

Abstract

allah project — مشروع الله is a study of the use of Arabic religious terms and formulations in the Levant, and more specifically in Lebanon. I intend to show how the use of these terms differ and how their signification is altered by the speaker according to the social context. The project begins with a term or expression that is made part of a performance where it is written consecutively and repetitively on various mediums. Live sounds envelop me in action, giving a tempo to the performance. This is an exploration of societies where religions and traditions are prevalent, through the deconstruction of certain terms that are used daily. With these expressions shattered, my aim is to uncover what lies behind them: communities that are organised around a highly controlling and patriarchal system.

I am currently in the research stage of developing sound for live performance, recording samples and practicing vocals in order to make the experience of the performance more ephemeral.

This whole process could become an edited collection of videos, performance, and sound, or it could be developed into a performance and screening. The realisation of the project will depend on the research and study.



Intro

In Lebanon, as children, we are taught that humanity and the universe are Allah's¹ greatest creations. This means that Allah has provided us with all the resources needed to sustain ourselves until we pass on to *eternal life*. At the final judgement, we discover whether we are to go to *heaven* or *hell*. In this essay, social perceptions of Allah deriving from this pathway are reflected upon through the study of common Lebanese vernacular. The essay illustrates how religious language, particularly when it is used to express notions of Allah, can become a tool for addressing personalised needs. Throughout these observations a performance came to life, one that embodies the layers of Lebanese societies and reproduces them within a different environment to put into

¹ Within this essay "Allah" is written in small caps as a reference to the Arabic language that does not include capital letters. For more information, see: Brown, T. Julian, Anderson, Donald M., Turner, Eric Gardner, Williams, Robert, Barbour, Ruth, Pinder-Wilson, Ralph H. and Nash, Ray. "Calligraphy". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 22 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/art/calligraphy> (Accessed May 6 2021).

It is instead highlighted in red as a reference to how it is highlighted in some Quran versions to refer to his holiness. Yet within this paper the highlight intends to refer to how the figure of Allah is dominant, and for us to trace its presence throughout the paper.

question the religious expressions that are used, in an everyday context, in relation to the social, political, and religious spheres they exist within. These religious expressions reflect a response to reality that is adopted by people in order to cope with their lives.

The complex religious, societal, and political structures of Lebanon make the country a rich setting for such a study. Within this small and diverse country, the older generations have been heavily influenced — and traumatised — by the experience of living through the civil war (1975-1990), and this has resulted in younger generations inheriting their habits, beliefs, and societal dysfunctions, often without question. The perpetuation of these traits means few that in Lebanese society have had the opportunity to fully interrogate the political causes of the war beyond the religious ones. Meanwhile, politicised sectarian tensions continue across Lebanon, often subject to direct and indirect interference from foreign powers. This has fostered further division, reinforcing wartime sectarian alliances in modern Lebanese society. As Rima Majed argues², these issues are not due to Lebanon's diversity—wars are not social explosions—rather, they are due to politicised diversity. Sect and political party have been combined into a single identity by conflict, and this has become a tool used in all systems of self-identification and discrimination. Such rivalries are vaguely perceived in everyday society however, and are both displayed and tested in daily life;

While the Tā'if Accord had called for a gradual end to confessionalism within the country, the reality in post-civil war Lebanon tended toward an entrenchment and strengthening of sectarian allegiances. The civil war had resulted in the virtual elimination of multiconfessional regions where coexistence was the norm; as a result, sectarianism became increasingly geographically as well as culturally defined. Moreover, the electoral system continued to militate against the emergence of crosscutting political parties with the ability to challenge the regional power bases of Lebanon's traditional *zu'amā*.³

In order to understand the dynamics that perpetuate the relationships and divisions among Lebanese people and within Lebanese society, personal interests and group alliances present ideal starting points. Living between political, religious and communal lines produced by the powerful forces of war and religion, many Lebanese arguably stick to these forces blindly, only shifting directions according to their needs.

Lebanon can be divided into eighteen sects, each of which is united by shared characteristics, beliefs and habits. All of Lebanon's sects are present in Beirut, a small capital city, and it is advertised to the west that the people there coexist peacefully. Looking more closely at the segregation of its people, practically every Lebanese community is affiliated with a sect that dominates the area. Territorial divisions between sects can be identified simply by looking at the facades of each neighbourhood. Shrines found on street corners will see people crossing their chest and running their hands over the artifice in the hope of a blessing. In Islamic neighborhoods, you will find symbols referring to praising Moussa El Sadr and a range of other Islamic leaders⁴ with influence in the religious and political spheres ([add image](#)).

It is not only through religious iconography and behaviours that the 'territory' of the Lebanese sects can be identified. Closer observation often reveals the identities of the political actors with which sects are associated, with pictures of political leaders and other symbols hung next to shrines or Islamic symbols. From this we learn not only the religion that certain groups adhere to, but also the political leaders that the members of these groups believe are protected by **allah**, and ultimately who is the most 'righteous', the 'chosen' one who they believe should lead the country.

² -Rima Majed "What's So Deep About Deeply Divided Societies? Rethinking Sectarianism in the Middle East" May 21, 2019, video <https://www.aub.edu.lb/nyo/Briefings/Pages/sectarianism.aspx>

³ Ochsenwald, W. L. , Bugh, . Glenn Richard , Kingston, . Paul , Khalaf, . Samir G. , Barnett, . Richard David and Maksoud, . Clovis F. "Lebanon." Encyclopedia Britannica, March 10, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Lebanon>.

⁴ Because in Islam depictions of Mohammad are forbidden or '*haram*'.

Haram is a Legal term for what is forbidden or inviolable under Islamic law. [It] also describes the area around the three holy cities of Islam—Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem—indicating their role as sanctuaries where no one may be killed. Hunting, uprooting trees, harvesting grain, violence toward humans except in self-defense, and carrying weapons are forbidden in these areas. Entry of non-Muslims into Mecca and Medina is also forbidden. Haram is the root of the word harem, referring to women's quarters that are forbidden to any males except relatives and husbands. The word is used as an exclamation in Arabic in reaction to bad news, meaning 'God have pity!'" For more information, see: "Haram." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam.* , edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e808> (Accessed May 6, 2021).



So we begin to see how the country is divided and controlled by the entanglement of the political and the religious, and how politicians employ aspects of religion to influence their existing and prospective followers. In some cases, this blend of the political and the religious in the public mind can even 'deify' political leaders and reinforce their elevated status.

The following examines how these aspects are applied (or not), and will analyse through anecdotes how common religious expressions used on a daily basis shape the beliefs and behaviours of individuals. The original religious meanings of these expressions will be interpreted, as well as how they are used in everyday life, how they change within different contexts, and how people use them for their own benefit, according to their current needs or wishes. **allah** then becomes a useful and customisable tool.

The analysis will cover three main levels at which patterns of communication are in constant repetition: the domestic level (or nuclear family), the social level, and the political level. These three main domains will be referred to in this essay as spheres.

These three spheres can be divided into smaller fragments that are constantly reacting with one another, mostly in a dysfunctional manner. As we reach further into the subdivisions of these spheres, we can extract religious expressions—units—that individuals use on a daily basis, and we can show the contradictions that appear between their various interpretations. From there we can see patterns within different sects in which the expressions are used, and in which this use is customised to the sect's needs while disregarding its impact on the other. In other words, these religious expressions, also perceived as units within the performance, could be used as tools to offend the other for the benefit of oneself, or to bless the other, all the while using the same phrasing. These units are constantly moving within the three spheres.

Since the excessive repetitiveness of these expressions becomes so layered, and one cannot think them through consciously before using them, they represent an association with the mood or context in which the person using them is situated. The tone of voice in which they are used also affects their meaning. This multilayered mechanism underpins a social behaviour and communication that can vary between sweet, harsh, and sometimes irrational. Given the context of a very densely-populated country, with the complexities it holds, first gathering all of these expressions became a necessity in order to demystify them. At

times it was a challenge to locate some of the expressions that include the word **allah**, because within the spoken language, the words can morph together, or we become so familiar with the expressions that we forget that **allah** is within those words.⁵ It was an interesting process to rethink and pay attention to what we are used to expressing in the arabic language, and it made clear how people are constantly and emotionally driven to communicate with the other through “**allah**”—the absent figure that we lean on, that we depend on to wither and solve our miseries, that we use to wish luck to the other, to condemn the other, etc.

While gathering these expressions, and based on the aforementioned usage of them, I started to select them one by one and inscribe them repetitively and seamlessly next to one another. Repeating each expression created a form of an expression that could each time mean something depending on how it might be said, and resonate their differences in the identical way, or different ways they are being written. For instance, holding a book that contains religious icons representing different stages of Jesus's life made me question how these expressions could be applied in relation to the situation that these photos represent. It was a book of Giotto, the Italian painter, who is now one of the major art historical figures during the middle ages.

His icons held both references to the Biblical story of Jesus, and in a personal observation, a cynical representation of its characters. Looking at the famous moment where Judas betrayed Jesus and gave him away to the Romans, the main characters—Jesus and Judas—were portrayed facing one another in close proximity in a confrontational moment. From one side this could be viewed as purely dramatic, but from another side it could be seen as a romantic moment between the two characters. This is where



Kiss of Judas (1304-06), fresco by Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy

⁵ Such as Mashallah—الله ما شاء (what **allah** willed), which is originally constituted of three words: ma sha'a **allah**—الله شاء ما

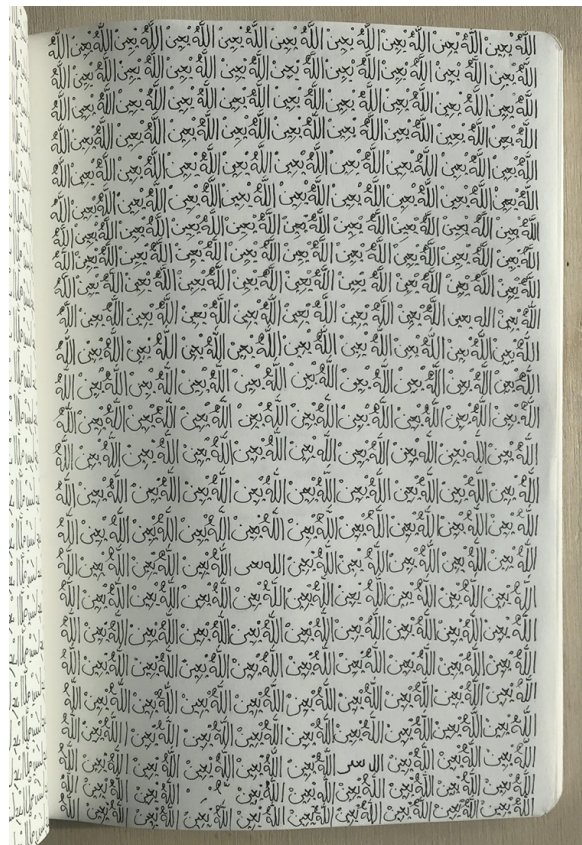
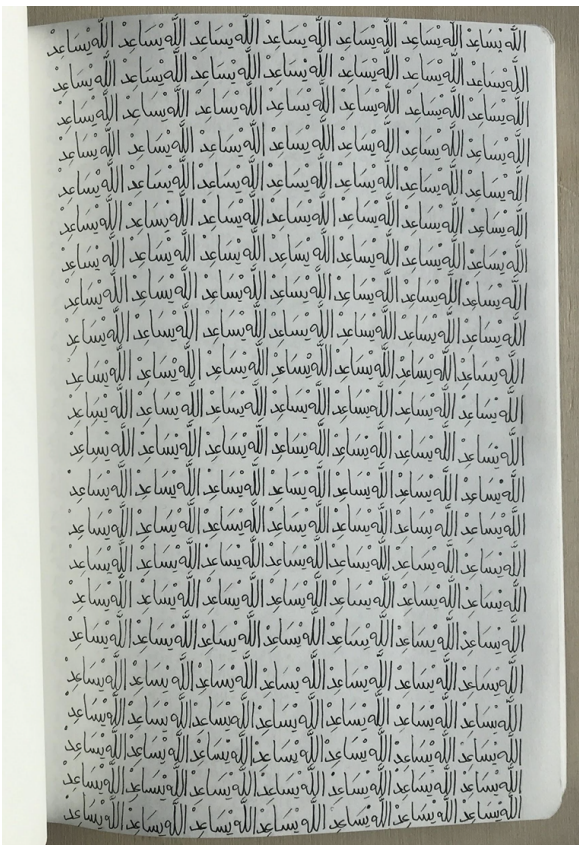
the questioning of the expressions that include **allah** came in, giving the project a starting point from which to address each situation. For example, this icon is supposed to be a serious portrayal of betrayal, but its depiction would be considered 'haram' or to be defying the Bible if it were understood to show a romantic relation between characters of the same sex. The expression "**allah** yestor" — الله يستر — meaning—May **allah** veil/cover (what is about to happen)—came to mind as a cynical reaction to the situation. And each time the phrase is repeated, the assertion of how wrong and how socially unacceptable this representation is becomes stronger.

From here, the research focused further on the manner of the repetition of these expressions, in order to address the various meanings they could each hold. In religion, repeating the same religious expressions within a ceremony may allow the individual to reach a state of trance, which is considered to bring us closer to **allah**. As the **allah** project progresses ([add footnote on the performances i did at sandberg?](#)), performances, videos and experimentations are being developed to explore and question the trance state as a concept, and how its assertion becomes more of a redundant act.

This project is the outcome of a collective trauma that we live within this country, a reality embedded within a patriarchal system. The process of trying to find the origin of that system is like trying to find a needle in a haystack. This project is a shared experience through which the audience is invited to explore certain layers within society. But these ephemeral performances are also concerned with things that we may not consciously address. The further in we reach, the more different patterns or layers emerge that may be connected to other cultures, other regions.

Having lived in a bubble of a single religion while growing up, and being alienated from the others, the constant reminder to fear the other was indirectly transferred through society, whether that was the fear of being outnumbered by the others, or whether it was encouragement to always be prepared to fight them. This desire to prove righteousness and power through religion is taught to exist as long as our belief in **allah** is there. If we are to think of abandoning this belief, we are warned to become victims of evil, or the *shaytan* (devil); we would become nothing but souls who have lost their way to **allah**. This notion of fear becomes holy, and once we lose it, we are in the void, and people learn to be afraid of the void, afraid to see it as an open door to them. And this could result in people getting more attached to religion, and consider it as a tool to fight the other.

Within the sound, performances, and video work I am currently developing, the delusion of the void is being manifested in the seamless repetition of writing, speaking, or otherwise visualising religious expressions. . It is an attempt to fill this void with the religious expressions that people tend to use seamlessly on a daily basis, whether that be from habit, or from helplessness, surrendering to the will of the higher figure, **allah**. Through the work being conducted, the excessive use of these expressions through varied forms becomes the void itself.



Below are three spheres through which I attempt to decode the slipperiness of the Arabic language using these religious expressions —units—and their interpreted meanings. By doing so, the grounds of the performance are revealed throughout the essay.

Short intro into the Arabic language

As a prologue to this research project, a brief explanation of the structure of the Arabic language will be presented in order to allow us to explore the use of religious expressions in Arabic.

Arabic is a Semitic language prominently used in the Middle East. Its alphabet contains twenty-eight letters, of which twenty-six are consonants and two are semi-vowels⁶. For Arabic to be pronounceable, the language incorporates diacritics⁷ which include the following sounds (vowels): a (*fatha*), i (*kasra*), ou (*dameh*), and (*sukun*) (which represents the lack of a vowel). Additionally, the language includes a sign called *shaddeh* which indicates the accentuation of a letter.

At an early age, native Arabic speakers and readers learn how to correctly pronounce expressions including diacritics, depending on their placement in the sentence. Upon reaching a certain maturity, it is assumed that they are then capable of reading any text in Arabic without diacritics. As such, diacritics are eliminated from most modern Arabic texts.

An important distinction is to be made between spoken (*Aamiyya*—عامية) and classical Arabic. Classical Arabic is taught in all Arabic-speaking countries and maintains the same grammar, lexicon, and structure in each place. In contrast, spoken Arabic differs across the Middle East, encompassing many accents and dialects. For the purpose of this paper, we will be focusing on the diacritics' level, and how these symbols alter the meaning of an expression according to their placement on its letters.

Three letters put separately:	Aayn – qaf – dal	ع ق د
When combined together:	Okd	عقد
With different forms of diacritics:	Held	عَقَدَ
	Tied – complicated – thicken – made it happen	عَقَّدَ
	Retain	عَقِدْ
	Contract	عَقْدٌ
	Necklace	عَقْدٌ
	Decade	عَقْدٌ

Domestic Sphere

In the Middle East, the nuclear family has a patriarchal structure. The father figure occupies the top of the pyramid and his position is never to be questioned.

A child is expected to respect his elder and when a fight occurs between siblings, it is taught that forgiveness is to be offered, as in every situation, in order to avoid the path of sins⁸. Forgiveness—in addition to the wrath of **allah**, and the fear of being sent to Hell, which would be invoked if one were to become a sinner—constitutes part of the common basis of education in a regular household. In this context, the father figure becomes the representative of **allah** and is the ultimate observer of one's daily behaviour.

When it comes to the behaviour of the father himself, the rule doesn't apply within the domestic sphere. For instance, if there is a fight between the father and the child, the child is always wrong, and must ultimately apologise without a discussion. This is applied as much to the children as it is to the mother. The same pattern is applied even in the temporary absence of the father, whereby the mother uses the same technique to control the children, eternally perpetuating this patriarchal model.

⁶ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Arabic alphabet". Encyclopedia Britannica, 22 May. 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arabic-alphabet> (Accessed 6 May 2021).

⁷ *ibid*.

⁸ NIV 1 John 4:20-20

While this configuration remains common in the Middle East, it is often kept well within the walls of the home, away from the gaze of the other, so as to prevent 'shame' from falling upon the family and tarnishing its name. However, the walls have ears in our communities, and often the entire neighbourhood finds out what happens in those secret homes, leaving a trail of gossip behind them.

Neighbours never directly interfere in 'family business,' even when violence occurs, because the shame becomes mutual when they do. Instead, the resort to **allah** in their daily expressions as a way to avoid facing the harsh reality that is domestic violence, e.g.:

allah yiinon — الله يعينن (may **allah** help them)
allahou el 3alim — الله العظيم (**allah** knows better)
allah yesaaed — الله يساعد (may **allah** help)

After the carnage, the father decides to put an end to the matter, and asks his children to gather with him, hold hands, and to pray to **allah** to give his wife back her sanity, and to forgive her for the sins she has done to this family.

Communal Sphere

So we are living in an age of both harmonisation and dissonance. Never have men had so many things in common; knowledge, points of reference, images, words, instruments, and tools of all kinds. But this only increases their desire to assert their differences⁹.

The religious and social divisions within society in Lebanon are clearly portrayed visually in each neighbourhood. The public display of religious figures in cities is a way to affirm territories and identities. For the Lebanese people, identity does not revolve around personal identity; it is rather a communal one. It is often religious belief that comes first, followed by political affiliation, geographical roots, and the family name.

For example, Beirut is an extremely ethnically and religiously diverse city, but it is also very segregated. Each community controls its own neighbourhood and publicly displays its religious and political affiliation through various posters, banners, and shrines scattered across the territory (neighbourhood) associated with them. The ghost of the civil war roams above the city and perpetuates a state of tension and competition between the different communities who parade Photoshopped pictures signifying their religious and political affiliations, hoping to appear strong and ferocious in front of the other. In reality, this show of force hides a profound fear of being exterminated by the Other (communities), who constitute an existential threat.

My **allah** is stronger than your **allah**."

With the increased presence of vehicles over the years, these religiously and politically engraved territories become mobile. A Muslim bus driver may cross the whole country with their vehicle well-marked with various types of religious and political pictures, sayings, talismans, and other objects.



⁹ Amin Maalouf, "The Age of Global Tribes," in *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2001), 93.

A handmade calligraphic work inscribed with Salli Aala el Habib el Mostafa Mohammad—محمد المصطفى الحبيب على لـص (Pray to the beloved, the chosen one Mohammad

These different political and religious identities, which were once very much rooted in a restrained geographical space, become mobile territories that purposely tear through each others' social structures with each display of their political and religious affiliations.



A public transportation bus on the move, the back window decorated with a portrait of Jesus

Because each community is considerably agglutinated, the notion of privacy disappears within each one of them. To maintain strong and welded communities, individuals are deprived of their own privacy. Their private space disappears as their individual actions have direct repercussions for the wider community and may lead to the disintegration of the group (if actions are not coordinated with the rest of the community). The rules that cement this structure, which is nearly identical in every community across Lebanon, are reflected through religious teachings, rituals, habits and traditions.



Motorcycle with a vinyl cut of Saint Charbel - A Maronite Monk and Priest from Lebanon

Political Sphere

The political sphere replicates a similar patriarchal model to that described in the domestic and the communal spheres. The leader of a political movement or party embodies the image of **allah**. This is reflected in a phenomenon widely present across Lebanon: the personality cult.¹⁰ It is prevalent in the streets of Lebanon and can take the form of images, statues, iconographies, etc. Leaders

¹⁰ "Personality cult." In Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/personality%20cult> (Accessed May 6, 2021).

are sanctified and often presented as the saviours of the community. This is a popular propaganda tool used to control the masses and to reinforce the patriarchal model reproduced in each sphere.

The leader is the father figure; severe but kind, to be feared and adored. For instance, the slogan or title entitled to refer to the current president, Michel Aoun, is: the Father of All.

Michel Aoun (the Lebanese president) was sitting in front of a group of politicians and clergymen telling them a story (like the ones we read in the Bible, for instance, where you learn the metaphor at the end of it). He told the story of a man captaining a ship, with a lot of people on it, including his daughter. She was asleep, and the father was guiding the ship along. For some reason, no one cares what it is, the men on the ship went to the daughter to tell her to go up and check on her father. The first time, she did not reply and went back to sleep. For some reason, they insisted on her waking up, maybe there was a storm or something, and the daughter replied by asking: is my father the one steering the ship? They said yes, and the daughter went back to sleep



Current president Michel Aoun gifted with an iconography including him, Virgin Mary, and baby Jesus. (online found photo)



Former president Camille Chamoun portrayed in an iconography including him, Virgin Mary, and baby Jesus. (online found photo)



Choreography and Repetitive Motion

The **allah** project studies the repetition of religious expressions that include the word **allah** in various forms. Its aim is to explore and dissect the significance of these words that can take on different meanings according to their placement in the sentence or according to the context in which they are employed.

During a performance, the meaning of the expression can be altered depending on the way it is written, spoken (intoned), or physically expressed. This control gives a margin of freedom in which to make a *jeu de mot*¹¹ with what is being delivered. Sounds, for instance, can become ever more abstract, or give a different meaning, if repeated over and over or layered onto one another.

One performance technique could be to choose to add diacritics to the expression that is repeatedly written. Since the significance of the expression changes according to the placement of the diacritics, one can allow oneself to reveal new meanings of the expression by altering its diacritics at the end of the performance. It is a tool that allows one to attempt to control the outcome of a performance, and the meaning or message communicated to the viewer.

The performance is also a construction of creative body movement and gestures that are an extension of how the language could be communicated. It is an approach that gives language a different form in order for it to be perceived differently. However, because a human being is conducting the choreography, it is impossible to recreate the same exact gestures throughout the entirety of the act. Actually, failing to write the expression each time in an identical manner breaks the ritual¹² of the performance. It is indicative of the fact that the same expression can be used in a multitude of social contexts. The more the expressions are repeated in different contexts, the more an original meaning morphs into other meanings, or is lost entirely. Yes! Also, the expressions may differ in the way they are pronounced: an expression may involve three words originally, but then through time become a single word, and be used as a reaction. The choreography for the performance is fundamental.

Original expression: الله اكبر

Translation in English: **allah** is the greatest

-If one is impressed by something, one expresses their amazement by saying “**allahou** akbar”

-Islamist extremist groups such as the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda and the military branch of Hezbollah (among others) employ the expression “**allahou** akbar” when they succeed in achieving a goal, for instance the carrying out of a violent attack using weapons.¹³

-When a child is messing around, one may say “**allahou** akbar on you” to express anger and frustration towards the child

The performance itself is physically intense. Consecutively writing the same expression (and then adding the diacritics) on the canvas requires precision, and it can be a lengthy process—writing with the body. Eventually, this physical intensity will translate into a rhythm, a tempo that is unique to each act, drawing the audience in. (add photos from performances).

Religious rituals are repeated (and contain repetitive movements or sounds) in order to further assert and reinforce notions, such as particular ideas of **allah** (as portrayed in the monotheist religions). In contrast, while my performance could appear to be similar to such rituals, it is actually breaking with the assertion of **allah** as envisioned by society as a whole. This break is made by altering the placements of the diacritics on, or by assigning other meanings to, the words and phrases that make up the religious expressions.

This process pushed me to further explore the potential mediums and setups in which these expressions can exist. From there, the performance started to expand from small pieces of paper with repetitively written expressions on them to canvases that record whole choreographies in which the expressions are written excessively with the full potential of the body. The latter is an exhaustive mode of production that resists the silent oppression we live in, questioning the need for right-wing elements to pressure and control people, and how constant repetition becomes in itself a sacred and ultimate truth for some people. The expressions become visuals that express the shallow depth of meaning behind their existence, and remain only as a constant reminder that these figures are always there, watching us all, and are above all eternally alive, whether they are politicians or religious figures.

Epilogue

¹¹ Play of words

¹² “Ritual.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ritual> (Accessed May 6, 2021)

¹³ Idleb news - July 23, 2019. "الله اكبر قصف كثيف على الكفار". Documentation video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WgDrCRrt_N0

The patriarchal scheme is reproduced in the family, in the community, and in the political sphere. It is cemented by the numerous sects present throughout the small geographical territory that is Lebanon. Each of these sects reinforces their presence by displaying their political, religious, and social affiliations through various mediums and through their religious rituals, habits, and traditions.

The aim of *allah project* is to dismantle the cycle of social behaviour that is observed in the three spheres mentioned above.

Amin Maalouf, "I have the profoundest respect for people who behave in a generous way because of religion. But I come from a country where the misuse of religion has had catastrophic consequences. One must judge people not by what faith they proclaim but by what they do." As he writes in *On Identity*: "For me a believer is simply someone who has faith in certain values"—which he sums up as human dignity." as cited in *The Guardian* by Maya Jaggi¹⁴

What happens if the word *allah* is removed from these expressions, altering the concept? Would the people speaking be losing part of their identity? Would people prefer to continue deferring to a third party, constantly accumulating denial, rather than take responsibility for their own actions?

¹⁴ Maya Jaggi "A son of the road," *The Guardian*, 16 November 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2002/nov/16/classicalmusicandopera.fiction>