



Semiotic Codes in *Filastīn Bilādī* by Humood Alkhudher: A John Fiske Analysis of Resistance, National Identity, and Ideology

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ABSTRACT

Purpose - This study analyzes semiotic codes in the music video *Filastīn Bilādī* by Humood Alkhudher, examining how visual and lyrical elements construct Palestinian national identity, political resistance, and ideological meaning across multiple layers.

Design/methodology/approach - A qualitative media text analysis grounded in John Fiske's three-level semiotic framework of reality, representation, and ideology. The primary data source is the official music video of *Filastīn Bilādī* by Humood Alkhudher (YouTube channel: Humūd, duration: 3:45, accessed January 2025). Eleven scenes were purposively selected based on four criteria: (1) symbolic density, (2) ideological relevance, (3) multimodal richness, and (4) direct connection to Palestinian identity and resistance. Data were collected through repeated observation, scene capture, lyric transcription, and systematical categorization into three analytical levels.

Findings/results - At the reality level, social codes including the *kūfiyyah*, Palestinian flag, a large key, protest posters, and destroyed urban spaces, encode the Palestinian political and cultural experience. At the representation level, cinematic choices—eye-level angles, bird's-eye views, low-angle shots, back shots, and contrasting lighting—intensify emotional and ideological readings. At the ideology level, the music video frames Palestinian identity as layered and multidimensional, encompassing anti-colonial resistance, collective memory, intergenerational solidarity, and, in specific visual sequences, Islamic faith as one ideological strand among several.

Originality/value - Unlike prior semiotic studies that focused on violence or social emotion in media, this research positions *Filastīn Bilādī* as a multidimensional political text that integrates the national, cultural, and religious dimensions of Palestinian identity. The analysis shows how popular music can function as a medium of symbolic resistance and counter-hegemonic identity construction within a settler-colonial context, contributing to semiotic media and Palestinian cultural studies.

Paper type - Research Article

Keywords: Semiotics; John Fiske; Palestinian identity; Symbolic resistance; Humood Alkhudher.

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1. Introduction

Music does more than entertain. In societies living through prolonged conflict, songs become sites where identity is negotiated, memory is preserved, and resistance takes form without necessarily requiring weapons or barricades. Palestinian musicians have long understood this. Songs that emerge from occupation and displacement carry weight that ordinary speech cannot always bear—they cross borders and languages in ways that political statements rarely manage.

Protest music as a scholarly field has attracted serious attention in recent decades. Alexander and Sugiono (2021) argue that protest songs function as historical documents, encoding social contradictions and political aspirations that formal discourse suppresses. Suryadmaja (2025) extends this to semiotics, showing that words and melodies are structured systems for communicating values, cultural norms, and political meanings—not mere expressions of feeling. In the Palestinian case, popular music occupies an especially contested symbolic space, where art and politics are rarely separable.

One track that has circulated broadly beyond Arab-speaking audiences is *Filastīn Bilādī*, popularized by Humood Alkhudher. The song draws on symbols deeply embedded in Palestinian cultural and political history—the *kūfiyyah*, the key of return, protest imagery, and Qur'ānic allusions—while wrapping them in a contemporary musical aesthetic. The music video intensifies these meanings through deliberate cinematic choices worth examining carefully.

Several recent studies have applied John Fiske's semiotic framework to popular media. Bernicka (2023) used Fiske's three-level coding model to examine violence representation in the *Katarsis* series, demonstrating how technical and ideological codes work together to shape viewer perception. Puspita and Nurhayati (2019) applied the same framework to a *Ramaḍān* advertisement, uncovering gender bias encoded through audiovisual conventions. Suryadmaja (2025) extended Fiske's approach to music video analysis, tracing emotional meaning in the song *Senja Kala Itu*. These studies confirm the framework's analytical power for unpacking ideological layers in media texts.

There is, however, a gap in this literature. None of these studies addresses music as a medium of anti-colonial political resistance, and none specifically engages the Palestinian context. The intersection of Palestinian nationalism, settler colonialism, and symbolic resistance has not been examined through a Fiskean semiotic lens. This study addresses that gap by treating *Filastīn Bilādī* not as a musical artifact but as a multidimensional political text—one that integrates lyrical content, visual representation, and ideological discourse to construct Palestinian identity for a global audience.

Two clarifications are worth making from the outset. First, Palestinian identity as represented in this music video is not reducible to a single ideological strand. It encompasses national, cultural, secular, and religious dimensions—including a Palestinian Christian tradition and a diaspora with diverse political orientations. This study does not claim that the video represents all Palestinians, but examines how one specific popular text constructs and communicates particular layers of that identity. Second, the concept of resistance used here is grounded in the settler-colonial studies framework: Wolfe (2006) argues that settler colonialism

is a structure, not an event, characterized by the ongoing elimination of indigenous presence and the erasure of cultural identity. Resistance, in this framework, is likewise structural and continuous rather than episodic.

Two research questions guide this study:

RQ1: How do the semiotic codes within Filasṭīn Bilādī represent Palestinian national identity and resistance against colonial occupation across the three analytical levels of reality, representation, and ideology?

RQ2: How does the music video function as a medium of symbolic resistance and counter-hegemonic identity construction within a settler-colonial context?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to semiotic media studies, protest music scholarship, and Palestinian cultural studies, while offering a methodological model for future analyses of politically charged audiovisual texts from conflict regions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 John Fiske's Three-Level Semiotic Framework: Decoding Layers of Media Meaning

John Fiske's semiotic model, developed in *Television Culture* (1987), provides a systematic approach to decoding the layers of meaning embedded in media texts. Rather than treating meaning as self-evident, Fiske argues that media texts operate through three interlocking levels of codes, each working on the others to produce ideological meaning.

The first is the reality level, comprising the social codes through which a culture organizes its perception of the world—appearance, dress, gesture, setting, speech, and facial expression. These codes feel natural and obvious even though they are deeply conventional, which is precisely what makes them ideologically effective. The second is the representation level, where technical codes—camera angle, framing, lighting, editing, sound—translate social reality into media language. These technical choices are not neutral: they select, emphasize, and exclude in ways that steer audience interpretation toward particular meanings. The third is the ideology level, where technical and social codes combine to produce coherent worldviews. Fiske (1987) describes these as the overarching concepts that bind cultures together—nationalism, individualism, gender norms, or, in this context, resistance against occupation and colonial domination.

What distinguishes Fiske's model from simpler content-analytic approaches is precisely this emphasis on how meaning is produced through the interaction of levels rather than residing in any single element. A *kūfiyyah* is a social code at the reality level; how it is framed by the camera is a representational code; what it ultimately communicates about Palestinian identity and resistance is an ideological effect. The model is particularly suited to politically charged music videos because it attends simultaneously to raw social material, the media conventions through which that material is rendered, and the broader ideological formations that the combination serves to contest or reproduce.



2.2 Palestinian Identity under Settler Colonialism: Cultural Memory and Symbolic Resistance

Palestinian identity in visual and musical media has been studied from several disciplinary angles. Jaber (2025) demonstrates that national symbols—the map of Palestine, the Palestinian flag, the *kūfiyyah*, and the olive tree—function not merely as decorative elements but as instruments of identity construction and collective memory in Palestinian visual arts, their meanings evolving through major political events from al-Nakbah to the present. Mosheer (2020) extends this claim, showing that Palestinian visual representations consistently encode meanings of nationhood, dignity, and the struggle against occupation.

Understanding what that struggle consists of requires theoretical grounding. Wolfe (2006) establishes that settler colonialism differs from classical colonialism: rather than extracting labor from indigenous populations, it aims to eliminate indigenous presence and replace it with settler society. Veracini (2011) develops this further, arguing that settler colonialism is defined by a logic of transfer—the displacement of indigenous peoples from their land. This framework is directly applicable to the Palestinian experience, where the al-Nakbah of 1948, the ongoing occupation, and repeated displacement have constituted precisely the kind of structural elimination Wolfe describes. Resistance, within this framework, is not merely oppositional but constitutive: it affirms indigenous presence and identity in the face of their systematic denial.

The *kūfiyyah* occupies a particularly rich semiotic position within this context. Abu-Ayyash (2024) documents how the *kūfiyyah* has transformed from practical rural headwear into a globally legible symbol of Palestinian heritage and resistance, a transformation accelerated through the image politics of the twentieth century and digital media in the twenty-first. Zulaihah (2023) notes the *kūfiyyah*'s re-emergence on social media as a solidarity marker for Palestine, confirming its continued semiotic vitality. The large key carries equally specific meaning. Zoghi, Mohd Nor, and Abdul Hamid (2018) trace its emergence as the central symbol of the Palestinian Right of Return, originating in the practice of refugee families keeping the keys to their 1948 homes as proof of ownership and expectation of return.

In music and the arts, Hammoud (2024) argues that Arab art music in Palestine has long served as a site where cultural preservation and political assertion converge, with traditional instruments like the *'ūd* carrying layered meanings of heritage and resistance that cannot be separated. Ben Labidi (2021) situates Palestinian cultural production within a broader media and cinema tradition that transforms personal suffering into collective political narrative—exactly the function this analysis attributes to *Filastīn Bilādī*.

A further theoretical note is necessary regarding Palestinian identity. The music video under analysis draws on Islamic references at specific moments, but Palestinian national identity is not coextensive with Islamic identity. Palestinian society is historically diverse, encompassing Muslims, Christians, and secular nationalists, as well as diaspora communities with varying relationships to religion and national politics. This study reads the Islamic dimensions of *Filastīn Bilādī* as one ideological layer within a broader, multidimensional national identity rather than its defining feature.

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative media text analysis approach grounded in John Fiske's three-level semiotic framework. The primary data source is the official music video of *Filasṭīn Bilādī* by Humood Alkhudher, published on the artist's official YouTube channel (channel name: Ḥumūd; video title: *Filasṭīn Bilādī* Humood Alkhudher; total duration: 3:45; date accessed for analysis: January 2025). Lyrics were transcribed directly from the video with attention to semantic accuracy; Arabic passages were translated into English by the research team.

The selection of eleven scenes for analysis followed four explicit criteria. First, symbolic density: each selected scene contains multiple intersecting signs (objects, gestures, clothing, setting, sound) that interact to produce layered meaning. Second, ideological relevance: each scene contributes directly to the music video's construction of Palestinian identity, resistance, or collective memory. Third, multimodal richness: each scene displays a meaningful combination of visual codes (camera angle, lighting, color, framing) and verbal codes (lyrics). Fourth, direct connection to the research question: each scene encodes readable meanings related to Palestinian national identity and resistance against occupation. Scenes that were visually repetitive, contained no discernible symbolic content, or were transitional in nature were excluded.

The coding process followed Fiske's three-level framework in sequence. At the reality level, social codes were identified: clothing (*kūfiyyah*, civilian attire), gestures (V sign, raised fist, back posture), facial expressions, settings (urban streets, destroyed buildings, public demonstrations), and physical objects (flags, keys, posters). At the representation level, technical codes were examined: camera angle (eye-level, low-angle, aerial, back shot), framing and composition, lighting quality (natural, low-key, diffuse), color palette, and background music including instrumentation and tone. At the ideology level, the analysis examined how the intersection of reality-level and representation-level codes produces or contests broader ideological formations related to nationalism, resistance against occupation, collective memory, intergenerational solidarity, and Islamic faith as one cultural layer.

Data were interpreted descriptively and analytically, drawing on relevant semiotic, cultural studies, and Palestinian studies scholarship to contextualize findings. The analysis prioritizes interpretive depth over comprehensive coverage: rather than cataloguing every visual element, it examines selected scenes in detail to trace how meaning is constructed across Fiske's three levels. As semiotic analysis is inherently interpretive and researcher-dependent, it is acknowledged that audiences with different cultural, political, or religious backgrounds may read these codes differently. This limitation is addressed further in the conclusion.

4. Results and Discussion

The eleven analyzed scenes are organized into four visual clusters. Each cluster is presented first in tabular form summarizing the three analytical levels, then discussed in prose that traces how codes at each level interact to produce meaning.

4.1 Visual Cluster 1 (0:02–0:15): Opening Sequence

Table 1: *Semiotic Analysis of Visuals 1.1–1.4*



Visual	Duration	Reality Level	Representation Level	Ideology Level
1.1	0:02–0:15	Demonstrators in kūfiyyah raise green posters with Arabic text rejecting the Wādī ‘Arabah Agreement; serious facial expressions	Medium close-up shot; overhead natural sunlight highlighting individual faces and poster content	Collective resistance against political normalization perceived as a betrayal of Palestinian liberation
1.2	0:02–0:15	Cityscape filled with large crowds demonstrating mass mobilization	Aerial/bird's-eye view emphasizing scale and collective presence; natural sunlight from above	Palestinian struggle as a collective international issue requiring global solidarity
1.3	0:02–0:15	Large Palestinian flag displayed prominently among crowds	Centered framing reinforces the flag's symbolic centrality; traditional Middle Eastern background music featuring the ‘ūd	Palestinian nationalism, cultural continuity, and resistance to the erasure of identity
1.4	0:02–0:15	Destroyed buildings and damaged urban spaces	Dark, bleak lighting; desaturated color palette creating atmosphere of grief and devastation	Material consequences of occupation; resistance grounded in documented suffering rather than abstraction

The opening sequence does careful ideological work across all three analytical levels. At the reality level, the four visuals draw on social codes saturated with Palestinian political history. The green poster in Visual 1.1 displays *al-sha’b yurīdu ilghā’ mu’āhadat Wādī ‘Arabah*—a public rejection of the 1994 Wādī ‘Arabah peace treaty between Jordan and Israel. AlMomani (2012) documents how Palestinian activists view this agreement as a form of normalization that reduced pressure on Israel while weakening Arab solidarity; the poster converts this political grievance into street-level declaration. The *kūfiyyah* functions simultaneously as social code and political symbol: Abu-Ayyash (2024) documents how it has evolved from rural headwear into one of the most globally recognized markers of Palestinian resistance and anti-colonial struggle, a transformation documented across social media and public protest alike.

At the representation level, cinematic choices amplify these social codes into emotionally charged political discourse. The medium close-up in Visual 1.1 draws the viewer into individual faces and connects personal identity with collective activism. The aerial perspective in Visuals 1.2 and 1.3 shifts register from personal to monumental, communicating mass solidarity and the spatial scale of Palestinian mobilization. The centered framing of the

Palestinian flag in Visual 1.3 positions it as the visual anchor around which all other elements organize. Background music featuring the ‘ūd and traditional Middle Eastern tonalities further encodes cultural continuity, aligning the protest with a longer history of Palestinian musical and artistic resistance (Hammoud, 2024). These representational choices are not neutral—they transform documentary footage into persuasive political narrative.

At the ideology level, Visual 1.4 introduces a necessary counterpoint. Dark lighting and bleak imagery of destroyed architecture shift register from protest to consequence—suffering, displacement, the lived cost of occupation. This visual choice does not undercut the resistance narrative; it grounds it. Palestinian resistance, the opening sequence argues, is not an abstraction or a performance. It is a response to documented, ongoing violence. Wolfe (2006) observes that settler colonialism's logic of elimination requires continuous documentation and counter-documentation; the destroyed buildings function as exactly this kind of counter-archive.

4.2 Visual Cluster 2 (0:36–0:40): Symbols of Victory and Return

Table 2: *Semiotic Analysis of Visuals 2.1–2.3*

Visual	Duration	Reality Level	Representation Level	Ideology Level
2.1	0:36–0:40	Demonstrators raise the V symbol; green protest posters visible	Low/upward camera angle emphasizing the V gesture; natural outdoor lighting	Defiance and the collective refusal to accept defeat or silence
2.2	0:36–0:40	V symbol displayed alongside Palestinian flag	Low angle reinforcing the visual dominance of Palestinian symbols	National pride and solidarity expressed through peaceful but unambiguous resistance
2.3	0:36–0:40	Woman holds poster bearing the lyric "Our return is faith and certainty" ('awdatunā īmān wa yaqīn)	Low angle emphasizes the poster's message; bright daylight reinforces openness and clarity	The right of return expressed as both political demand and spiritual conviction—one ideological layer among several in Palestinian identity

Visuals 2.1–2.3 narrow the frame from the mass scale of the opening sequence to individual bodies and gestures. The V sign raised by demonstrators in Visuals 2.1 and 2.2 is one of the most cross-culturally legible political gestures in contemporary protest. Zikriyoqizi (2025) places it within a semiotic analysis noting its consistent association with peace, victory, and defiance across national and linguistic boundaries. Here it is embedded in a specifically Palestinian context—flanked by the flag and green resistance posters—so that its general meaning is inflected toward anti-colonial defiance rather than generalized celebration.



Camera angle in these visuals is doing deliberate ideological work. A low or upward shot is among the most codified techniques for encoding power, dignity, and heroism in media. Fiske (1987) argues that camera angle positions the viewer relationally: a low angle places the viewer below the subject, encouraging perception of the subject as strong or admirable. That Palestinian demonstrators are framed this way is not incidental—it directly contests the kinds of framing through which Palestinian bodies typically appear in mainstream Western news coverage, where they are more often shown as chaotic, victimized, or threatening. The representational politics here are deliberate.

Visual 2.3 introduces a female figure holding a poster with the lyric *‘awdatunā īmān wa yaqīn*—"Our return is faith and certainty." The phrase condenses the Palestinian right of return into a specific ideological register. The pairing of *īmān* (faith) and *yaqīn* (certainty) invokes Islamic epistemological categories: in Islamic thought, *yaqīn* denotes the highest degree of knowledge, beyond doubt. This positions return not as a political aspiration contingent on negotiation but as a conviction grounded in religious certainty. This is one of the music video's more distinctively Islamic ideological moments—but it should be read as one strand within a broader Palestinian national identity that includes secular, Christian, and diaspora dimensions, rather than as the defining frame of Palestinian identity as a whole.

4.3 Visual Cluster 3 (0:44–0:48): The Key, Children, and Intergenerational Solidarity

Table 3: *Semiotic Analysis of Visuals 3.1–3.2*

Visual	Duration	Reality Level	Representation Level	Ideology Level
3.1	0:44–0:48	Children in <i>kūfiyyah</i> collectively carry a large black key; energetic, joyful expressions	Eye-level camera creating equality and intimacy with subjects; key centered as primary visual focus; soft dusk lighting	Inherited resistance; younger generations as active guardians rather than passive victims of the struggle
3.2	0:44–0:48	Multi-generational crowd in <i>kūfiyyah</i> ; determined expressions; range from toddlers to elderly	Dim lighting and diffuse fog signifying grief and displacement; sunlight entering through gaps in destroyed buildings representing endurance	Palestinian resistance as a continuous collective legacy transmitted across generations, not confined to any single generation or political moment

Children appear in Palestinian cultural productions with notable consistency, and their presence always carries semiotic weight. Arin Faridatul Azma (2021) observes that in

Palestinian-themed music videos, children typically function as symbols of innocence, resilience, and future hope—embodying the continuity of struggle without yet carrying its full cost. Visual 3.1 builds on this convention while adding a specific object that transforms its meaning: the large black key.

Zoghi, Mohd Nor, and Abdul Hamid (2018) trace the key's emergence as the central symbol of al-Nakbah, the 1948 Palestinian displacement. Palestinian refugee families kept the keys to their homes as material proof of ownership and a physical assertion of the right to return. The key in Visual 3.1 is therefore not a prop—it is an inheritance. That children carry it collectively, with energy and even joy rather than grief, encodes a particular ideological argument: the right of return has not died with the generation that originally held the keys. It has been transmitted across time and transformed into something generative rather than elegiac. Resistance, the image argues, is not something inherited as burden but as possibility.

The eye-level camera angle in Visuals 3.1 and 3.2 is worth pausing on because of how it differs from the low-angle shots in Cluster 2. Where the upward angle conferred heroic stature, the eye-level framing here produces intimacy and equality. Viewers are placed beside the children rather than below them—invited into solidarity rather than admiration. This is a more democratic visual grammar, consistent with the ideological claim that resistance is a shared condition rather than the province of exceptional individuals or leaders.

Visual 3.2 introduces a multi-generational crowd—toddlers, adults, the elderly—all wearing kūfiyyah and standing with determined expressions. The diversity of ages encodes the ideological claim that Palestinian resistance has no generational limit; it is a continuous collective legacy. Lighting carries the semiotic load here. Dim lighting and diffuse fog register grief—the accumulated weight of decades of displacement. But sunlight entering through gaps in destroyed buildings introduces a counterpoint: light breaking through ruin is a cross-cultural visual idiom for endurance and hope. The combination holds grief and aspiration simultaneously, which is arguably truer to the texture of ongoing Palestinian experience than either pure lamentation or pure triumphalism would be.

4.4 Visual Cluster 4 (1:00–1:05): Memory, Return, and the Continuity of Resistance

Table 4: *Semiotic Analysis of Visuals 4.1–4.2*

Visual	Duration	Reality Level	Representation Level	Ideology Level
4.1	1:00–1:05	Kūfiyyah-clad man stands before posters bearing faces of fallen Palestinians; posture of grief	Back shot placing viewer behind the subject and sharing his perspective; dark low-key lighting with gray tones	Collective memory, martyrdom, and the continuation of resistance through active remembrance



4.2	1:00–1:05	Poster displaying map of Palestine in national flag colors; V sign; word <i>rājiʿīn</i> (We will return)	Low-angle shot making the Palestine poster appear dominant and authoritative; warm natural lighting and sunlight filtering between buildings	The right of return as political demand, cultural memory, and—in this specific textual moment—spiritual conviction
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5. Conclusion

This study analyzed semiotic codes in the music video *Filasṭīn Bilādī* by Humood Alkhudher through John Fiske's three-level framework of reality, representation, and ideology. Across eleven scenes organized into four visual clusters, the analysis traced how concrete social signs—*kūfiyyah*, Palestinian flag, the key of return, protest posters, destroyed buildings, and the word *rājiʿīn*—are processed through deliberate cinematic choices to produce layered ideological meaning.

The findings show that the music video operates on multiple registers simultaneously. At the reality level, it draws on social codes saturated with Palestinian political and cultural history. At the representation level, a range of camera techniques—back shots, low angles, eye-level framing, aerial views—together with contrasting lighting and traditional music, transform these social codes into emotionally powerful discourse that shifts between intimacy and monumentality, mourning and defiance. At the ideology level, the video frames Palestinian identity as layered and multidimensional: it encompasses anti-colonial resistance grounded in the settler-colonial structure identified by Wolfe (2006), collective memory of al-Nakbah and its aftermath, intergenerational solidarity, and—at specific textual moments—Islamic faith as one ideological strand among several. The analysis also shows how Fiske's model, applied carefully, reveals not just what a media text contains but how meaning is actively produced through the interaction of levels. That is its principal methodological contribution.

This study has several limitations that should inform future research. First, the analysis covers selected scenes from a single music video; findings cannot be generalized to Palestinian media production more broadly or to other songs by the same artist. Second, the interpretation is inherently researcher-dependent—semiotic analysis reflects the analyst's own positionality and cultural literacy, and audiences with different backgrounds—Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, Christian, secular, diaspora, or international—may decode these codes in substantially different ways. Third, the study does not incorporate audience reception data, leaving open the question of whether the ideological meanings identified here are the meanings that actual viewers construct. Future research should examine a wider range of Palestinian protest music and music videos comparatively, and might productively combine semiotic text analysis with audience reception methods to better understand how these texts shape political awareness, solidarity, and emotional engagement across diverse publics.

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