

Fate and Fury



By Kegham Balian

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From the elite minority that caress the soft pelt of Orientalism, desperately hoping to sensitize the ethos of Palestine to Western proclivities, to the average Sisyphean (or more aptly, Ahedean*) individual trying to make ends meet, all Palestinians face the unenviable task of defining their identity within the confines of a culturally destructive environment, whilst trying to maintain a semblance of sanity, which leaves most with an increasingly binarized survival option, should they be fortunate enough to even have a choice: stay and assimilate or leave and assimilate. No matter the path, a portion of one's cultural identity is unwittingly sacrificed in lieu of foreign conformism. You could be forgiven for assuming that Noor Daoud fits this grim mold, but Noor is no ordinary Palestinian.

Born on December 15, 1990, in Houston, Texas, hardship came knocking at an early age: when she was merely a month old, Noor's parents divorced. A tainting experience, even more so in Palestinian societies. You could lead a moon-landing mission from Gaza, whilst evading a barrage of Israeli missiles, successfully land, return to Gaza, successfully land, and still feel the specter of contempt in the midst of heroic praise. Samar Daoud, her mother, is no astronaut, but she might as well be in the eyes of her daughter, having escaped the gravitational pull of a compromising existence in order to nurture and support her child's growing ambition.

A move to Jerusalem, back home, soon followed, and Noor was already displaying signs that stereotype didn't allow; traits that a girl shouldn't hone, only shun. Supposedly.

"She never liked Barbies, she only played with toy cars!" exclaimed her mother. "Always running around, climbing, anything to be active, just anything not to be bored!" she continued. Not out of pressure, a riposte to prevalent sexist norms, or any other cynicism-born defiance that one acquires with age, but out of the unscathed, innocent naivety of youth simply wanting to be. A rebellion against uncertainty on her own terms. "I was jumping



Noor Daoud, a Palestinian car racer.

from sport to sport, I wasn't sure where my place was, where my heart was, so I got involved in everything – football, swimming, track, tennis, everything!" Noor said unrelentingly.

Yet something eluded her, a call that needed the deft touch of destiny to be heard, and surely enough, it came in the form of a 1998 BMW E36 328i, her mother's car. A burgeoning engine roar that deafens most, to her, love at first sound. Only 13 years old, as her mom wove through fabric — a talented fashion designer in her own right— she'd "steal" the car and drive around Ramallah, where the lack of police authority proved useful (for a change) in fostering her rebellious streak, allowing her to weave through the potholes accentuated by the bumps, crooks, and nicks of the roads, coupled with literal uphill battles; battles that were dismantled by the might of German engineering (I am not sponsored by BMW, *wallah*), and the will of an adrenaline-fueled Palestinian avant-garde. Feminine? Masculine? Irrelevant.

Their love affair would be short-lived, but a distant reunion would prove prophetic.

In 2007, she left Jerusalem to enroll in the prestigious IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida, to play tennis

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whilst undergoing mental and physical conditioning, under the supervision of none other than Nick Bollettieri, the legendary coach who pioneered the concept of tennis boarding school, having worked with notable luminaries such as Andre Agassi, Maria Sharapova, and Serena Williams, to name a few. At the same time, she had her first experience in a gym at Live Fitness Studio, instantly being drawn to the grit and sweat that physical fitness offered, something to finally complement her determination and desire to compete – to win – by matching body to spirit. And still, again, despite the challenges she relished facing, a nagging itch remained. Something was amiss. "I loved tennis, it was very demanding, very competitive, but I needed more, something more, something extreme!" she said.



Noor Daoud during a training session.

After two years, she returned to Palestine in 2009, and sought out Khaled Qaddoura, the head of the Palestinian Motorsport Federation (PMF). Mind you, she did this purely of her own volition, without advice from anyone, nor a guiding hand; single-handedly venturing into a predominantly male arena, facing a high risk of ridicule and social backlash. To her surprise, instead of being ostracized, she was welcomed with open arms, and got introduced to time-attack racing, a type of race where the racers compete on a track for the best lap time. Parallel to this, she resumed her body-building endeavor by signing up at Oxygen Gym – it’s one thing to go to a gym in Florida, as a woman, and a completely different ballgame to go to one in Ramallah. Surely Palestine is too conservative a nationless nation to allow such transgressions, which threaten the misogynist social fabric that binds together our outdated culture. Surely. Surely wrong! Like the PMF before them, they, men, welcomed Noor and eventually employed her as a personal trainer/fitness instructor, upon seeing the positive and motivational influence she had on the other members of the gym, her unbridled tenacity empowering men and women alike.

This rise in recognition coincided with the formation of the now world-renowned Speed Sisters, the first all-female racing team in Palestine, of which she became a prominent member. Fame was on the horizon, but this wasn’t time-attack racing anymore, where speed and time were the only variables measuring success. This was drifting, where a higher degree of control and maneuverability was not only required but demanded; where bravado and showmanship reigned supreme. Noor was finally in her element. Like toreros mastering their craft, honing their senses to guilefully evade and dance around the bull, she took to the tracks like the latter took to bulls, not taming them, simply dominating. The *olés* became *yallas*, and a *matador de tracas* (track slayer) was born. Made in Palestine.

Her weapon of choice? As fate would have it, a 1998 BMW E30 600HP.

The world took notice, and the invitations followed: Between 2012 and 2015, she participated in a wide range of competitions in the Middle East and Europe, including the King of Europe race, the largest and by far most popular continental drifting event, in Budapest, Hungary, finishing 8th, and impressively, against all odds, to a 3rd-place finish the following year; Oman, Muscat Drift championship, finishing 5th; Jordan, Amman Arab D1 championship and Cupra Drift championship, finishing 8th and 4th, respectively; UAE Dubai, Drift UAE and Moto Drift championship, finishing 7th and 6th, respectively. Not to forget, also the highly selective Red Bull Car Park Drift, finishing 9th; UAE Abu-Dhabi, Drift UAE at the Yas Marina Circuit – where the prestigious Formula 1 Abu-Dhabi Grand Prix takes place – 7th place; and a number of other drifting endeavors in Croatia, Poland, and Slovakia, organized by the European Drift Show.

Nauseating, but bear with me.

At face value, you might say that though commendable, the results weren’t aligned with the portfolio of a serial winner, of a champion who ranks at the very top of her game. But context is key: she was racing against the finest that this motorsport had to offer, the *crème de la crème*, boys catalyzed into men upon years of training within the rigors of carefully tuned programs and highly developed institutional

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Noor pulls the hopes of Palestinian dreamers along with her own determined drive, dangling on her rearview mirror, serving both, in equal measure, as a memento of a tumultuous past and a beacon for future aspirations.

racing infrastructures that cater to an aspiring driver’s nutritional, athletic, and motivational necessities. More mundanely, yet equally important, they had access to normal, well-maintained public streets. What did Noor have? Sure, the streets of Ramallah might improve one’s reflexes in dodging a myriad of road hazards for the sanctity of one’s car, but hardly the place to develop consistency. What about professional tracks? Pffff. How about semi-professional? Still a stretch. Any track?! Sigh. Let’s just say that you have a better chance of seeing the billows from a smoke grenade – courtesy of our ever-empathic Israeli neighbors – than that produced from a rear-wheeled skid on a fresh tarmac within the security and assurances of an academy designed for this purpose only. Solely for racing. Solely for drifting.

(Credit where it’s due. Noor had previously visited the MYWAY Drift School in Hungary, twice, to ameliorate her drifting skills, but that’s hardly a substitute for the advantages the other competitors had).

She did have fame though, now. Fame was one of the few resources she had in abundance: BBC, CNN, Top Gear, Sky News, Sport360, and Al-Jazeera all lined up to track (pun intended) her progress. Paired with social media and her gender-defying exploits, she was



Noor Daoud behind the wheel.

catapulted to regional stardom, as evidenced by her near 500k followers. She had a platform now, an audience to influence, not by her thoughts or words, but by her actions. Pulling the hopes of Palestinian dreamers along with her own determined drive, dangling on her rear-view mirror, serving both, in equal measure, as a memento of a tumultuous past and a beacon for future aspirations.

Now living in Dubai since 2015, Noor is sponsored by the Pro-Drift Academy, still defiantly participating in races whilst serving as a drift instructor for future generations and a track instructor at the Dubai Autodrome. She also works as a fitness instructor/personal trainer, pushing her clients to the brink of their limits, yielding hard-earned results. "I like to give more than I take. I want to help people achieve their goals more than I want to achieve mine. This approach, the fact that I'm

making a difference in the lives of other people, gives me support and pushes me to do more for myself," she said.

I could sit here and regurgitate all the mainstream narratives associated with gender discrimination and all the perils associated with her acquired fame. After all, they were very present. For every message of encouragement she received, ten others of disparagement followed (from the ignorant to the downright obscene). To the detractors, I say quality over quantity. To the rest of us, who tire in this increasingly nihilistic political climate, with stifled freedom and dwindling opportunities; the occupation, in tandem with self-made incompetency, squeezing every last drop of fight out of our collective resolve. I say endure. Like she has.

Her weapon of choice? A new and improved BMW E46 850HP.

*termed after Palestinian activist Ahd Tamimi

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