

Introduction

FROM UPRISINGS TO PLAGUES

THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT that when historians reflect on the first two decades of the twenty-first century in the Middle East and North Africa, the revolutionary artists of this era will take their place besides the Dadaists of Zurich, the Beats of Greenwich Village, the metal pioneers of Birmingham, the Plastic People of Prague, the reggae artists of Trench Town, the “citizens” of Fela Kuti’s Kalakuta Republic, and the B-Boys and MCs building a new art form in the Bronx and Compton, as artists and scenes that simultaneously forced societies to look at themselves more honestly and, in so doing, pushed them forward—even if it was ultimately further than they were then willing or able to go. Indeed, the chapters that follow demonstrate how the conditions produced by the often horribly violent counterrevolutions have in fact inspired a new generation of countercultures and their attendant musics, which are each playing important roles and offering unique insights into the culturally as well as politically revolutionary eruptions across the Muslim-majority world.

Along with January 14, 2011, when Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali unceremoniously decamped to Saudi Arabia, ending his inglorious twenty-four-year rule, the removal of Egypt’s “Pharaoh,” Hosni Mubarak, on February 11 marked the culmination of a process of politicization of a new generation of Egyptians that had begun a decade earlier, in the year between the eruption of the al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000 and the attacks of September 11, 2001. Unfortunately, March 14, 2011, in the Bahraini capital of Manama, some twenty-five hundred kilometers to the east (and a bit south), marked the beginning of a new and much darker phase in the relationship between young people and the governments that ruled over them across the MENA. It was then, as I stood near a music store with members of one of Bahrain’s OG metal bands, Motör Militia, that I observed the fantastical

sight of American-made Saudi tanks, driven by South Asian mercenary soldiers and festooned with images of Bahrain's King on their turrets, roll by as they entered the country to crush that country's prodemocracy uprising.

When looking back, it's hard to miss just how prescient were the songs on Motör Militia's then forthcoming album, *Cloaked in Darkness*. Tracks like "Flames of Oppression," "Cries of the Innocent," and "al-Nakba" ("The Disaster," the term applied to the expulsion of three-quarters of a million Palestinians from their homeland in 1948) perfectly captured the sense of foreboding and even impending doom I'd felt a few hours before the tanks rumbled by as I walked through the soon-to-be-destroyed "Pearl," where protesters were camped out Tahrir-style, chanting for the downfall of the brutal minority-Sunni monarchy and its replacement with a multisectarian democratic system. Metal might not have provided the soundtrack most people think of when they look back on the Arab uprisings that were igniting like brush fires all across the MENA in the winter (and not, in fact, spring) of 2011. But for anyone who was listening, it both narrated the prehistory of the region-wide protests and foreshadowed how most would turn out. Floating slightly above the historical ground, heavy metal and its sister forms of alternative and extreme youth music such as hip hop, punk, and hardcore in all their various subgenres were among the most aesthetically embedded forms of cultural production and performance in the societies of the MENA and broader Muslim world, deeply shaped by and shaping the larger cultural and political landscapes of the societies in which they are embedded.

But things weren't always so foreboding and dark. When *Heavy Metal Islam* was published in July 2008, the situation actually seemed to be improving. Certainly the region was livening and even lightening up—at least culturally—at an ever-quickening pace. Four months after its publication, MTV Arabia, the regional franchise of the music television giant, aired a wonderfully funny promo video set in a bygone era (circa 1958) in Cairo, Baghdad, or perhaps Beirut. The clip began with a performance by a male crooner with a traditional orchestra of the era (think the Arab equivalent of Sinatra's or Count Basie's big bands), when suddenly the 'oud player stops playing the mellow "conversation music" *maqam* that's barely holding the audience's attention, the 'oud's sound changes from acoustic lute to brutally distorted guitar, and he starts shredding like he's playing a Gibson Flying V through a Marshall stack. The perfectly attired and coiffed, thin-mustachioed crooner adjusts his collar and tries to keep up with his suddenly berserk side man, but fails miserably; as the shredding grows more intense a bejeweled



FIGURE 3. Still for a commercial for MTV Arabia from 2008 featuring metal-themed parody of 1950s Arab cabaret scene. Anonymous 'oud shredder unknown, never identified.

woman in an evening gown swoons. After a solo that would make Steve Vai proud, the portly shredder smashes his 'oud, flashes the metal horns, and stage dives into the shocked audience as the swooning woman faints.

The commercial was certainly a long way from the days of the Satanic Metal affairs that had rocked the region, including the Gulf (where the ad was produced), during the previous decade. Not long after the video premiered, and by no means unrelated, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie spent a lovely weekend in Damascus with Syria's equally young and telegenic First Family, Bashar and Asma al-Assad, later recounted by Mrs. Assad for a *Vogue* feature. Among the takeaways of the profile was how shocked (and, we can presume, jealous) America's then First Celebrity Couple was at how the al-Assads could move around in public without—allegedly—any security detail, something, needless to say, Brangelina simply couldn't do. In their minds, it seems, this was clearly a sign of the high regard with which the Syrian people held their president and first lady, as well as the relative normalcy of their life (references to Scandinavian royals and prime ministers biking to the office were hard not to conjure). The two fashionably dressed power couples also shared stories of their mutual humanitarianism.

It goes without saying that the profile was removed from the website after Bashar started murdering his people en masse in the spring of 2011.

Less than a year after the Brangelina-Assad *matinée*, Damon Albarn, the Britpop icon and leader of Blur, came to Damascus to collaborate with the National Orchestra for Arab Music for the third Gorillaz album; he departed with a lush string and percussion arrangement that would highlight one of *Plastic Beach*'s standout tracks, "White Flag" (a plea for peace in the Middle East), which provided a two-minute book-ending on either side of the three-minute-and-forty-three-second track, perfectly setting off the typically minimalist funky body of the song. So enthused was Albarn with the collaboration that he brought the full band—now featuring live as well as virtual members—back to Damascus in July 2010 for a historic concert at the Damascus Citadel. National Public Radio covered the concert and declared—with some ignorance of other recent collaborations—that it "marked what we can only hope is a new era of music in the Middle East."

Today the metal, rap, punk, hardcore, and other youth-oriented music scenes in the Middle East, North Africa, and the rest of the Muslim-majority world exist in a contradictory state. On the one hand, except for pockets of extreme conservatism, most artists and fans have the ability to perform and listen to these forms of music more or less freely, as long as they are not overly political or antireligious. This represents a sea change in the politics of music whose impact on musicians was impossible to overstate. Even Saudi Arabia and Iran have seen greater tolerance for the music and certain variable and changing conditions. There has also been greater professionalization of the scenes, and the third generation of artists across this vast region has more opportunities for spreading its music and, through it, its culture than ever before.

Indeed, before the coronavirus pandemic closed down the world in early 2020 it had become *de rigueur* for rock and metal festivals across Europe to include one or more artists from the region, and the idea of metal from the region is no longer eyebrow raising. On the other hand, the idea of hijab-wearing women being a crucial part of the scenes still has the power to surprise if not shock people in the Arab/Muslim world as much as abroad, pointing to the ongoing centrality of gender as a marker of contestation and mystification surrounding Arab/Muslim identities, in and outside the region.

If the MTV Arabia video described above was funny precisely to the extent that the idea of Arab metal was still hard to fathom for the average television viewer in the Arab world, today metal and hip hop and rock more broadly have become far more normalized parts of the sonic landscape. This raises a fascinating question about what happens to scenes that begin deep underground when they are no longer so politically and socially marginalized

and in fact are increasingly accepted by the rest of society. During the last thirty years the EYM scenes created spaces where some of the most creative and committed young people, and particularly those outside the highly constricted societies, could gather together to create communities and attempt not merely to survive but also to imagine positive futures for themselves in environments that seemed otherwise devoid of hope. Once sub- or counter-cultural scenes move more into the open and are tolerated by mainstream society (and those in power) they often lose their subversive, never mind transversal and transformative, power. It's not yet clear whether these scenes will retain their hold on the young people who were previously drawn to them, especially if, when, or as they become more accepted and even, at least for hip hop and its offshoots (like trap or Egyptian *mahraganat*, which we'll meet in chapter 2), commercially viable. In countries like Morocco, many of its biggest hip hop stars are already tied to the King, much as Egypt's biggest pop stars were closely aligned with Mubarak during his reign.

As is the case everywhere else on the planet, the kind of (comparatively) extreme—or at least brutal—metal that characterizes many of the scenes in the MENA and larger Muslim world does not have the same wide commercial potential that hip hop does. When it comes to women-fronted metal groups, like female rappers their very existence points to the emergence of a more open and moderate culture in the society at large. The royal subvention of the female thrash band *Mystik Moods* in Morocco over a decade ago and the widespread coverage of the all-female metal band *Voice of Baceprot* (VoB) in Indonesia today attest to the symbolic power and value—in very different ways from the inside and outside—of female artists in patriarchal cultures, especially in genres that are traditionally dominated by and associated with men. Even more so when, as is the case with VoB, the band members all wear hijab while shredding, screaming, or blasting out beats, or, in the case of a few rappers, spitting out rhymes. Of course, what the hijab actually means in the context of the female musicians wearing it onstage, how much it represents something essential about the band or whether it's been overdetermined or even has changed over time, and whether it would actually “mean” anything to anyone outside the band and a limited number of fans if their music wasn't tied strongly to videos that establish their bona fides as seemingly “religious young female metal musicians” (because they're wearing hijab) all beg for answers.

What is clear is that at the same moment these genres have the unprecedented freedom to be recorded, performed, and listened to from Morocco to

Indonesia, the political and economic conditions that inspired and infused them (the same “structural adjustment” of economies great and small that first inspired the sound and lyrics of metal, hip hop, and punk starting in the later 1960s) are more salient than ever. Whether in a context of greater cultural freedom these scenes retain their subversive, subcultural, and countercultural values and sensibilities, which are often but not always coupled with increased political repression and economic marginalization, remains to be seen. The last decade has seen momentous changes not just to the peoples, societies, and music explored by *Heavy Metal Islam* and now this book, but also to the ways all are, or at least should be, studied. Equally important, the approaches and theories we use to study metal and other forms of hardcore music, and the people who inhabit these scenes, have been deeply impacted.

Unfortunately, in the last decade governments across the region have learned how to surveil, utilize, master, bypass, syphon off, or render inutile the power of the digital modes of cultural production, circulation, and consumption that helped enable the uprisings in the first place. Indeed, the defeat was doubly severe: not only were the streets reclaimed by governments and those supporting them through a combination of brute force and ideological manipulation; there was no longer the possibility of retreating to a still-inchoate Internet outside governments’ watchful eyes, as existed before the uprisings era.

And so today most of the musicians who rose to prominence from 2009 to 2013 have been either silenced by various means, imprisoned, exiled, or, in some cases, coopted. Several musical and other artists have been murdered by governments or ultraconservative forces. It remains unclear whether the various societies of the MENA have descended permanently from the liminal moment between the old and the new, authoritarianism and democracy, patriarchy and racism and true equality, extreme divergences in wealth and sustainable societies back into the patriarchal and authoritarian norms that long defined them. Or perhaps the majority of citizens remain stuck, unable to function with the status quo but unable to pass over to new ways of thinking, being, and relating to one another. Nor is it clear what role the hardcore music scenes that helped spawn the generation of 2009–13 might play in the forging of a new generation of subcultural and potentially countercultural voices across the MENA, one that has grown up in a very different sonic as much as political environment than their elders.

What I hope is clear from the author’s note and this introduction is that we can look at the metal, rap, and other musical artists, graffiti artists, guerrilla

filmmakers, 'zine makers, and all the other subversive and street artists as what in the spirit of Nietzsche we can term “cultural physicians,” uniquely placed to help diagnose and at least help begin to heal the pathologies of their societies. Egyptian revolutionary singer Ramy Essam succinctly explained it in April 2011 as we walked from a protest in front of the Syrian Embassy in Cairo to a nearby recording studio: “As a singer my job is to take in all feelings and sentiments and ideas of the people, and reflect these back to them in a more condensed and amplified form.” Since he explained this to me I’ve seen artists play a similar role, with the same level of self-consciousness, from the garbage-strewn streets of Beirut to the candle-lit vigils in Hong Kong and the mountains of Chiapas, where the Zapatista movement hosted several “CompArte” festivals that brought artists and activists together from across the world to teach and share their experiences and knowledge with one another (if ever there’s been the kind of synthesis of theory and praxis debated within the Frankfurt School, as discussed in the author’s note, it was there).

The music and artists featured in this book emerged at a unique moment in the history of authoritarian rule. The “authoritarian bargain,” in which these governments in the previous quarter century delivered significant improvements in social and economic development in return for acquiescence to their undemocratic rule, had broken down with the rise of neoliberal capitalism as it was imposed on the MENA and other regions of the Global South. By the 1990s and then the 2000s, increasing numbers of people not merely were forced to live at the economic margins of society but were becoming literally superfluous—of little or no value to systems that were devising new rationales and technologies for deploying violence to maintain order once the authoritarian bargain no longer held and growing to resemble the immensely corrupt and even criminal rackets scholars like Frankfurt School founder Max Horkheimer and sociologist Charles Tilly so expertly diagnosed them to be decades earlier.

Indeed, citizens of countries like Egypt and Tunisia, as well as large parts of Morocco, Syria, and so many other countries, were being treated far more like colonial subjects than as citizens. And so it wasn’t surprising that an Egyptian activist (and metalhead) I met during the eighteen-day uprising, when questioned by me as to why he was wearing an “End the [Israeli] Occupation” T-shirt, replied without hesitation that “because we’re occupied too.” If one thinks about the cauldron in which millions of young people across the MENA came of age in the late 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s—the repression of authoritarian rule, the violence of war, the increasingly

hemmed-in and often-superfluous existence imposed by a consolidated and corrupt neoliberal order, with the twin bogeymen of Western neocolonial ideologies and violent political Islamism added in for good measure—the roots of extreme music across the region are clear.

MIGRATING MUSIC

If *Heavy Metal Islam* served as a historical archive of sorts for the prehistory of the first great, and all too predictably tragic, revolutionary era of the twenty-first century, then the uprisings era proper constitutes the canvas upon which the history recounted in this book is painted. Together, they point to many possible avenues for future research on the MENA and larger Muslim world, the role of music in its and other youth cultures, and why young people engaged in creative expression, no matter how “extreme” it might sound, look, or read, are quite possibly shining a light onto the most pressing problems facing their societies. One issue that was important yet not central in 2008 was that of migration, and particularly its experience through exile and as refugees. The story of Reda Zine, one of the main interlocutors of *Heavy Metal Islam*, was emblematic of the move of millions of people from the southern and eastern Mediterranean to Europe. For well-educated young Arabs (and Turks, Iranians, and Pakistanis as well), fluent in one or more European languages, the move often involved attending university or graduate school in a European country and then ultimately making a life there. Thus Reda, fluent in French and Italian, attended the Sorbonne and ultimately moved to Italy, where he still lives, now as an Italian citizen who regularly returns home to Morocco. For the majority of young migrants, without high levels of education or significant economic means, however, the journey was “illegal” and thus clandestine, perilous and too often tragically deadly. For millions the situation has meant long periods of more or less hiding in plain sight in Europe while waiting for the chance—most often through a job or marriage—to obtain working or residency papers.

To the experience of economically, educationally, or artistically motivated migration, however, has now been (once again) added those of political exile in Europe. If Europe and North America have long exerted a strong pull factor on young artists, activists, and cultural creatives more broadly, the push factor of escaping political repression and even threats to their lives, never mind freedom, has the foremost consideration for this generation of