

## **Female Singers Celebrate Diversity in Damascus**

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A series of concerts by prominent woman singers highlighted the diverse culture influencing the Middle East, with music from North African, Andalusian, Kurdish and Arab cultures floating through Damascus this week.

The Women's Song Days festival, held from May 12 to 16, was a series of free concerts held as part of Damascus's year as Arab Cultural Capital.

The music took audiences back to the days of Muslim rule in Andalusia and celebrated the heritages of Morocco, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Performers included Syrian opera singer Lubana Qintar, and the Moroccan Kareema al-Saqli, whose style is inspired by classic singers such as Um Kulthoom and tinged with Andalusian influences. Her performances drew a constant stream of applause and whistles.

But it was the May 14 performance by famed Iraqi singer Fareeda al-Ali that was the highlight. More than 2,000 people attended the event, including locals, Iraqis living in Syria, and foreign tourists.

Approximately 1.5 million Iraqi refugees live in Syria, mostly in Damascus.

The Iraqi band leader opened by announcing, "Baghdad embraces Damascus – Iraq embraces Syria."

Syrian minister for expatriates Buthaina Shaban attended the concert along with officials and dignitaries from the cultural capital committee.

Ali praised organisers, expressing appreciation for Syria's concern for Iraq and interest in its culture.

"I consider this an honour for us and for Iraq," she said.

Ali gave a moving performance of traditional Iraqi songs expressing her yearning for home. She said the audience was "great and interactive."

She also embraced Iraqi minorities, including Yezidis, Sabeans and Chaldeans, and sang two Kurdish songs that inspired the audience to dance.

"It was nice to find in the heart of Damascus, in front of the Syrian minister of expatriates and a host of Arabs, Fareeda al-Ali singing for Kurds in Syria and Iraq, during a celebration of Damascus as an Arab Cultural Capital," said one Syrian Kurdish writer who attended. "It was something curious for me – Kurdish songs as part of an Arab Cultural Capital celebration in Damascus?"

The festival ends on May 16 with performance by Lebanon’s Jahida Wahbi, a singer, poet and actress praised for her “silken throat” since early in her career.

Wahbi will sing Sufi songs in addition to music from her latest album, “Katabtani” – “You Wrote to Me”.

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

**Location:** Middle East  
Palestine  
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**Focus:** Syria

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