphate. Furthermore, during the Abbasid Caliphate, in the Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad, Greek scientific works were actively translated into the Arabic language. Among these works were also the treatises on music.

There are some problems with using the term “music” in the Islamic world. It is important to mention that it was used to define secular music. As for music in Islam, sources refer to it as *handasat al-sawt* or the art of sound. *Handasat al-sawt* classifies genres of music and divides them into two groups. The first group includes recitation of the Qur’an, religious rituals such as *azan*<sup>6</sup>, *takbir*, and *tasbih*, music performed at the family celebrations, martial music. The second group includes the type of music that is performed in accompaniment with musical instruments. Among these genres, three types of music are distinguished: *halal* (permissible), *makruh* (disliked), and *haram* (forbidden) – permissible and forbidden types of music (Al-Faruqi 1985, 8).

In the history of Islam, numerous and contradictory oral or written sources emerged from the various regions of the Islamic World, the reliability of which is frequently subject to doubt. Therefore, the research uses the universally recognized sources of Islamic law, such as the Quran, Sunnah, and Hadith. Additionally, the research relies on the works of the authoritative scholars from Islamic *mazhabs* – schools of jurisprudence.

During the period of Islam, Muslim theologians wrote several important treatises and research on music. Abu al-Faraj’s *Kitab al-Aghani*, or *The Book of Songs*, represented a significant collection of poems and songs in the Islamic world.

<sup>5</sup> The Taliban treated female dancers very brutally in Afghanistan. In 2009, members of the Taliban tortured and executed the popular dancer, Shabana, because she performed a dance at the wedding ceremony. Her tortured body was left in a Green Square as a warning to other women (Buneri 2011, 79).

<sup>6</sup> In the beginning, *azan* had the only declarative function. The muezzin walked along the streets and called people to prayer. However, chanting *azan* from minarets began early in the Islamic Caliphate.

Also noteworthy is *Kitab al-Musiqa al-Kabir (The Great Book of Music)*, which deals with Islamic music and where Al-Farabi lays the foundation for the tonal Arabic system of music.<sup>7</sup>

The research also relies on the works written by Muslim theologians, who wrote about banning the musical activity, although they did not use the term *haram*; instead, their writings include other terms such as *makruh* and *halal*. Therefore, the works of these theologians became a significant source for using the terms related to music or Islamic law. Muslim jurists also refer to hadiths as another source from which they found the variety of interpretations. They agreed on one principle: audio art (i.e., music) is divided into three categories: legitimate, illegitimate, and disputed (Rashid n.d.). The legitimate category includes *qira'aat*<sup>8</sup> (recitation of the Qur'an, which is also referred to as rhymed prose), *da'wa* (call to prayer) and chanting. Music is considered illegitimate if it leads to alcohol abuse or immoral behavior. The disputed category of audio art includes almost all types of music. As for religious music, it may be part of all three categories and can be legitimate, illegitimate, or disputed.

Muslim theologians (Al-Ghazali), while discussing music, also paid great attention to three factors: time, place, and circumstance during listening to music (Al-Faruqi 1985, 17; Macdonald 1901, 212). Theologians, such as Ibn Taymiyyah, determined whether certain types of music were prohibited or permissible depending on the context. The use of a musical instrument – tambourine – was considered permissible if it was played by a woman during a wedding celebration. Yet men were criticized for using the same instrument (Taymiyyah 1966, II; Al-Faruqi 1985, 19).

In Islam, there is no concrete reference in the Qur'an that directly prohibits music. Nevertheless, some Muslim theologians – especially from Wahhabi or Deobandi sects – cite the Qur'an to justify the prohibition of music. Ibn al-Jawzi, representative of the Hanbali School from Baghdad, referred to three verses from the Qur'an to show that Islam bans singing. However, these verses do not include any term that is directly related to music:

*“And incite whoever you can among them with your voice”* (Qur'an 17:66 (64)).

*“And of the people is he who buys the amusement of speech to mislead [others] from the way of Allah without knowledge and who takes it in ridicule”* (Qur'an 31:5 (6)).

*“While you are proudly sporting?”* (Qur'an 53:61).

Also, hadiths are interpreted in two different ways by theologians who oppose or support music. One such example is the story of Ibn Umar, who, while traveling, happened to hear the sound of a shepherd's pipe. He put his fingers in his ears and did not uncover them until he had moved far away so that he could no longer hear the music. Ibn Umar claimed that the Prophet Muhammad used to do the same when he heard the sound of a shepherd's pipe. Theologians such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Jawzi, who opposed music, used this hadith as evidence that music is prohibited in Islam. However, Al-Ghazali offers a different interpretation, noting that the Prophet Muhammad likely covered his ears because the sound of the pipe distracted him from thinking. If the Prophet had intended to prohibit listening to music altogether, he would have explicitly forbidden Ibn Umar from hearing it (Gribetz 1991, 48).

Modern scholars often reference the view of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who argues that music is only forbidden when it causes a Muslim to inappropriately demeanor – such as engaging in alcohol consumption or illicit sexual activity. For some Muslims, only vocal music is considered lawful, and the use of musical instruments is prohibited. Others accept only percussion instruments and consider all other instruments forbidden.

To use musical instruments was not allowed in Islamic rituals during the prayer. Azan, reciting of the Qur'an, *takbir*, and other rituals were performed without musical instruments in general. Muslim theologians allowed the use of musical instruments just for performing martial music or secular genres of music. Al-Ghazali argued that a certain type of musical instrument, which has a sweet sound like a

<sup>7</sup> The Arabic tonal system is based on dividing the octave into 24 equal parts, where the distance between notes is a quarter tone. Each tone has its own unique name that does not repeat in other octaves. In the European tonal system, the octave is divided into 12 parts.

<sup>8</sup> According to Ibn Qutayba, the first person who recited the Qur'an, was 'Ubaydallah Ibn Abu Bakr, who used *alhan* or melodies during reciting.

nightingale, should be permitted. However, he prohibited all musical instruments associated with alcohol drinking, homosexuality, and other forbidden behaviors.

The Great Imam of Al-Azhar, Mahmud Shaltut<sup>9</sup> issued a *fatwa*, where, among many issues, he addressed the question of whether music is permissible or forbidden (Sakata 1986, 33). He noted that listening to music affects human emotions in the same way as eating delicious food, wearing fine clothes, or enjoying beautiful sights, bringing pleasure to a person. Regarding the prohibition on music, Imam Shaltut pointed out that in hadiths, where music is condemned, it is always accompanied by conditions such as alcohol drinking, singing-girls, and adultery. Therefore, music is not inherently condemned; rather, theologians criticize the environment in which it may be performed (Shaltut 1960, 355-359).

Some Muslim preachers went even further and associated music with the devil. The 12<sup>th</sup>-century preacher and jurist Abu al-Faraj argued that music is a temptation from the devil. Listening or performing music gives the *Iblis* the possibility to dominate the soul and enslave its desires if the soul does not resist (Shiloah 1997, 154).

In the modern era, Western-style music is actively used in the Islamic world. Western songs became the anthem of the “Arab Spring” in the Middle East. In Libya, rebels fighting against Muammar Qaddafi used compositions of Pink Floyd and hip-hop type music in their fight (Pieslak 2015).

It should be noted that *nasheeds* are also widely used in the Islamic world. Berg forms two groups of *nasheed*: Jihadi *nasheeds* and mainstream Islamist *nasheeds*. He notes that the second group of *nasheeds* was often used by the president of Egypt, Gamal Abd al-Nasser, to boost public morale after Egypt’s defeat in the 1967 war. In the 1980s, “Muslim Brotherhood” groups in Egypt and Syria used mainstream Islamist *nasheeds*. As for Jihadi *nasheeds*, Berg cites Hezbollah *nasheeds* as an example (Berg 2018, 432).

Al-Qaeda propagandist and one of the main ideologues, Anwar Al-Awlaki, justified the use of *nasheeds*. He wrote that if, during the Prophet’s time, poets were responsible for inspiring Muslims and demoralizing the enemy through their poetry, in the modern era, the role is fulfilled by *nasheeds*. “*Nasheeds* motivate the young people who are the foundation of Jihad in every age and time” (Al-Awlaki; Behnam 2012, 863-879; Weinrich 2020, 252).

Although radical Jihadist groups officially reject music, they actively use *nasheeds* to recruit new members and spread their ideology. *Nasheeds* filled with Jihad ideology are a successful tool for spreading the culture of those groups. *Nasheeds* are performed to commemorate killed fighters or are dedicated to their mothers. There are moderate and conservative *nasheeds*. The Hamas group distributes pop-music style *nasheeds*, which are sometimes performed by girls and accompanied by musical instruments. Pieslak notes that Hamas uses musical instruments in their *nasheeds* because of the local population’s interest in Western music and culture in Gaza. Taliban *taranas*,<sup>10</sup> on the other hand, rely on Afghan and Pushtun cultural rhythms and sounds to attract new members easily with familiar melodies (Pieslak 2015). Interestingly, Jihadi radical groups try to use Western-style music to attract society in order to spread their anti-Western ideology.

As for Al-Qaeda and the IS, these groups represent the conservative wing in which musical instruments are absent from *nasheeds*. The only potentially permissible instruments are percussion, as throughout the history of Islam, Muslim fighters used these instruments during battle. Also, Al-Qaeda may spread *nasheeds*, the author of which is not a member or supporter of the group. Although the *nasheed* text and mood may be relevant to Al-Qaeda’s ideology.

As it appears, despite the intense debates within Muslim societies about the role of music in Islam, even those who support the prohibition of music often resort to various forms of music to promote their own ideology. In this context, *nasheeds* have proven to be a rare form of music that has been used for centuries in the Islamic world and has gained legitimacy within society.

Thus, the issue of music in Islam does not represent a strictly uniform or universally accepted dogma; rather, it reflects cultural, theological, and social diversity.

<sup>9</sup> Mahmud Shaltut (1893-1963) – Imam of Al-Azhar in Egypt during 1958-1963.

<sup>10</sup> *Tarana* – the term is derived from the Hausa ethnic group in Nigeria and means “Born in the Day”. In the Hindi language, it entered as the term which means music or song. *Tarana* is a genre of classical vocal music in Hindustan, which uses words based on the Arabic and Persian phonemes. The founder of this musical style is Amir Khusrau, who worked during the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the modern era, singer Amir Khan played a key role in popularizing the *tarana*.

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