Rap and Revolt in the Arab World

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Rap is just starting. I think before me, before the Tunisian revolution, rap was ignored here. People are paying attention now. It’s really popular, it’s the new thing. But it’s always been there in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria.
—El Général

Despite its relative novelty as a form of artistic expression in the Arab cultural scene, rap music emerged in the last decade or so as a fresh force of sociocultural and political dissent that cannot be disregarded in the study of youth and Arab culture. In a world that is currently shot through with insurrection and revolt, rap music is not only part and parcel of the exponential curve of change sweeping across, among others, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and Morocco but also an indispensable feature of Arab culture itself or, at least, of what will have become of Arab culture in the aftermath of its ongoing transformation by rap and hip hop.

This essay approaches the phenomenon of Arab rap music as an emergent form of cultural and communal intelligibility and solidarity whose simultaneous influence on and indebtedness to global hip hop and youth cultural movements has transformed it into an increasingly transnational collaborative project, bringing together a heterogeneous array of artists despite their dispersed geopolitical locations. While the history of rap music in the United States is replete with East Coast/West Coast dichotomies, clashes, and lethal rivalries as, for instance, in the case of Tupac Shakur (2Pac) and Christopher Wallace (the Notorious B.I.G.) in the mid-1990s culture wars, the development of rap music into a worldwide youth phenomenon should be seen as a result of intense circulations, exchanges, borrowings, adaptations, hybridizations, and graftings of global
and local forms of musical expression and cultural empowerment. I firstly approach Arab hip-hop culture as a highly transnational and collaborative endeavor—really, the traveling form par excellence of youth cultural production, consumption, and mobilization. Secondly, I approach Arab and Tunisian rap music as an integral element of the rich cultures of resistance to colonial, neocolonial, and late capitalist entrenchments in the Arab world. Much like decolonial Arab and Tunisian film and literature, whether avant-gardist or popular, rap music has contributed to the dissemination of a culture of dissent, wakeful to societal and economic problems and mindful of popular preoccupations and concerns. In their haste to summarily dismiss rap music as a commodity detritus of consumer culture—or, worse, as a vehicle of Euro-American cultural imperialism—Arab commentators, cultural critics, pundits, and detractors tout court often miss the opportunity to take stock of its entangled transnational and collaborative genealogy as well as of its untiringly anti-imperialist and dissident dimensions.¹ Thanks to its intensely content-based form, rap music is amenable to transparent, straightforward, and dense yet unequivocal articulations of popular sentiments and sociopolitical grievances as well as of transformative, feasible, and perfectible futures.

Arab and Tunisian rap music has emerged, above all, as an unlikely democratizing force not only in the field of music and arts in general—where a great number of marginalized youth have found in it a viable career path and an accessible means to intervene in the highly commercial and competitive fiefdoms of popular culture—but also in the public sphere where rappers have adopted an activist agenda and spoken loudly in the name of the poor and underprivileged, conveying their political and socioeconomic malaises to the powers that be. I devote a major part of this essay to such important songs as Psyco M’s “Manipulation” (2010) and El Général’s “Rais Lebled” (“Head of State”) (2010), among others, and discuss the crucial role they played in capturing and articulating the mass discontent of Tunisians with Ben Ali’s authoritarian regime and, above all, in inspiring the popular uprising that has shaken the country and the entire region since 17 December 2010. To speak about the democratizing force of Tunisian rap music is to underline its largely amateurish nature and its committed political agenda. The same can be said about the venture of Arab rap in its entirety. Arab rap music is not only revitalizing but also resemanticizing and enlarging the concept of committed art (al-Fann al-Multazim), which has been exclusively associated in the Arab world with the avant-gardist aesthetic and literary movements of the 1950s and 1960s. At the same time that hip-hop culture and rap music seem to have lost their political edge and become largely mainstream in the United States and Europe, Arab and Tunisian rap is still shot through with insurrection and revolt.²
The Rise of Rap and the Arab Scene

Hip-hop is the voice of this generation. Even if you didn’t grow up in the Bronx in the ’70s, hip-hop is there for you. It has become a powerful force. Hip-hop binds all of these people, all of these nationalities, all over the world together.
—DJ Kool Herc

Although it is not so farfetched to imagine that rap music could have originated in Arab culture (given that Islamic and pre-Islamic Arab culture boasts a robust poetic and oral tradition, not to mention that Arabic is traditionally a suitable vehicle for the composition of saja’, or rhymed prose, which is central to rap lyrical production), the point is that much of the current vitality of Arab culture hinges on the strident pace of youth and popular trends of artistic production revolving around hip-hop aesthetics and rap music. Undoubtedly, the fact that hip hop emerged at the margins of urban America in the South Bronx in the late 1970s and early 1980s, offering a voice for marginalized and racialized black youth in their continued struggle against white supremacy and the nefarious machinations of neoliberal and capitalist ideologies, proved of particular appeal to Arab youth not only in pre-1948 and occupied Palestinian territories but also elsewhere in the Arab world where conniving forms of foreign and indigenous colonialisms prevail.

The worldwide spread of hip hop and rap music pertains less to the globalization of American culture than to the emergence of a transnational vision of emancipation that has invariably resonated with oppressed peoples across the world. Since by the onset of World War I almost nine-tenths of the world’s landmass had been either colonized, settled, or controlled in some way, this vision of emancipation is deeply rooted in the anticolonial struggles that took place in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe throughout the twentieth century, particularly after World War II, and that continue to this day in Tibet, Kashmir, and historical Palestine, among others. What muddies the waters is that the legacy of colonialism, entangled as it is with various neocolonial and imperial encroachments, has continued to produce and reproduce almost all aspects of material reality not only in the newly independent nation-states, but also in the imperial West, namely, in the United States and Europe, where minorities of African, Asian, and Arab descent have been and continue to be at the receiving end of numerous forms of oppression and racism. The concatenation of struggles for freedom from the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s to the more recent banlieue riots in France should, therefore, be seen as local appropriations and materializations of an unyielding transnational scramble for freedom and justice inspired by the legacy of anticolonial and revolutionary movements.
The emergence and circulation of hip-hop culture, along with various arts movements, is so entangled in these highly anticolonial forces of liberation whose transnational flows and forms of exchange range from emancipatory imaginaries and strategies of resistance to tactics of survival that it is difficult, not to say impossible in the end, to calculate the share of credit that should be allocated to any given decolonial culture, movement, artist, or rap crew for the rise and spread of hip hop and rap. Following Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, it has become customary to trace the origins of hip hop to African American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture in the inner spaces of New York City. Several other studies have, however, unraveled the threads of other cultures constitutive of its dense and colorful loom. The geocultural and temporohistorical origins of hip hop are too jumbled to be systematically disentangled and verified. All the more so given that hip-hop culture is not only composed of rap music or rapping (aka Emceeing, MCing, or just rhyming), which is the main focus of this essay, but also of an entire aesthetic continuum, including DJing (aka Deejaying, turntablism, sampling, mixing, and scratching), break dancing (aka Breaking, B-Boying, and B-girling), and graffiti writing (aka aerosol art), not to mention beat boxing, street entrepreneurialism, self-knowledge, street language, and attitude as well as street fashion, styles, and walking movements.

The current diversity, overall richness, and coherence of hip-hop culture across the globe testify to the fact that it developed collaboratively, gradually, and steadily into a transnational, multicultural, and multidirectional assemblage. As DJ Kool Herc points out:

> When I started DJing back in the early ’70s, it was just something that we were doing for fun. . . . The parties I gave . . . became a rite of passage for young people in the Bronx. Then the younger generation came in and started putting their spin on what I had started. I had set down the blueprint, and all the architects started adding on this level and that level. Pretty soon, before we even knew it, it had started to evolve.4

Hip hop’s collaborative and transnational heritage cannot be overstressed: as Dick Hebdige and David Toop demonstrate, hip hop is deeply rooted in a range of transnational cultural and aesthetic flows from the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, and Asia, whether by way of reggae (so central to the pioneering mixing and sampling of Jamaican-American DJ Kool Herc, whose 1970s street parties and Herculords speaker systems are unanimously credited for inaugurating the entire hip-hop movement), Brazilian Capoeira, and Asian Kung Fu, as well the dancing traditions of West Africa, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic (so central to what is commonly known as breakdancing), or by way of jazz, blues,
Afro-Cuban Rumba, Puerto Rican Plena, Jamaican toasting, the spoken word of West African griots, and even Italian opera (so central to rap language and break beats, especially in the trailblazing work of hip-hop legend Afrika Bambaataa, founder of the Zulu Nation in 1973–1974, which brought rap to Egypt and the Arab world). Of note here is the fact that MC Solaar, pioneer of French rap, first discovered the Zulu Nation in Egypt at age twelve in 1981—a detail that testifies to the complex and intractable origins of rap music. I have no interest here in mapping all the transnational roots of hip hop and its chain collaborative endeavor, much less in engaging with renewed arguments about its undeniable blackness. I agree with Danny Hoch’s conclusion that

Hip-hop art is so multilayered that it could never have been born solely from the African continent, or solely from a poor community in the United States without African diaspora traditions. Neither could it have been spawned solely from a polycultural community in Durban or Barcelona or from a rural Missouri community devastated by Reaganomics. It could only have been born of the fusion—and profusion—of all of these complex conditions.

What is of particular interest to me in what follows is that the many scholarly reflections on the origins of hip hop have compelled cultural historians to start discerning and acknowledging how hip hop has been also influenced by Islamic themes and Arabic terms, particularly with the increasing prominence of the Nation of Islam and the breakaway Five Percenters in the second half of twentieth-century America. “Many ‘Old School’ rap songs are flavored,” as Hishaam Aidi rightly points out, “with references to Islam and the Nation of Islam.” Afrika Bambaataa, Big Daddy Kane, and Paris, among others, variably reckoned with the undeniable force of Islam in African America; others such as Mos Def, Q-Tip, Ice Cube, Lauren Hill, Talib Kweli, K-Solo, and MC Ren came directly under the influence of the Nation of Islam. Ever since Public Enemy’s Chuck D famously rhymed, “Farrakhan’s a prophet that I think you ought to listen to,” the Nation of Islam’s message of Black nationalism became more and more appealing to African American youth. This was not the case, however, with the Five Percenters who broke away from the Nation of Islam in 1964 and went on to establish an idiosyncratic theology that revolved roughly around the rejection of the tenets of the Nation of Islam (where Wallace Fard Muhammad was considered Allah) and the adoption of the idea that only five percent of humanity are the “poor righteous teachers”—those who know the truth and acknowledge the true divine nature and esoteric powers of the Black man as God or ALLAH (Arm Leg Leg Arm Head) and the Black woman as Earth.

While Father Allah, the founder of the Five Percenters, formerly
known as Clarence 13X, was murdered in 1969 and the Five Percenters labeled as blasphemous by some and as criminal or security threats by others, their thought and theology exerted a lasting influence on such prominent hip-hop artists as Rakim, the God MC and master of flow, Eric B. and Rakim, Busta Rhymes, the members of the Wu-Tang Clan, Mobb Deep, Poor Righteous Teachers, Killarmy, Lakim Shabazz, Brand Nubian, X-Clan, Nas, Big Daddy Kane, Queen Latifah, and Sister Souljah, among several others. As more and more disaffected minority youth gravitated toward both hip hop and Islam in the inner cities of the United States (and later Europe), Islamic rap emerged as a hip-hop subgenre and cultural movement, blending the language of Islam and the rhetoric of black national consciousness. The notion of Islamic rap, though, remains very unspecific, especially given the incommensurable ideological differences between hip hoppers who followed the teachings of the Nation of Islam as opposed to those who gravitated toward the Five Percenters. Native Deen, however, a group from the Washington, DC, area, comprising three African Americans, Joshua Salaam, Naeem Muhammad, and Abdul-Malik (none of whom is a member of the Nation of Islam), developed a distinct trend in Muslim rap in which they avoided the use of sampling and turntables and played instead traditional drums, which they deemed consistent with their version of Islam. Despite the diversity of Islamic hip hop—its incompatible differences and proclivities—it remains unanimously animated by a common denominator: freedom from injustice.

The development of a far-reaching cultural movement like hip hop has been and continues to be the result of a transnational collaborative project anchored in a worldly vision of emancipation and endowed with a progressive agenda that challenges the status quo and empowers downtrodden youth across the globe. Even contemporary mainstream hip hoppers such as Jay-Z, Outcast, and Eminem have at times rapped in the politically conscious tradition of Grandmaster Flash, N.W.A., and Public Enemy. In the wake of 9/11 and the war on Iraq, they produced songs that condemned the Bush administration and its imperial adventures in the Arab Middle East. No wonder, then, that the focus of Islamic rap itself shifted from Islam in America to global Islam and US foreign policy in the Middle East. While Islam initially informed the emergence of hip hop in African American ghettos, rappers of Muslim and Arab descent in Europe and the United States in particular sought instead to influence how Islam and Arabs are portrayed in mainstream media by rhyming against the joined forces of Islamophobia, Arabophobia, Zionism, and imperialism. Of note here are not only such North American groups and artists as The Philistines, Ragtop, The Narcycist, Excentrik, N.O.M.A.D.S., Omar Offendum, Iron Sheik, Tru Bloo, and the Hammer Bros.; but also British Palestinian Shadia Mansour, British Moroccan Master Mimz, and British Iraqi Lowkey;
the Danish-based trio Outlandish; Moroccan Dutch Appa, Salah Edin, and Cilvaringz; the Swedish Palestinian rapper Palestine a.k.a. Ref-UG; Beurette rapper Saliha; IAM, Beur rapper Freeman, Franco-Tunisian rapper Tunisiano, as well as Beur group Alliance Ethnik.

While the subgenre of Islamic rap demonstrates the extent to which mainstream hip-hop culture in the United States has been infused with Islamic themes and Arabic words before there were any parallel Arab artists MCing or DJing in the Arab world, the emergence of diasporic Arab and Muslim rap took place at almost the same time as the emergence of rap in the Middle East and North Africa: roughly in the mid-1990s even though it can be traced back to the late 1970s and 1980s when the Zulu Nation arrived to the region. Early Arab interest in rap was mainly celebratory, consumptive, or mimetic but if Maghrebian raï were to be taken as the precursor—or at least the cultural equivalent to rap and hip hop—then Arabs must have started rapping before the rise of rap in the Bronx (for, Algerian raï dates back to the 1930s and its longevity and maturity were well established by the time Cheb Khaled’s hit single, “Didi,” became a worldwide sensation in the early 1990s). If raï was indeed Arab rap before Arab rap, IAM’s qualification of Cheb Khaled as the “le Public Enemy arabe” (“the Arab Public Enemy”) should be taken seriously. All the more so given that IAM acknowledged the importance of Khaled in a raï-like rap song titled in the original English, “Do the Raï Thing,” a pun on Khaled’s musical style and on Spike Lee’s 1989 film Do the Right Thing. What is more, the song is included in IAM’s 1991 widely acclaimed album, . . . De la planète Mars ( . . . From Planet Mars), which painted the broad strokes of present-day French rap.

While the Arab origins of rap might be disputed along lines of authenticity and locality—according to which Algerians, Palestinians, Tunisians, or Moroccans would pinpoint an indigenous precursor or cognate—I’d like to reiterate that Arab rap, like African American rap, is the result of the very same transnational collaborative endeavors aforementioned. What distinguishes Arab rap, however, is that it is one of the most politically committed local articulations and acculturations of contemporary global hip-hop culture. Not surprisingly, Arab rap has first emerged in relation to the most vexing and defining question of Arab contemporaneity: Palestine. It owes much of its current prominence to the unprecedented success and fame of DAM’s explosive 2001 single “Meen Irhabi?” (“Who Is the Terrorist?”). In the wake of al-Aqsa Intifada, 9/11, the war on terror, and the Euro-American media crusade against Arabs and Muslims, the song was unequivocal in its indictment of Israeli occupation and of Israel’s shameless rhetoric of democracy and peace and practice of dispossession and state terrorism. DAM (a Palestinian Arab rap crew from Lyd, inside the 1948 borders of Israel, composed of brothers Tamer and Suhell Nafar and
Mahmoud Jreri) was profiled in Jackie Salloum’s eye-opening and highly acclaimed 2008 documentary, *Slingshot Hip Hop*, along with PR (Palestinian Rapperz) from Gaza, solo artists Abeer from Lyd, and Arapeyat and Mahmoud Shalabi from Akka. Other Palestinian rappers and rap crews of variable influence inside and outside Palestine include NWR from Israel, the Ramallah Underground, Checkpoint 303 and Boikutt from the West Bank, and Clotaire K, Aks’ser, I-Voice, and DJ Lethal Skillz from the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. While Palestinian rap arose from worse conditions than those of the embattled streets of the Bronx, it has not yet received the global attention it deserves despite—or, perhaps, because—of its combustible lyrics and uncompromising critique of Israel’s splintering occupation of historical Palestine.

The other national traditions of rap music in the Arab world emerged from similar contexts, except that instead of Israeli occupation, Egyptians, Moroccans, Tunisians, and Algerians, among others, have for so long submitted to the indigenous forms of occupation perpetrated by their own nonrepresentative and ruthless governments. Censorship has become the litmus test of healthy dictatorship. Ironically, however, censorship became simultaneously the signal of rap’s vitality even in theocratic Saudi Arabia, where local rapper Klash has been arrested several times and where the 2008 album *When the Desert Speaks*, by Emirati hip-hop duo Desert Heat, was banned. Algeria, in which the first rap song—Hamidou’s “Jawla Fe Lil” or “Night Walk”—was recorded as early as 1985, boasts now more than 160 rappers or rap crews, including Hamma Boys, Intik, and MBS, the three earliest groups to come to prominence in the early 1990s, and Lotfi Double Kanon, Algeria’s most popular rapper (especially in Tunisia). Intik and MBS have recorded albums with Universal and Sony. Intik’s songs and performances were censored in Algeria in 2000 because of their untiring diatribe against the Algerian authorities; Intik continued to prosper in France, however, and went as far as to call the Peoples’ Democratic Republic of Algeria “the Peoples’ Republican Dictatorship of Algeria.” After Algeria, Morocco is probably the next most vibrant hip-hop nation in the Arab world. Apart from DJ Key, H-Kayne, Fnaïre, Bigg, Brownfingaz, Mot de Passe, and FatiShow, all of whom are profiled in Jennifer Needleman and Joshua Asen’s 2007 groundbreaking documentary film, *I Love Hip Hop in Morocco*, the most prominent Moroccan rappers and rap crews also include Casa Crew, Zanka Flow, the fusion group Hoba Hoba Spirit, and the female rap crew Tigresse Flow.

The Arab rap scene is very much in flux today, with so many rappers and rap crews springing up in the heat of the Arab uprisings. Each Arab country boasts its own rappers or rap crews: MTM, Y-Crew, MC Deeb, Asfalt, and Arabian Knightz from Egypt; Aks’ser, Rayess Bek, Clotaire K, Ashekman, Fareeq el Atrash, Malikah, and RAmez from Lebanon;
JoMC’z, Autostrad, and Ostaz Samm from Jordan; S19, AJ Hagage, Zaid, and OG Thug from Yemen; Qusai, Klash, and Dark2Men from Saudi Arabia; DJ Outlaw, The Mystro, Flipperachi, and May Alqasim from Bahrain; Lowkey, The Narcicyst, Timz, and NiZ-R from Iraq; Eslam Jawaad and Sham MCs from Syria; Ibn Thabit, Khaled M., Sheeba, Street Souljahz, Malik L., Guys Underground, B-Way, MC Swat, and Music Masters from Libya. While they initially adopted English or French as their language of choice, the majority of Arab rappers now rap in their own local dialects, making their novel art a more accessible and authentic musical genre. With few exceptions, Arab rap contains no expletives or sexually explicit lyrics. It has, however, tackled a wide spectrum of issues, including political disenfranchisement, religion, prostitution, sex, drugs, democracy, freedom (of expression), war, Zionism, terrorism, and American imperialism. Unsurprisingly, Arab rappers have often gone underground and faced an uphill struggle in their mostly amateurish yet activist careers. Not only do Arab rappers clash with the status quo, but they have also clashed with each other, and with other artists and public personalities, giving rise to various public controversies.

Rap music in the Arab world has become a force to be reckoned with in the public sphere. While it did not directly spark the Arab uprisings, rap has kept alive the contestatory instincts on which the early demonstrations hinged. In Tunisia, for instance, Psyco M’s fifteen-minute-long song, “Manipulation,” fueled a public controversy because it mounted an explicit attack on such public figures as Sawsen Mâalej, an actress who routinely appears on Nessma TV, and Olfa Youssef, author of the highly contentious book, حيرة مسلمة (The Bewilderment of a Muslim Woman). In one of her regular appearances on the popular TV show Ness Nessma, Mâalej read a comic poem packed with sexual innuendos and, at one point, made an explicit reference to the male genital organ of Fawez Ben Temessek, the anchor of the show. In her aforementioned book, Olfa Youssef engages with such hot-button issues as female inheritance, marriage, divorce, masturbation, bisexuality, and homosexuality from a deconstructive and psychoanalytic perspective; grosso modo, she foregrounds fringes of open texture in several verses of the Qur’an to conclude that current Islamic law and jurisprudence leave much to be desired insofar as they claim conclusive and definitive adjudications upon questions that the Qur’an itself leaves unresolved. Psyco M’s polemical rap song situates Mâalej and Youssef in a long lineage of secularist thinkers and nationalist leaders that ranges from the Sharif Hussein of Mecca, Lawrence of Arabia, and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to Gamal Abdel Nasser, Qasim Amin, Tahar Haddad, Habib Bourguiba, and Nouri Bouzid, all of whom have, according to Psyco M, been involved in a Euro-American crusade and Zionist conspiracy against Islam and the Islamic Caliphate. The inflammatory
lyrics discredit both Mâalej’s credibility to speak for Tunisian women (all the while presenting a negative role model that encourages sexual openness and alcohol consumption) and Youssef’s credentials to interpret the Qur’an better than Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (all the while “dressed up like Naomi Campbell”).20 The song went viral on Facebook and YouTube and polarized the public sphere between those who supported Psyco M and those who supported Mâalej and Youssef, both of whom ended up filing a defamation suit against the rapper after they allegedly received death threats from anonymous people.21

In his defense/defiance, Psyco M claimed that the song did nothing but recap and relay popular opinion and that he rapped, after all, in the Psyco M persona he created and not at all in his own name as Mohamed El Jendoubi. While Psyco M explained in a press conference held on 18 December 2010 that he did not target Mâalej and Youssef as individuals, only the ideas they represented and propagated, he was still held accountable by some for the regressivist-salifist tendencies and leanings that informed his combustible lyrics.22 By and large, the controversy gradually died out as public attention turned to the sociopolitical protests raging in Sidi Bouzid in the aftermath of Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation (17 December 2010), but there is no gainsaying the fact that it incubated and charted the broad strokes of an intense public debate that would gain momentum a few days after the deposition of Ben Ali and that would oppose so-called Islamists to self-professed secularists. Both camps have been locked in an endless ideological clash, especially at a time when the Al-Nahda (Renaissance) Party, long censored under Bourguiba and Ben Ali, has emerged as a major player in Tunisia’s postrevolutionary political scene. One notable episode in this ideological clash followed immediately upon the screening of Nadia El Fani’s Ni Allah ni maitre (Neither Allah, nor Master) on 26 June 2011, a film that showcased atheism and blasphemy in Tunisia and called for a secularist state, as its other title clearly indicates, Laïcité Inchallah (Laicism God Willing).23 Allegedly, a bunch of bearded Islamists stormed into the entrance of CinemAfricArt and smashed its glass doors and display cases in protest against the gratuitously provocative and offensive message and implications of the film for the sensitivities of most Tunisians, be they observant or nonobservant Muslims. While Al-Nahda decried the attack and reiterated its renunciation of violence, it ended up nonetheless receiving much of the blame for what happened, especially in the mainstream, unbendingly secularist media such as the Nessma and Hannibal TV networks. What I find ironic in contrasting these two controversial episodes (Psyco M’s and El Fani’s) is that both camps (Islamists and secularists alike) have clearly played the role of the censor in alternating succession. Self-professed secularists denied Psyco M’s right to free speech when he attacked the symbols of secularism and Arab
nationalism and called for a revalorization of Islam and Islamic values, but they reasserted that very same right to free speech when it came to a documentary film whose message coincided with their agenda. So-called Islamists are guilty of exactly the same in reverse.

At stake is not just whether free speech should be set some clear limits but whether postrevolutionary Tunisia should become an officially secular state after it has been practically so since its independence (even though the first article of the constitution states that “Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state. *Its religion is Islam,* its language is Arabic, and its type of government is the Republic”). While I believe that Tunisia should identify as a civic state (دولة مدنية), neither secular/secularist nor Islamic/Islamist, it is lamentable, not to say outrageous in the end, that this debate has derailed the focus of Tunisians from the urgent task of completing the revolution to the snares of identity politics and culture talk (which have been constantly fueled by speculative and induced fears of an impending Islamist takeover). Not that these are unimportant issues, but in the midst of an unfinished revolution, they boiled down to nothing more than a red herring—really, a weapon of mass distraction contrived by the interim government in concert with secularist elites and Francophiles as well as the media to divert attention away from the counterrevolutionary encroachments on newfound civil rights and liberties. The counterrevolutionary forces sought at the time to discredit the legitimacy of popular demonstrations and to create the moral and sociopolitical panic necessary to crack down on any future protests against the economic policies and political actions of the interim government of Béji Caïd Essebsi (which is exactly what happened on 15 July 2011, when riot police fired tear gas inside the Qasba Mosque, interrupting the ongoing Friday prayers, wreaking havoc in the Hafsid-built mosque, and preempting the much-anticipated sit-in protest in the Qasba Government Square).

The importance of Psyco M’s “Manipulation” in this context cannot be overstressed since it unmasks the dissimulative, psychosocial, and manipulative strategies that systems of government make use of to impose the status quo and restore what Essebsi has insistently referred to as the “reverence for the state” (السماح للدولة). Psyco M has continued to be active in the aftermath of the revolution and has performed regularly in public; his latest songs include “Jeu Politique,” “Complot,” and “Message.” The latter comes indeed in the form of specific messages directed to, among others, the interim government, the secularists, the Islamists, the shadow government and the remnants of Ben Ali’s party, RCD (Constitutional Democratic Rally), as well as to specific media personalities such as Hela Dhaouadi of Hannibal TV. Despite the fact that he started rapping in 1999, Psyco M was banned from performing in concert or on television under Ben Ali and received death threats in addition to routine harassments. Yet,
he persevered and became Tunisia’s number-one “Net rapper” in 2010; one of his Facebook pages counts more than 253,302 fans.25

In addition to Psyco M, the Tunisian rap scene now boasts dozens of rappers and rap crews, including Balti, Guito’n, Ahmed Mihoub, BlacK EyE, Kenzi, DJ Costa, Emino, Delahoja, Lak3y, Mastaziano, Phenix, Weld El 15, Nordo, SinCerO, and Wajdi Mascott. Balti is perhaps one of the most famous and well-established prerevolutionary rappers, who has been accorded the title of the official rapper of Ben Ali’s government since he rapped about every controversial issue on the table except the system of corruption fostered by Ben Ali and his cronies; his song “Passe Partout” (a damning portrait of Tunisian girls as prostitutes and one-night-standers) provoked public responses from parents and families as well as rappers (such as DJ Costa, Emino, and Lotfi Abdelli, who collaborated on “Cha-wahtou som3et lebled,” or “You Stained the Reputation of the Country,” a response song and corrective to Balti’s invective). Despite his overall silence on Ben Ali’s corrupt regime, Balti did in fact rap in the politically conscious tradition of hip hop: his song “Ca Fait Mal” (“It Hurts”) is a moving exposition of the socioeconomic problems that gnaw at the very vitals of Tunisian society.

The Rise of El Général and the Tunisian Revolution

A music innocuous enough to sell burgers to old people is not going to rile up anyone up to revolt or resist.
—Marc Bamuthi Joseph

When he recorded his greatest claim to fame, “Rais Lebled” (“Head of State”), El Général was practically unknown in Tunisia’s underground rap scene, although he had by then been rapping for two years. Not even his earlier song, which had an equally provocative title and content, “Sidi El-Rais” (“Mr. President”), was known much beyond his own small circle of amateur rappers and fans. The fact that YouTube and Dailymotion had been banned in Tunisia since 2 November 2007 did not help to get the message out. After “Rais Lebled” was uploaded to Facebook, however, it was quickly picked up by various media outlets inside and outside Tunisia until El Général’s Facebook page was blocked.26 Tunivisions magazine featured the song in an article that was also immediately censored. The powerful lyrics of the song embodied El Général’s fine-tuned political sensibility and eagerness for change on, ironically, the very same day that the country was celebrating the twenty-third anniversary of the “blessed change,” the seizure of power on 7 November 1987 by Ben Ali from the eighty-three-year-old and self-proclaimed “president for life” Habib Bourguiba. Having rounded up a team of doctors who attested to Bourguiba’s mental and physical inability to perform his duties, Ben Ali
snatched power in what amounted more to a palace coup (backed up by a constitutional maneuver of Article 57 of the now obsolete Tunisian constitution) than to a transition of power or anything worthy of celebration. Yet, by constantly ennobling and blowing it out of proportion as a major turning point in Tunisia’s postcolonial history, Ben Ali manufactured its legitimacy and the legitimacy of his entire rule afterward.

Although Ben Ali nullified the title of president for life (which Bourguiba acquired in 1975) and limited the tenure of the president to two five-year terms in major constitutional reforms he initiated in 1988, he did seek and win the right to run for a third term in 1998. He then won a fourth term following the widely successful 2002 referendum that abolished term limits altogether and raised the age limit to seventy-five. Not only did Ben Ali outstay his constitutional welcome but he also trampled under his feet the very constitutional reforms he spearheaded and had trumpeted again and again upon his assumption of power in 1989. It became clear that while Ben Ali abolished the title of president for life, he stopped at nothing to stay in power: he sought and won a fifth term in 2009 and was already preparing the ground to run for a sixth term in 2014. As US ambassador to Tunisia William J. Hudson reported in a cable dated 1 September 2006, “One of the standard jokes about President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali (usually delivered only half in jest) is that he has three goals for his presidency: to stay in power; to stay in power; and to stay in power.”

The campaign calling for President Ben Ali to run in the 2014 presidential elections that was well under way by August 2010 (backed by a petition that sixty-five Tunisian celebrities and public figures allegedly signed). El Général’s “Rais Lebled” can be seen as part of a counter-campaign that was raging in social media and in cyberspace as a whole. It was clear that Ben Ali had no intention of leaving office at the end of his fifth term: the fact that he reiterated twice in his last speech to the nation on 13 January 2011 “no presidency for life” (لا رئاسة مدى الحياة) is ample evidence that he was actually trying to appease Tunisians rather than to reassert an irrevocable principle of his presidency to which he did not renew his commitment ever since he took power in 1987. El Général’s song created a buzz on Facebook. It became a party crasher of sorts during the twenty-third anniversary of the “blessed change” before it transformed into a whistle-blower, especially in the aftermath of Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation on 17 December 2010, an act that kick-started the popular demonstrations in Sidi Bouzid and elsewhere in Tunisia.

The video clip of the song went viral on the Internet not only because of the shocking severity and timeliness of the message-cum-diagnosis that El Général delivers to Ben Ali, but also because of its sincerity, transparency, and accessibility. Above all, it was well conceived, well wrought, and well rounded. The underground is not only the musical genre of the song,
but also its central conceit; it is an extended metaphor for going under-
neath Ben Ali’s facade democracy and digging deeper into the regime’s
Mafioso-style gangsterism.29 The opening segment of the video clip, which
features Ben Ali pleading with a schoolboy to speak, sets the stage for the
entire song.30 This opening segment was actually taken from the footage
of Ben Ali’s surprise visit on 4 December 1992 to Zouakra and Barrama,
two villages in the governorate of Siliana, situated in the interior of the
country, between seventy and eighty miles from the capital, Tunis. Ben
Ali was known, particularly in the early years of his presidency, for making
such “surprise visits” (زيارات فجائيّة) to various towns and government
offices to see for himself the living and working conditions of Tunisians in
underprivileged or “shadow areas” (مناطق الظلّ). The visit to Zouakra and
Barrama would become a historic event for his entire regime since it led to
the inception of the Fonds de Solidarité Nationale (FNS) or the National
Solidarity Fund (aka 26–26, the account number where Tunisians and
non-Tunisians alike can make donations) in support of vulnerable and
impoverished rural areas.

During his visit to Zouakra and Barrama, Ben Ali stopped to observe
firsthand the lack of basic resources such as potable water, hospitals, elec-
tricity, schools, and navigable roads in these two isolated villages, and he
was genuinely moved. He spoke with various villagers from farmers to
schoolteachers, and particularly with schoolboys whom he visited in their
classroom. The opening segment of the video clip of El Général’s rap
song, “Rais Lebled,” portrays Ben Ali trying to have a conversation with
one of the schoolboys in the classroom he visited. Ben Ali approaches the
anguished and fear-struck boy, bends down to the level of his table, and
addresses him as follows:

أشبيك أنت، أشبيك تقلقتم أنت؟
إحكيبي شبيك، تحس تسولي حاجة؟ أؤ؟

What’s the matter with you? Why are you worried?
Go ahead and tell me. Do you want to tell me something? Eh?31

The schoolboy remains silent. Ben Ali moves on to another boy, who
not only freezes in his seat but also bursts into tears, apparently shocked
and awed by the president’s stature and bullying demeanor. El Général
was born in 1988 and was four years old when Ben Ali made his visit to
Zouakra and Barrama; he belongs to the same generation of boys Ben
Ali was eager to converse with, which is why it makes sense for him to
identify with and speak up for them. El Général prefaches the video of his
song with this segment showing Ben Ali’s abortive talk with the two boys
so as to make the song a response to Ben Ali’s insistent incitements to
discourse. The song, however, shifts the context with fast-forward speed from 1992 to 2010 (or 2011, as in the song itself): El Général’s persona plays the role of the schoolboy who was asked by the president to speak and failed to do so in 1992, but he implicitly reserved the right to respond and does so eighteen years later in the form of a rap song. By situating his song as a belated reply to the president’s questions (or appeals to speak), El Général deftly and tactfully rids himself of the otherwise unwarranted and unsolicited nature of the song-cum-response. In other words, the opening segment here becomes not only the historical and contextual anchor of the song, but also its logical (and legal) justification, its raison d’être and defensive mechanism against any governmental backlash (apart from, of course, the most obvious one: censorship).

Lest he be misconstrued, El Général insists time and again in his lyrics that his song be seen as a message from a child to the president. The power of the song lies not only in its uncompromising diagnosis of the culture of corruption but also in its diplomatic and frank (almost friendly) address to Ben Ali himself. This diplomatic component of the song has been routinely overlooked by audiences and authorities alike in favor of its allegedly scathing invective against Ben Ali’s regime. If examined closely, however, the song’s overall goal is not revolt but reform. It is true, though, that to ask for reform in Ben Ali’s Tunisia amounts to nothing less than an incitement to revolt. As will become clear, the song exposes the two main ills of Ben Ali’s regime: coercion and corruption. The first part of the song is devoted to the exposition of coercion while the second is dedicated to the denunciation of corruption. The first part runs as follows:

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رئيس البلاد، هاني اليوم نحكى معاك
باسمي و باسم الشعب الكل اللي عايش فلعداب
2011، مازال فم شكوت يموت بالجوع
حبّي بخدم باش يعيش لكن صوتو موش مسموع
أهبط للشارع وشف لعباد ولأّت وحوش
شو ف الحاكم بالماتراك "تك أتاك" ما على بالوش
مادام ما فقأ حذّ باش يقلو كلمة لا
حتى القانون اللي في الدستور نفخو وأشرب ماه
كل نهار نسمع قضية وكبوهلو بالسиф
بورتانا الحاكم يعرف اللي هو عبد نظيف
شو في اللحناش تضرب في النساء المتحجّين
زعة ترضها لينتك؟ عارف كلام يبيكي العين
عارف، مادامك بو ما ترضاش الشرّ لصغارك
ألور هذا ميساج عبارة واحد من صغارك يحيي معاك،
مالسوفنس رانا عايشين كالكلاب
شطر الشعب عايشين الذّلّ وذاقوا من كأس لعذاب
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Mr. President,
I speak to you today in my name
And in the name of all the people who live in oppression and pain
It’s 2011 and there are still people who die of hunger
They want to work to make a living but their voices are unheard
Go down into the streets and see people turn into beasts
See the cops clobbering people, tak-a-tak, not caring in the least
As long as no one can make them stop their assault,
Constitutional laws remain ink on paper, not worth a thought
Every day I hear of someone prosecuted for a fake offense
Even while officials actually know his innocence
I see police goons beating up hijab-wearing women,
Would it be fine with you if your daughter were in their place?
I know these words make one cry, and I know anyway
As a father, you won’t let your children in harm’s way
So, consider this as a message from one of your children talking
We are suffering through our lives like stray dogs
Half the people live in humiliation and drink of misery’s cup

El Général addresses the president directly, sending him an open message in the form of a rap song. The message and the song entertain a relationship of complete complementarity: the message is as much a vehicle for the song as the song is a vehicle for the message. The poetic, imaginative, and creative endeavor here (the choice of historical framing, words, images, rhythm, and rhyme) is both enabled and constrained by the realist and documentary dimensions of the message that El Général delivers to Ben Ali more than eighteen years after the latter’s historic visit to Zouakra and Barrama. The National Solidarity Fund (FNS), which was created four days after this field trip and which initially worked well enough that the World Solidarity Fund was modeled on it, had become very dysfunctional by 2010. It suffered from a complete lack of transparency even though (or, perhaps, because) it had been under the direct authority of the president himself.

While donations to the FNS have been quasi-mandatory, particularly on 8 December, Tunisia’s National Day of Solidarity, much of the FNS’s income has been utterly unaccounted for, especially in the past decade or so (when Ben Ali reportedly had prostate cancer and the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally or RCD took over the running of the FNS and apportioned its income in a clientelist manner). In short, even though the FNS institutionalized solidarity and contributed more or less to poverty alleviation, it did not fully succeed in its crusade against poverty, particularly in the disenfranchised zones in the southern and interior parts of the country. Its lack of transparency and clientelist approach profoundly diminished its practical relevance as a last resort for the poor and unemployed.
Hence, El Général’s verdict: “It’s 2011 and there are still people who die of hunger.”33 Playing on the dual persona of schoolboy and grown-up, El Général goes on enumerating and decrying the harsh realities of Ben Ali’s Tunisia: poverty, unemployment, injustice, police brutality, and lack of civil liberties. I will come back to most of these issues later when I discuss the socioeconomic grievances of the second part of the song, but suffice it for now to mention that one of the consistencies of the postcolonial regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali is the use and abuse of Islam for political gains.

The coercive unveiling of which El Général speaks when he points to hijab-wearing women being beaten up by state security goons is part of a much more sophisticated and by now very routine strategy that the secularist and corrupt regimes of both Bourguiba and Ben Ali adopted in order to overcome political opposition and consolidate power. The crackdown on hijab in public offices, which started in the early 1980s under Bourguiba (decree 108 of 1985 bans the veil in educational establishments), was consolidated throughout Ben Ali’s rule and especially in 2003 with the implementation of counterterrorism legislation (i.e., law no. 75 in Support for the International Effort to Combat Terrorism and the Repression of Money Laundering). Like Bourguiba’s, Ben Ali’s regime saw in the very instances of wearing hijab or beards, or mosque-going, recipes for radicalization. All the more so, since he built his entire system of governance on the neutralization, not to say extermination, of Islamists. While the majority of Islamists were either imprisoned or exiled, as was the case, most noticeably, with Rachid Ghannouchi, Ben Ali hitched his wagon to the so-called war on terror in order to gain further flexibility in eliminating any remaining type of political challenge to his one-party rule from leftists, journalists, or mere human rights activists. Ben Ali would raise the threshold of the war on terror (which did not have any clear boundaries at which to stop) to basically imprison, torture, or disappear all his opponents on licensed grounds.34

The State Department cables released by WikiLeaks demonstrated the extent to which the United States was complicit with Ben Ali’s sclerotic and ruthless regime and the culture of corruption it fueled in Tunisia. Time and again, the US ambassador to Tunis, Robert F. Godec, cautions that “we cannot write off Tunisia. We have too much at stake. We have an interest in preventing al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and other extremist groups from establishing a foothold here.”35 Ben Ali consistently told the United States exactly what the United States wanted to hear: he would cooperate “without reservation” in the global effort to combat terrorism. It was understood that for Ben Ali such a commitment implied that he would be let off the hook for human rights abuses, and he did not shy away from pointing that out to Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs David Welch. It was understood that for the United States the travesties of
democracy were a price willingly paid in exchange for Ben Ali’s aforementioned commitment even though the threat of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb and particularly in Tunisia had remained and still remains more of an exaggeration rather than an actual reality. In the wake of 9/11, Tunisia became, with its police forces quadrupled since the presidency of Habib Bourguiba (1957–87), an Orwellian police state, a gigantic surveillance camp, and Ben Ali found in the war on terror and the so-called Islamist threat a convenient ruse to recast allegations of human rights violations, along with various travesties of democracy and freedom of speech, as part of the global effort to fight terrorism.

To say that Ben Ali’s regime exaggerated the Islamist threat and exploited the fault lines of the global war on terror to entrench himself in power is to make the crassest understatement. Much of the credibility of Ben Ali’s autocratic reign derived also from the swiftness and consistency with which it intimidated and punished its detractors, critics, and opponents as well as from the politics of fear that it used to engineer the consent of the population. In almost every single family in Tunisia, you will find at least one member or relative who had or has been until recently detained, tortured, or imprisoned because of his or her political persuasions and leanings or any other such alleged offenses regardless of how relatively threatening or remotely oppositional to the regime and its clienteles. The ruse of raising the specter of the Islamist threat and making it the raison d’être of an entire regime is that it becomes independent of (and not dependent on) the existence of any perceived and concrete Islamist threat. The threat can always be fabricated, manufactured, or faked. This is partly what El Général’s song exposes when it refers to those who are routinely prosecuted for a variety of unfounded offenses, but the song points out also the rampant culture of corruption and illegality in Ben Ali’s Tunisia, particularly in the second part, which runs as follows:

# عربية

رئيس لبلاد، قليل احتى من غير خوف
هاني، حكبت كن عارف إلى نهابي كن لكونك
شوف في برئي ظلماً علاً علاً احتترك
لا، فوراً وصاوني بردش عيان إلى نهابي كان الإعدام
لكن، في متي التوامي عائش فالأوهام
وإنها حرية التعبير؟ ربي منها كان لكلام
سميتونا تونس بالخضراء، رئيس لبلاد، هاك شوفت
اليوم لبلاد ولاة صحراء مقسمة على روز طروف
سرقات بالمكشوف، بالغورة ملكوا البلاد
من غير ما نستن انت تعرف شكونهم هالعباد
برشة فلوس كانت مشادة، مشايع وانجازات
مدارس ومصحات، بناءات وتعديلات
Mr. President, you told me to speak without fear,
I did, but I expect slaps in the face, let’s be clear
I see so many injustices, which is why I chose to address you
Even while many people warned me I’d face the death penalty
But, for how long must Tunisians live in illusions?
Where is freedom of expression? I saw nothing but repression
You called “Tunisia, the Green,” Mr. President, but as you can see
Today, it’s become a desert terrain split in twain
They steal in broad daylight, confiscate property, and own the land
No need for me to name them, you know who they can be
A lot of money was pledged for projects and constructions
Schools, hospitals, buildings, and modifications
But, the sons of bitches stuffed it into their potbellies
They pillaged and plundered and clung to their positions of power
I know people have in their hearts much to say but no way to convey
If there were no injustices today, I would have had nothing to say

El Général’s persona harps again on the president’s injunction that he
speak without fear (as in the opening segment of the video clip of the song)
in order for him to tackle head-on the thorny issue of corruption, which US
ambassador Godec called in one of the State Department cables released
by WikiLeaks the “elephant in the room”: every Tunisian knew about it,
but no one dared to address it. It was a red line for everyone, and whoever
discussed it publicly did so at his or her own peril. In the same cable, which
dates back to 23 June 2008, Godec exposed the extent to which the clan
composed of the extended families of Ben Ali and his wife, Leila Trabelsi,
formed the nexus of corruption. This “quasi-mafia” or “owning family”
(as they are called by Tunisians) put their hands on more than a third of
Tunisia’s economy and had no scruples whatsoever about coveting more
assets and under any form of shady dealings, be it cash, services, theft,
money, property expropriation, extortion of bribes, money laundering,
drug trafficking, or illegal privatizing of national assets and companies. As
the song points out, they divided Tunisia into two fiefdoms or geographical
entities along family lines: the Ben Ali clan monopolized the central and
coastal region, and the Trabelsi clan dominated the greater Tunis area.

The ambassador was right to conclude that corruption was the ele-
phant in the room that every Tunisian knew about. Until the revolution
started, whoever visited, studied, and appreciated Tunisia would not fail to
notice the striking disconnect between the will and dignity of its people and the corrupt and oppressive regime to which they submitted. El Général’s song has broken through the wall of silence that Ben Ali’s regime erected to ward off political opposition, disguise the truth, and protect the cover story (i.e., the masquerade of democracy à la Tunisienne). El Général dares the president to come down to the streets and see for himself how people lead their everyday lives and how the political police are clubbing and harassing Tunisians wherever they show any resistance to its whims and will. El Général dares the president to offer evidence of the stark contrast between the rhetoric of democracy he embraces (i.e., simulates and dissimulates) and the culture of corruption that prevails in the country and in the Palace of Carthage.

Given that in his third and last speech on 13 January 2011, Ben Ali avowed that he was “misled” by his advisers who apparently kept him deliberately out of touch with the Tunisian people (out of a concern for his declining health), El Général’s plea becomes prophetic. Ben Ali was a dying man both physically and politically. At any rate, the song galvanized young men and women and sent shock waves across the country before it was banned and El Général was arrested on 6 January 2011. The arrest garnered a lot of national and international media attention, which helped reinvigorate the revolution and offer it a new hero after Bouazizi. After three days of intense interrogations in the Ministry of Interior, Ben Ali’s regime concluded that it made a mistake in arresting El Général and released him. It was too late: El Général had become a global hip-hop icon and the regime’s legitimacy was dealt a serious blow.

One of the reasons why the song resonated with every Tunisian is that it exposed the widespread governmental corruption, nepotism, and ineptitude—in short, all the vagaries of Ben Ali’s neoliberal restructuring of the country. This process began in the late 1980s and intensified in the wake of Tunisia’s association with the European Union in the mid-1990s through a drastic process of privatizations that spared nothing, not even the educational sector, which was on the brink of being completely marginalized by the emphasis placed on the private sector of education, particularly since Leila Trabelsi, Ben Ali’s wife, had started her own private and for-profit school called the Carthage International School. Tunisia’s economic reform program seemed to work quite well at first, and the country was able to privatize 140 state-owned enterprises after 1987. Georgie Anne Geyer wrote an article about Tunisia’s economic reforms in the mid-1990s that was then turned into a book titled *Tunisia: A Journey through a Country That Works*. During the period between 1970 and 2000, the World Bank was confident enough about Tunisia’s success that it gave the country more loans than any other Arab or African country. Anyone
who was misled by statistics seemed to believe that Tunisia was a success story. That was not necessarily the case, however, much to the surprise and bewilderment of both Arab and non-Arab observers.

What Ben Ali did basically was to create a “Tunisian entrepreneurial class eager to engage in globalized patterns of economic activity” and to “[locate] himself (and his family) firmly within that class.” In other words, under Bourguiba the state controlled the bulk of the resources and the private sector assisted it in negotiating the rules of the game, while under Ben Ali, by contrast, private operators acted as catalysts of progress and were assisted by the state in determining its political and economic priorities. As a result, Ben Ali and his wife and their extended families put their hands on more than 40 percent of the economy at a time when the national unemployment rate reached 13 percent and went as high as 40 percent in the southern and interior parts of the country. Economic growth was mostly confined to Ben Ali’s entrepreneurial class in the greater Tunis area and along the coastal urban areas, to the detriment of the interior regions, which trailed behind.

While more than a third of the country’s youth were unemployed, Ben Ali’s entrepreneurial class continued to prosper by legal and illegal means. Ben Ali’s neoliberal adventure deliberately marginalized the southern and interior parts of the country where demonstrations erupted in the mining area of Gafsa in 2008 over unfair recruitment practices at a phosphate company. The demonstrations escalated into protests and lasted more than six months before they were brutally repressed by the security forces (who ended up killing a number of workers). The Tunisian revolution could have very well started in 2008 (in the manner in which the bread riots of 1984 against Bourguiba’s economic policies prepared the ground for Ben Ali’s palace coup in 1987), but neither Facebook nor Al-Jazeera saved the day then, and the six-month-long demonstrations were contained within a media wall of silence, never gaining national or international attention before they completely died out only months afterward. What I am trying to suggest here is that there is a tradition of spontaneous workers’ movements that kept alive the spirit of rebelliousness particularly at a time when the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) was officially co-opted by the successive regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali since its last effective general strike in January 1978.

The little legitimacy that the government retained (despite its flagrant human rights abuses and the culture of corruption it fostered) hinged squarely on its ability to deliver economic growth, create jobs, and ensure the socioeconomic well-being of all Tunisians. But growth was hard to attain, let alone sustain, especially in the wake of Tunisia’s entry into a Free Trade Agreement with the European Union, which exposed it to
tough competition in the world market and made evident its inability to cope effectively with the increasing liberalization of international trade. At any rate, whatever economic growth or financial gains that were made benefited only those at the top and did not translate into job creation, much less into a genuine movement toward the fair distribution of wealth. What ensued instead is nothing less than the pauperization of the middle class. The number of those unemployed in Tunisia reached more than 700,000 in 2010 and is expected to rise, especially with the annual increase of university graduates, whose number reached more than 150,000 in the same year. According to Cyril Grislain Karray, the number of unemployed and excluded will increase exponentially in the next five years until it hits the two million mark by 2015.44 This might be a bit exaggerated for one reason or another, but it should be noted that a third of Tunisians live on less than 3 dollars a day, while 1 percent of Tunisians rot in wealth.

“Rais Lebled” hammers home this most disconcerting reality in the part of the song that is most memorable: the refrain. Here, El Général crudely reports to the president the collective death of his people: “Mr. President, your people are dead.” In so doing, he basically consigns his presidency to irrelevance since the people he is supposed to preside over are no more.

This refrain is repeated six times throughout the song. It clearly sketches an apocalyptic vision of Tunisia in which people are dead or feed on garbage and others find nowhere to sleep and end up ground underfoot. The apocalyptic tone of the refrain serves not only to document Tunisian everydayness in many disenfranchised areas of the country but also, and more importantly, to rouse emotions and prompt urgent actions by the president as well as by the people of Tunisia themselves. Toward the end of the song, the voice of the people is called upon to issue its verdict on the country in 2011. Nothing changed:
Okay . . . People’s voice . . . Général . . . 2011
Same fate . . . same problems and suffering

This short interlude reproduces and exposes a yawning disconnect between the people and their supposedly representative government. The collective consensus that (consciously or unconsciously, privately or publicly, willingly or unwillingly) compelled Tunisians to compromise political freedoms of various kinds in exchange for economic and social welfare became more and more volatile and untenable. El Général’s song articulated the enormity of a people’s discontent with Ben Ali’s regime and inaugurated what would become an ever more vocalized and outspoken popular withdrawal of consent. The carefully crafted video of “Rais Lebled,” its highly evocative opening segment, its black-and-white footage, and its crisp realist imagery — along with the underground location in which it was shot — all combine to convey a sense of an uprising in the making. The slow, pulsating beat of the song, moreover, serves to focus attention on its highly explosive riff. The song marks the power and vitality that can be channeled by its explosive combination of storytelling and political commentary. Sporting a hoodie and a baseball cap, El Général fills the recording booth (a dimly lit basement room whose walls are decorated with graffiti and a prophetic number: 14) with earnest yet apprehensive intensity.

**Collaborative Revolutionism**

The Tunisian postrevolutionary rap scene is now filled with so many voices, old and new, and suffers no lack of politically committed rap music or artistic creativity of various genres. Most new and old rappers are following in the footsteps of El Général, who was celebrated by *Time* magazine as the seventy-fourth most influential person in the world in 2011, ahead of US president Barack Obama and of FC Barcelona and Argentinian soccer superstar Lionel Messi as well as of Israel’s notorious prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. As the inaugural revolutionary slogan, “الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام” (“The people want to dissolve the system”), is now replaced by “الشعب يريد الثورة من جديد” (“The people want to start the revolution anew”), it remains to be seen whether the current overdose of political rap songs can help Tunisians sustain and achieve the goals of their grassroots revolution. The same can be said about the wider
Arab rap scene, which is currently teeming with fresh voices and exciting new projects. What is particularly worth highlighting here are the many rap songs that have brought together diasporic and local Arab rappers in a concerted effort to applaud the grassroots revolutionary movements taking place in the Arab world and to send strong messages of solidarity and unity. Of note here is the collaboration between Omar Offendum, The Narcicyst, Freeway, Amir Sulaiman, and Ayah on the “#Jan25” song in support of the Egyptian revolution. The video of the song enjoyed quite a success, and one of its versions on YouTube was viewed 263,253 times. The dissident Libyan movement, Khalas (Enough), compiled and put out the Mish B3eed (Not Far) mixtape, which brought together some of the best songs about the revolution by rappers and rap crews from Tunisia (El Général, Mr Shooma, and Mohamed Ali Ben Jemaa), Egypt (Ramy Donjewan, Ahmed Rock, and Revolution Records), Algeria (Lotfi Double Kanon), and Libya (Ibn Thabit).

Because indigenous and foreign forms of rule hinge on sowing division along the lines of ethnicity, religion, race, and nation, Arab rappers have insisted in their songs on the necessity of union and solidarity not only among the different regions, ethnicities, religions, or religious sects that form and inform each country but also among Arabs and Arab states from the Atlantic to the Gulf. One of these songs is suggestively titled “Arab World Unite” and is performed by Qusai and Ayzee from Saudi Arabia, Flipp from Bahrain, Timz from Iraq, Rush from Egypt, Murder Eyez from Syria, Balti from Tunisia, Talal from Palestine, and Vico from Lebanon. While “Arab World Unite” transcends state boundaries and calls for a united Arab world, “Bahrain Unite” brings together some of the best local rappers such as DJ Outlaw, The Mystro, Flipparchi, and May Alqasim around a call for unity and for resisting the incitements to sectarianism: “One heart, one nation, one plight, / Come together, Bahrain Unite.”

There are numerous other instances in which Arab rappers from across the Arab world, Europe, and North America have collaborated on one project or another (as was the case in particular with the 2010 Lyrical Alliance musical project, which brought together Rabah Donquishoot from Algeria, Rayess Bek from Lebanon, Samm from Jordan, VJ Jana Saleh from Lebanon, and Tamer Nafar and Shadia Mansour from Palestine for one week in a London studio to write five songs based on the pre-Islamic “suspended odes” or معلقات). If the current upsurge of creativity and productivity is sustained and expanded, the future of Arab rap looks promising, all the more so with the formation of the Arab League of Hip Hop, “a conglomeration of rappers from across the Middle East, Europe, and the United States, who have joined forces to spread their message and their music to audiences worldwide.”
Clearly, then, rap music has gained a lasting foot in the Arab world and has spawned an influx of creativity that is quickly transforming the role of popular culture from a weapon of mass distraction to a weapon of mass insurrection. What is perhaps most unsettling about Arab rap is not only its novelty but also the timeliness with which it responds to public events as they unfold or the way it ushers in new developments of its own making. While most commentators associate hip-hop culture and rap music with the globaliza- tion of American decadence from above, especially given its heightened materialism and transformation into a lucrative business, what I have tried to suggest here is that hip hop has been and continues to be globalized as well from below by grassroots youth and arts movements across the globe and particularly in non-Euro-American parts of the world such as the Arab world. For, at the very same time that hip hop has become a multibillion-dollar culture industry in the United States (and increasingly so in Europe), it has never ceased to rediscover and retain its inaugural, pedagogical, and insurrectionary vocation in such places as the Arab world. Rather than accelerating the globalization of American culture, Arab rap builds toward vernacular forms of emancipation from oppression and resistance to cultural imperialism. It might have been inevitable for rap to be co-opted by the market economy in the United States and Europe, where its massive monetary infrastructure and profit-oriented tendencies have almost eroded its critical bite, but this is not (yet?) the case with the Arab world, where rap music is only beginning to make an impact on the cultural scene and is still very much an amateurish and underground genre of musical production. Suffice it to say, at least for now, that far from miming the materialism of American rap, which seems to have abandoned its revolutionary underpinnings, Arab rap has become a source of optimism and a beacon of hope for sociopolitical transformation. Nowhere else is this more evocative than in El Général’s “Rais Lebled,” the song that inspired a people to ouster a dictator. 

Notes

1. This is not to say, of course, that hip hop is immune to the assimilative ruses of empire, namely, its deployment by the United States as a tool to boost its foreign policy. See Hishaam Aidi, “The Grand (Hip-Hop) Chessboard: Race, Rap, and Raison d’État,” Middle East Report 260 (Fall 2011): 25–39. The point is neither to dismiss nor to overstate the role of hip hop in the Arab uprisings.


3. “Rap music is,” Tricia Rose argues, “a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America . . . . It began in the mid-1970s in the South Bronx in New York City as part of hip-hop, an African-American and


5. Tony Mitchell propounds the following: “In strictly musicological terms, rap could be traced back to *recitativo* in 17th-century Italian opera, the spoken word parts of opera which were recited over a musical background, and which often involved arguments or debates between characters in the opera,” in “Indigenising Hip-Hop: An Australian Migrant Youth Subculture,” in *Ingenious: Emerging Youth Cultures in Urban Australia*, ed. Melissa Butcher and Mandy Thomas (Melbourne: Pluto Press, 2003), 198–214. See also Dick Hebdige, *Cut ’n’ Mix: Culture, Identity, and Caribbean Music* (London: Routledge, 1987), and David Toop, *Rap Attack 2* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1992).

6. Imani Perry argues that the “accuracy of the assertion that hip-hop has multiracial and multicultural origins does not suggest that it is not black. Only a worldview that subjugates blackness marks the phrase ‘it’s just black’ as an offensive designation. Why can’t something be black (read, black American) and be influenced by a number of cultures and styles at the same time? . . . To deem something French or English rarely implies that there were no Germanic cultural influences, or Irish, or even Algerian,” in *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 10–11. The implication here is that blackness and hip hop are identical. However, I believe that neither blackness nor hip hop can lay an exclusive claim to each other. Hip hop and blackness do certainly overlap, but they do not coincide; they are an instance of what Jacques Derrida would call “an overlap without equivalence,” in Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Allan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 321.


9. Aidi argues that “Islamic hip-hop in the last few years has clearly evolved into a cultural movement. If Islam is the new internationalist ideology, Islamic hip-hop which fuses Islamic themes with hip-hop, the preeminent global youth culture, has emerged as a powerful internationalist subculture for disaffected youth around the world,” in “ ‘Verily, There Is Only One Hip-Hop Umma,’ ” 124.

10. *Raï* means opinion in Arabic. The genre derives its spiritual and musical characteristics from the Bedouin folk music of the Cheikhas, but has integrated Western instruments and developed a disco-style dance rhythm and a pop sound. It is sung by “chebs” (or “chebbas” in case of female singers) in Arabic (or Tamazight dialects) laced with French, especially in Oran (Wahrān), the second largest city in Algeria, but also everywhere in the Maghreb and the Beur diaspora in France. It possesses a street sensibility and conscious message that parallels and rivals American hip hop. As Richard Nidel points out, the “essence of rai is the direct expression of heartfelt opinion with a high value placed on improvisation. Like hip-hop, ample borrowing and sampling from other musical genres are regular components of the


25. As of this writing the number of fans is now 266,489. See Psyco M, www.facebook.com/PsycoM (accessed 5 August 2012).

26. Facebook remained active and effective mostly because it functioned on an encrypted https secure server and therefore evaded the “phishing” attacks mounted by the Tunisian authorities whereby they log into the accounts of activists and remove data or block them altogether. State authorities monitored and censored blogs, political sites, and all sorts of social media sites, especially YouTube and Dailymotion, which had once released a video that documented Leila Ben Ali’s frequent use of the presidential jet on extravagant shopping sprees in Europe.


31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.


37. El Général, “Rais Lebled.”


45. El Général, “Rais Lebled.”

46. Ibid.


50. This article was written in summer 2011.


53. Lyrics of “Rais Lebled” are published with the permission of songwriter and performer El Général.