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(Editors)

Whatever Happened to the Islamists?

*Salafis, Heavy Metal Muslims
and the Lure of Consumerist Islam*



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HEAVY METAL MUSLIMS

THE RISE OF A POST-ISLAMIST PUBLIC SPHERE

Mark LeVine

The contributions to this volume reveal the rich, complex and sometimes distorted tapestry of contemporary Muslim belief and practice. Yet most of the movements and discourses described thus far have at their core been political; they self-consciously identify, however problematically, a religiously-grounded ideology with specific forms of political practice or goals. This chapter will extend the parameters of analysis in two directions: first, the political towards more culturally-grounded terrain; second, the religious to what ostensibly seems like secular identities and practices. In both cases I seek to expand the understanding of what can be described as the constitution of globalized Muslim public spheres, which during the last decade have taken a variety of forms, with an increasing number of participants, which together call into question the boundaries of Islamism as envisioned by contemporary scholarship.

I don't like heavy metal. Not because I think it's *haram* (forbidden) but just because it's not my kind of music. But when we get together to pray, and pump our fists in the air and beat our chests, and chant very loudly, we're doing heavy metal too'. These words were spoken to me by Sheikh Anwar al-Ethari, a young Shi'i cleric

from Sadr City, who's known by his community as 'the Elastic Sheikh' (*al-sheikh al-lashudduidiyya*) because he has a degree in sociology from Baghdad University as well as an advanced degree in theology from the al-Hawza seminary in Najaf, and is willing to use 'whatever works, whether it's Western or Islamically-sanctioned, if it will help my people'. Sheikh Anwar made this remark on a panel that brought him together with several young artists from the Arab world, among whom was a founder of the Moroccan heavy metal scene, Reda Zine.

Reda had just explained why, given Morocco's rich musical traditions, he decided to become a heavy metal musician: 'We play heavy metal because our lives *are* heavy metal. Can you think of a better soundtrack to life in poor and oppressive societies like ours?' Even as a scholar who has spent over a decade traveling across the Muslim world, the idea of heavy metal Islam was a great surprise.

Indeed, if you juxtapose the typical image of a metalhead and an Islamist the two don't seem like a natural fit—the long-haired, tattooed, t-shirt and ripped jeans wearing slacker facing off against the conservatively dressed, stern faced and bearded extremist who is contemptuous of anyone who disagrees with his seemingly atavistic interpretation of Islam. But as so often is the case, reality is much more complex than the stereotypical imaginings of both sides of the Muslim world's cultural divide.

In observing this (potential) crossing of the paths of aesthetic and political movements within contemporary Muslim societies, a new direction in the shape of religiously-grounded Muslim activism becomes apparent; one that moves beyond the traditional understanding of Islamism as being rooted in the push to establish (through political means or violence) an Islamic state, and with the failure of the project of 'political Islam', either to move towards political normalization with existing regimes and the nation-state framework more broadly, or to move towards a closed, conservative and largely transnational 'neo-fundamentalist' perspective.¹ On the one hand, this change is part of a larger secularization of politics in the region; yet the new landscape of religious activism as seen by its views on seemingly un-Islamic cultural practices and the reengagement of Islamist movements in political activism

within the parameters of existing nation-states (rather than seeking either to take over or replace those states), reminds us of the need to move beyond the often simplistic notion of religion and politics as necessarily—or even optimally—two separate spheres of human activity.²

Finally, this discussion demonstrates the utility of exploring both 'Islamists' and fans of extreme music as equally viable counter-cultures whose presence has a 'spillover' effect in the larger social milieu by challenging both the politically and culturally dominant values of the larger society. Such counter-cultures create diverse yet cohesive communities that seek not merely to carve out autonomous spaces within society, but, when feasible, actively to transform it. At the same time, both movements constitute 'frontal engagements' with the problematic of modernity, and both pragmatically seek to make adequate use of available structures of opportunities and to mobilize available resources towards achieving greater independence of action and social acceptance. In short, as Taieb Belghazi writes of Moroccan Islamism, they are 'best understood as an engagement with the problematic of identity in a changing world',³ but, crucially, unlike neo-fundamentalist Islam or 'post-traditional fundamentalist' Christianity, is not interested in constructing an alternative to modernity or using the state as a primary instrument of a larger cultural transformation.

Most important, however, is that both movements offer alternative ways of grappling with the nihilism that has, at least since Nietzsche, been considered the most dangerous effect of modernization and the loss of social meaning and grounding its emergence often produces. That is, more specifically to the region, the ongoing history of colonialism, authoritarianism, war, underdevelopment, and the lack of life chances that such a system produces.⁴ In so doing, the personalities discussed in this chapter, in both the metal and Islamist 'scenes', represent more than just counter-movements or counter-cultures based primarily on deploying and defending closed, intolerant, hostile and sometimes violent identities—what the sociologist Manuel Castells terms 'resistance identities'. Instead, they represent, from what initially seems to be opposite sides of the social/political spectrum of most Muslim societies, some of the most powerful 'project identities'—that is, identities that are open

to dialogue, more tolerant of divergence of opinion and envision a just future that does not rely on violence to be achieved.⁵

As more than one religious activist in the Arab world has explained, they have bigger problems to deal with today than policing the tastes of young Egyptians or Moroccans, especially when they are trying to become more legitimate in the eyes of their fellow citizens and cement a growing presence in the public spheres and civil societies of their countries, while at the same time fending off increasing government repression.

When Religion Rocks: Defining the Boundaries of Religious Experience in a Globalized Context

One of the central debates in the study of Islam, and religion more broadly, is the relationship between religion and popular culture. By popular, or pop, culture, I do not mean popular religious practices, such as folk or Sufi Islam, which have long been the object of study by scholars. Rather, it is defined as cultural practices that are not ostensibly religious, and not considered part of the so-called 'high culture' of a country (as are classical Arabic music, calligraphy, Qur'anic recitation or poetry), and which therefore are often considered illegitimate in the eyes of the political, cultural or religious elites.

In the United States, scholars have in the last generation devoted increasing attention to studying the relationship between various forms of American Christianity and popular culture, be it novels (the [in]famous *End of Days* series of novels depicting Armageddon), or the genres of Christian rock, country or heavy metal that saw steady and increasing sales in the last two decades. Yet these cultural products, while clearly part of 'pop' culture, are not directly comparable to this study of Muslim popular cultures such as heavy metal or hip hop, because the former have specifically religious themes and are experienced as part of a larger, usually Evangelical cultural milieu (and also have received increasing corporate support), while for the most part the music and artists we will encounter here keep their distance from religious themes.

Indeed for Tillich,⁶ what defines 'secularization' is not an absence of religion or faith, but instead an emptiness and materialistic per-

spective towards life which can no longer express ultimate concern. In the Muslim-majority world the problematic nature of secularism as an ideology is exacerbated by a persistent demonization by mainstream as well as conservative religious forces of anything that challenges its self-perception. Yet despite this process, I argue that heavy metal, and hip hop, can be understood as religious phenomena, even when practiced by secular musicians and fans, because they express the inherent need for identity, connection and—despite the often angry or depressing subject matter of metal or hip hop songs—hope, that are associated with traditional religion. Indeed, one only has to compare the physical movements and percussive rhythms of a traditional *Zar* ceremony to that of metal-heads head-banging to their hard-driving music to understanding the similarities that allow these seemingly opposed phenomena to represent similar types of emotional and spiritual catharses.⁷

In his seminal writings on the relationship between religion and secularity, Talal Asad argues that:

...it is precisely in a secular state—which is supposed to be totally separated from religion—that it is essential for the state law to define, again and again, what genuine religion is, and where its boundaries should properly be... The phenomenon as a whole—that is the phenomenon of Islamism—as well as comparable religious movements elsewhere in the world ought to make us rethink the accepted narratives of triumphant secularism and liberal assumptions about what is politically and morally essential to modern life.⁸

By asking, for example, whether popular music can serve as a medium for religious experience, and concerts or other musical performances as a form of religious ritual, it is possible to develop more nuanced understandings of what we mean by categories such as 'religious experience' or 'ritual', how these relate to lived experience, and how this experience challenges established dichotomies that separate religious from supposedly secular spheres of life.

Music in Islam: A Wide Spectrum of Beliefs and Practices

More than most religions, Islam has a schizophrenic relationship to music. At its core, the Qur'an is a poetic work; although many Sunni authorities insist that it should never be 'sung', but rather

merely 'recited' (*tajwid*), the myriad shifts in pitch and rhythm are—as Muslim proponents of the permissibility of music argue—clearly musical. Similarly, many Sunni and Shi'i religious authorities across the centuries have declared music to be *haram*, or forbidden, but there is nothing in the Qur'an prohibiting music.

Indeed, many supporters of music point to *Sura* 7:32, where God asks, "Who prohibited the nice things God has created for His creatures, and the good provisions?" Say, "such provisions are to be enjoyed in this life by those who believe", such as allowing music. Moreover, the *hadiths* that prohibit music, such as in the collection of Abu Dawud, or Bukhari, are not very convincing and are countered by other *hadiths* in Abu Muslim and Bukhari too, in which the Prophet clearly supports the performance of music, at least during feasts and as long as the music does not advocate or encourage unlawful activities.⁹

It is ultimately this latter caveat which Muslim critics of music focus on in their condemnations of the practice. As with Christian opponents of rock 'n' roll, they assume that the sensual, emotional and spiritual power of music divert attention away from worshipping God at all times and therefore lead to sin and even apostasy. Particularly if one is talking about young people performing styles of music, such as Death or Black metal, that are often labeled 'Satanic' in the West, it is not surprising that religious authorities—and governments trying to demonstrate their support for 'Islamic values'—would go after metalheads and others whose music and lyrics can seem obnoxious and even anti-social, at least for the uninitiated. Indeed, this sentiment led to a series of 'Satanic metal affairs' in the late 1990s and 2000s, in which metalheads and musicians in Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon and Iraq were arrested and in some cases convicted of being Satanists on the pretext of their love of heavy metal music.¹⁰

While there are some Middle Eastern metal or rock bands that do sing about decidedly un-Islamic subjects, the majority of artists I have encountered touch on topics such as war, lack of freedom, oppression and other themes common to extreme metal around the globe, which reflect issues most Muslims are dealing with. And they do so in a manner that either does not touch upon religion at all, or sympathizes with many of the issues being dealt with in the current generation of religiously-grounded activists.

The place of Middle Eastern heavy metal or other forms of extreme music within the framework of contemporary Islamic belief and practice is not unique. Within the genre of seemingly non-religious heavy metal, the British pioneering metal band, Black Sabbath, which is cited by almost every metal band in the region as their most important influence, featured strongly religious themes in their lyrics. Farther afield (at least aesthetically), the well-known southern country-rock band Drive-by Truckers have positioned themselves against the basic assumptions of Evangelical Christianity, offering instead a socially subversive 'redneck liberation theology' that is quite similar to the phenomenon of heavy metal in the Muslim world: both represent a 'a music of necessity', one that both challenges authority and affirms their lifestyle.¹¹ The simultaneous affirmation of life against, and at the same time challenging, perceived oppression share many similarities with the process of counter-identity formation practiced by Islamist movements that are crucial to combating the pervasive lack of faith in the future and attendant nihilism—or worse, the nihilistic utopianism underlying the ideologies and psychological appeal of groups like al-Qaeda—against which both groups struggle in the context of continued social, political, economic and international conflict.

Perhaps it is this new way of approaching the long-standing problem of nihilism—or at least hopelessness—that defines what Asaf Bayat and many other scholars term the 'post-Islamist' attitude, in which as both a condition and project, Islamists become more self-critical, willing to question their own assumptions and ideology, and to engage in dialogue with those who were once considered adversaries, if not infidels. Both metalheads and the younger generation of religiously-grounded activists are, to varying degrees following the Nietzschean vocation of 'cultural physician', whose goal is to heal, or at least ameliorate the symptoms of the disease of nihilism.¹²

The difference between the German philosopher and his contemporary counterparts in the Muslim world is that Nietzsche assumed that nihilism could only be cured by finding more resonant 'spiritual deceptions' that would energize the sick and decaying; for both the metalheads and the Islamists, the communities they have imagined and are trying to create must be grounded in a much

more coherent and self-evident 'truth' that can challenge, and for activists, transform, the political and social status quo.¹³

Dispatches From the New Islamist Undergrounds

My encounters with young religious activists and heavy metal musicians in the Middle East and North Africa have led me to question how the emergence of a new 'post-' Islamist social dynamic is experienced on the ground.¹⁴ In almost all cases, what makes the people and situations I have encountered 'new', 'post-' or 'beyond' the traditional boundaries of what scholars describe as 'Islamism' (that is, religiously-grounded politics or social activism) is that they involve a redefinition of Islam and Muslim practice in which the bona fides of a particular action or belief from an orthodox Islamic legal or theological perspective is no longer the primary criterion for judging whether it is properly 'Islamic'.

Today, as Tariq Ramadan has declared, 'what is good for the world must be good for Islam, and what is bad for the world and its people can no longer be considered good for Islam'.¹⁵ In other words, the participants in this study have situated Islam within a globalized, ecumenical context that sees the fate of Muslims strongly tied to the fate of the entire world.

One of the most powerful and important examples of the rise of post or new Islamism has emerged in Egypt, which since the late nineteenth century, is one of the chief centers of political Islam in the Arab world. For most of this period, Egyptian Islamism has been both quite conservative and in opposition to the Egyptian state. But beginning in the 1990s a new brand of Islamism emerged, what some Arab commentators have taken to calling 'air-conditioned Islam' that is, the consumer friendly, individualistic Islam of the rising, Western-educated bourgeoisie of Egypt and other Muslim countries.¹⁶ This new, less scripturalist (but not Sufi) Islam, whose leading exponents include the likes of Egyptian television Imam Amr Khaled, focuses on issues such as increasing wealth and personal fulfillment as much (in many cases, more than) on veiling or other 'traditional' markers of Islamic morality. They are often simultaneously politically liberal and socially conservative, and began to coalesce more powerfully at the time that the Brotherhood decided to become fully engaged in the political process; a moment

when ultra conservative and even violent forms of Islamism had become increasingly prominent, and against whom the Brotherhood and other members of the so-called '*unsattiyah*', or moderate school, needed to define themselves.

This slow evolution achieved a milestone in 2005, when the Brotherhood won an unprecedented eighty-eight seats in the Egyptian Parliament. This victory, however, produced significant fear among more secular-minded Egyptians, and even more so among the political elite, who worried that the movement was poised to achieve a dangerous level of political and social power. Yet even as most Brotherhood parliamentarians displayed a high level of discipline, professionalism and relative moderation, the government rigged the next parliamentary vote, in 2010, to ensure fewer members were elected.

It is precisely the liberalization of the Brotherhood's modus operandi that made it a threat to the regime. This new ideology was on display, without air conditioning, on an unseasonably warm December day when I met Omar (not his real name), the Cairo Bureau Chief of the Brotherhood. Where in conversations a decade or even less in the past, faith and religious issues would often be the chief subject about which 'Islamists' wanted to talk, Omar was eager to talk about the political situation in Egypt and why the Brotherhood was the only group able to take on the system.

'There's no political life here', Omar began. 'The regime goes after everyone who tries to be political. The kids are scared; there's so much fear, censorship, and then self-censorship'. An increasingly popular alternative to direct political or social engagement is, of course, the internet. The problem for Omar was what young people find on the internet or other informal social networks:

They go on the internet, angry and frustrated, looking for an escape, and what do they find? Porn or bin Laden, or both. And those who don't go to extremes often become little more than 'negatively religious'. And Islam can't be just negative. You know, in the old days, before Quth took over, Ikhwān members used to play '*oud*! We were cultured.

Omar further declared that as far as he was concerned, the Brotherhood had 'gone to Hell' in the 1960s when the movement became increasingly militant. 'It's really the Salafis' fault', he explained, referring to ultra-conservative, orthodox Muslims who base their

actions on what they believe to be the model of the earliest generation of Muslims (and which therefore includes jihad). This was the first time I had heard an Islamist essentially blame everything on Islamism, but Omar had not finished: 'And in some ways also al-Azhar's for not correcting this tendency before it was too late'.

Such is the new or post-Islamism that one starts to become a bit incredulous at the conversation; in this case a senior Muslim Brotherhood member attacking Salafis, al-Azhar and too much praying. In a substantive departure from both the tenor and the substance of over a decade of conversations with Islamic activists, not once did Omar cite the Qur'an, *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad that are the second source of Islamic law after the Qur'an) or famous figures from Islamic history to back up his arguments. Instead, Omar explained: 'What we need to combat people like them are more freedom of speech, more trained judges, more human rights'.

The agenda laid out by Omar is in sympathy with that of the Egyptian left, but Omar dismissed the Left with a wave:

First of all, the Left can't motivate most young people, even if its ideas are good. More important, we are making up for the clear lack of bravery by much of the Left... as there are some people, particularly secularists, who argue that if the choice is between Islamists and dictatorship, they'll choose dictatorship. Can you believe that? But it's a false choice.

As important as the substance of Omar's remarks, is the opening for dialogue with secular Egyptians that it represents. Indeed, such dialogues are increasingly taking place, and in some cases, such as within the structure of the umbrella organization Kefaya ('Enough' in Arabic), which has spearheaded anti-government protests in the last three years, secular and religious groups are working together in an unprecedented manner. Making the situation more interesting is that many of the younger leaders of the Kefaya movement—who are also among Egypt's most prominent bloggers, at the forefront of creating the emerging public sphere—were and in some cases remain metalheads, and count their youth spent in the metal community as being among the factors that shaped their activism later.¹⁷

But these developments have yet to convince Egypt's heavy metal community—at least not the current generation, which is

only now recovering from the vicious attacks on it of the late 1990s 'Satanic metal affair' by government and religious forces—that it should be in dialogue with its generational cohorts across the cultural divide.¹⁸ And so when al-Houbaidy, a young leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and one of the editors of its website, dropped by as I was sitting with several musicians from the metal scene, they immediately became quite uncomfortable and left soon thereafter, even though in many ways their backgrounds were quite similar to his. Indeed, one of them was, like al-Houbaidy, a twenty-five-year-old MBA graduate of the American University of Cairo and worked for an IT company.

As important, all shared the desire to create an alternative yet authentic identity to the one offered by the Mubarak regime and its local and international sponsors. 'But still', Ibrahim offered after they had left, 'they're being naïve. They should know that the movement is more diverse and less strictly hierarchical today. Women are more involved and young members have even started blogs, like *'ana ikhtwan'* [I'm a Muslim Brother] where they criticize the leadership'.

This younger generation has a radically different approach to politics than has traditionally existed among Islamists in the Muslim world, who have not been very interested in the rights of other oppressed groups in their societies, particularly those that do not follow their conservative views on religion and morality. Such an attitude puts him in direct confrontation with extremist versions of Islam, but also with the 'air-conditioned Islam' that is becoming so popular among the 'yuppie' Egyptians who today are among the Brotherhood's chief recruitment targets. As Ibrahim explains:

Air conditioned Islam is creating a shadow society, a culture of shadows. Take this new advertisement from the Gulf that's regularly on TV. It shows two kids playing on their Playstations when the call to prayer comes. They jump up and while they run to pray and their joysticks stay floating in the air until they come back and pick up right where they left off. What message is this supposed to send? Is this Islam? The Kuwaiti Ministry of Religion [which sponsored the TV spot] has become more secular than the communists!

Perhaps if officially sanctioned Islam is becoming secularized (in al-Houbaidy's view; and other Islamist activists have provided

similar examples of this phenomenon), it is less surprising that underground musicians can feel more at home expressing a continuity between their music and religious sensibilities. Indeed, in Egypt their coexistence is epitomized by the teenage sons of the former Egyptian presidential candidate Ayman Nour, who as of spring 1998, remains jailed on what are generally accepted to be trumped up charges of election fraud.

Both in their late teens, Shady and Noor began to play metal in good measure to deal with their father's long and tortuous imprisonment by the Mubarak government (he suffered from several life-threatening ailments while in jail and was ultimately released in 2009 on medical grounds). As they explain it, their music, faith and activism come together thus: 'We listened to metal before our father's arrest, but it helps us deal with the anger since then, and to convert it to useful forms'. These included continuing to fight for their father's release, and being vocal about the abuses of the Mubarak government after that was achieved, while at the same time trying to stretch the boundaries of Egyptian pop music.

Shady and Noor are also openly, though not conservatively, religious. Shady's Friday afternoon ritual is to go to *Jum'a* prayer at the local mosque with his band and then rehearse for four hours. 'We go pray, and then play black metal', he said with a laugh, knowing how that probably sounded to a foreigner.¹⁹ While not universally shared among metalheads, a growing number of musicians and fans are finding space inside their moral and aesthetic universe for rock and religion. Indeed, for many, the dividing line is increasingly hard to find. This becomes even more evident if you attend a metal show, which since late 2008 have again been allowed to take place inside Cairo more or less openly (although not without government/police harassment), and regularly features young hijab-wearing women headbanging beside their male peers, who in some cases stop in at the local mosque before attending a show.

It is also shared by other members of the Egyptian metal scene, including members of the all-female band Mascara (short for 'Mas-sive Scar Era'), or the Oriental metal band Beyond East, both of whose members mix religious and musical devotion with no cognitive dissonance about their combination. As the lead singer of Mascara put it, 'I know why God put me on this earth; to create the

first girl's band in the history of Egypt'. A similar dynamic is evident in all the other metal scenes I have come to know, from Morocco to Pakistan.

The question that remains to be answered, or even explored, is whether this still strange admixture heralds a larger cultural rapprochement between the secular and religious forces in Egypt, or whether the government will continue to succeed in dividing, and when necessary, playing, the two poles of Egyptian culture against each other in order to maintain its stranglehold on power.

Elasticity As a New Islamist Ideal

Despite all the death and destruction he had seen, including that of his wife and numerous friends, Sheikh Anwar al-Ethari remains as committed as ever to working through non-violence and bridge-building to repair his country and build a new future. According to Sheikh Anwar, such an attitude is not unique, although it remains rarely reported in the media. Instead, it is common among the hundreds of his (mostly younger) colleagues who have combined secular and religious educations, and who draw both from Western and Muslim sources to solve the myriad problems facing their communities.

'I won't give up', he explains, 'I can't give up. If we believe in God we can say God is with us, not with terrorists; God is with peace. He's the biggest power in the universe. You can't say you're scared if you're Muslim because God said He will protect those fighting for justice or reward them if they die'. This sounds like the discourse of jihad, I suggested. 'Yes, but the good jihad! Even after my wife died, within a week I was rebuilding my area, cleaning my neighborhood of cluster bombs with my own hands, because if I didn't, the children would find and play with them. This is jihad'.

Sheikh Anwar's intellectual and theological 'elasticity' represents an important development among younger religious scholars—Sunni as well as Shi'i: a willingness to combine traditional religious training with so-called 'modern' or 'Western' educations. This is not the same thing as the well-established phenomenon of Islamist movements being founded by or populated with secular/Western educated middle-class members (such as, mostly, lawyers,

scientists, engineers and doctors). In most cases they were lay people; the phenomenon discussed here specifically involves what could be termed 'religious professionals'—that is, scholars who have completed a significant course of advanced religious training and are qualified to hold official positions in the religious system (for example, as imams of mosques or *ulama*).

A Sunni parallel became apparent during a 2007 trip through Pakistan when I was invited to deliver several lectures at the International Islamic University in Islamabad, which since 1980 has been one of the most important centers of advanced religious study in the country. The University explicitly based its mandate on the 'Islamic awakening' in the 'postcolonial world'. The allusion to postcoloniality was not what was most interesting about the university. Instead, it was the task that the professors and graduate students had set before themselves. The former are designing and the latter pursuing an innovative curriculum that is combining 1,000 years of Islamic learning with the latest developments in American and European scholarship.

Most of my time was spent speaking with the PhD students in comparative religion. From their 'traditional' looking clothing and beards, one would imagine that they were closer in philosophy to the Taliban than to students of Pakistan's secular universities. But as is so often the case, appearances are deceiving. As soon as pleasures had been exchanged, the students explained that they are all learning Hebrew, as well as biblical criticism and contemporary approaches to religious studies as part of their course work. They had little time or desire to engage in spirited critiques of the United States or the West; they were much more interested in discussing how to better integrate 'Western' and Islamic methodologies for studying history and religion, and more troubling, how to criticize the government 'without disappearing' into the dark hole of the Pakistani prison system for five or ten years, or worse.

This openness by a surprising number of young religious students is reflected in the powerful link between religion and music in Pakistan, particularly through Qawwali music, whose superstars like the late Nusrat Fatah Ali Khan have achieved world renown, and have influenced the creation of the genre of 'Sufi Rock' by platinum-selling artists such as Junoon, and today, groups like

Aaroh. For these artists there is no separation between religion and music; following in the Sufi tradition, both are viewed as key to healing society at large. Salman Ahmad, founder of Junoon (considered the 'U2 of Asia') has received death threats from extremists because of his activities, which include traveling to mosques in rural areas and singing verses from the Qur'an with the accompaniment of his guitar. For Ahmad, bridging the gap between musicians and mullahs is crucial to addressing the larger rifts in Pakistani society.²⁰

Ahmad's good friend and former band mate, Junaid Janshied, adds another dimension to this dynamic. Once the brightest star in Pakistani music, almost a decade ago Janshied turned his back on music and became deeply religious (he also started a very successful clothing company). Yet while Janshied firmly believes that music is in fact *haram*, he refuses to condemn his former colleagues and still supports their artistic efforts:

You can't try to impose your views on anyone. That's when power comes into the equation, and then oppression and resentment. People need to come to this realization themselves. Look, if I just tell society, 'Don't do this!' they will be flabbergasted. 'What the Hell is this guy talking about?' 'Who is he, a musician, to tell me music is *haram*,' etc. You must give them a better alternative. If I don't have a better alternative, I shouldn't tell them to stop or leave something... So I just try to offer my example and support everyone on their path.

Janshied makes frequent *du'wa* tours around Pakistan, in which he travels around preaching his views of Islam to as many people as possible. These trips have brought him very close to the grass roots of Pakistani society, which led me to wrongly assume that he was quite pessimistic about the future of his country:

Yes, there's a lot of pain, suffering and poverty, but I'll tell you something, Mark, I'm optimistic. The other people you mention aren't optimistic because they don't have the answer. I do, and the answer is God. We just need to return to Him, and be willing to listen to others, and talk, and the rest will follow. And until then, Pakistan, the US, the whole world, will be disintegrating and disgruntled. It's that simple.

This attitude reflects the kind of 'project identity' that is at the core of the more progressive strand of the 'new' or 'post-' Islamist thinking—open, tolerant of different views, activist, and ultimately

political, although often not as openly as the example of the Muslim Brotherhood would suggest. As Jamshed explains, 'If you preach too hard [that is, overtly politically], people will refuse to listen. I'm an artist at the end of the day, and I have to think like one. If you want to tell people something this difficult you have to sugar coat it'. Of course, 'sugar-coated' is the last adjective most listeners would use to describe the kind of extreme metal Jamshed clearly believes is not Islamic, regardless of its intentions. But the attempt to use cultural expression to bring to light harder truths does reflect a similar sense of how to get people to confront basic problems in their society.

Given the high level of political violence in Pakistan, it is logical for someone like Jamshed to assume that the sugar of music might help the medicine of serious and likely painful political, economic and social reform 'go down' a little bit easier, or at least seem more acceptable. This view is not universally shared by Islamist activists; across the Muslim world, in Morocco, the main opposition movement, *Adl wal-Ihsan* (Justice and Spirituality Association, or JSA), also refrain from attacking artists on a regular basis, but the same cannot be said for the positions of the movement's leadership towards the government and even the monarchy. Like Egypt, Lebanon and Iran, Morocco has had its own 'Satanic metal affair', this one in 2003, when fourteen metal musicians and fans were arrested, tried and convicted of various crimes because of their devotion to the music. What makes Morocco unique, however, is that the metalheads fought back vigorously, waging a major campaign in the public sphere that brought thousands of supporters into the streets and international support, particularly from the French press.

In one of the few such victories anywhere in the Muslim world, the young metalheads won the battle, as all the verdicts were overturned, and within a couple of years the government and even the King himself were sponsoring heavy metal festivals with tens of thousands of fans, at which local and international bands performed. Even all-female metal bands have made their mark in Morocco (as have female rappers), most notably the group *Mystik Moods*, who became famous with their breakthrough performance at the 2005 Boulevard des Jeunes Musiciens festival in Casablanca.

Mystik Moods is perhaps the seminal all-girl metal group in the Muslim world, anticipating Egypt's *Mascara* by at least three years. The idea of an all-girl thrash metal band achieving a following in Morocco—indeed, becoming a favorite of the women of the royal family—is interesting in its own right. But the band's views on religion and music are equally telling. As one of the band's singers, Ritz, explained to me, 'Some people want to show off their religion, but you know what, not everyone. Look at my father, he prays *and* loves music too. In fact, he's doing the sound for the festival!' Indeed, all the band members have family members and friends who were 'traditionally' religious, and none of them were against their music.

For the band, their acceptance demonstrates, as *Mystik Mood's* other lead singer, Rita, put it, that 'in Morocco women have more opportunities because our regime is more liberal than in other Arab countries'. Bass player Kenza continued:

This country is always moving, on the way to developing. You know, they say that tradition and modernity are supposed to be contradictory, that if they become more globalized or Westernized young people automatically become more European and renounce their tradition. But this is a false idea of what religion and tradition are.

Perhaps, although nothing in the dress, language or attitudes of the members of *Mystik Moods* says that they incorporate Islam into their lives very much. As the band's guitarist, Anaïs, added: 'Young people are torn between two trends, two kinds of extremes. On the one side are young people who listen to everything Western, and on the other, they are only religious, they can't be open. But it's wrong to call them "traditional", because tradition is more temperate than this'. Ritz continued, 'You know, young people who like metal also are Muslims and pray'.²¹

At the same time, however, the whole band agreed that it was impossible to get along, or even have a conversation, with religious forces. In a clear dig at the Justice and Spirituality Association (JSA), an Islamist Sufi movement led by Nadia Yassine, she explained, 'The Islamists say, "Yeah, we want democracy and a republic", but what kind? Like Algeria and Iran?' Ultimately, *Mystik Moods* represent a very political moment in Morocco, but for

the group's members the political is most definitely personal: the freedom to dress, act and play how they want.

As we have seen, the distrust by musicians of Islamists is a constant theme across the Muslim world. Yet in Morocco as in Egypt there are many parallels between the two forces. Indeed, the members of *Mystik Moods* are not the only mystical women in Morocco. Nadia Yassine, 'spokesperson' of the JSA, is the heir to the most important mystical movement in the country. Although not technically outlawed by the government, its members are constantly harassed and its publications largely banned. Indeed, Sheikh Yassine, her father, spent almost two decades under house arrest for writing an open letter to King Hassan II in 1974 calling on him to repent of his autocratic ways. A little over two decades later, his daughter Nadia was indicted by the government for treason for daring to suggest that a republic was perhaps a better form of government for Morocco than the monarchy.

Epitomizing the eclectic epistemological grounding of so many contemporary Islamist thinkers and activists, Yassine, a French teacher by training, is equally at home discussing French poetry, Continental philosophy, the works of Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn, and the classic texts of *fiqh* and Sufi doctrine. It is not surprising that such a brew would lead the government has branded her a 'witch'—an appellation she's embraced, putting her in the company of Morocco's metalheads, whose music, however, she is not at all fond of.²²

Yet however wide the cultural and aesthetic gulf between the two, neither the young metalheads nor the young Islamist activists are willing to 'suffer in silence' anymore, and both tend to be loud—the rockers and rappers with blasting music and searing lyrics, Nadia Yassine with her no holds barred attacks on Morocco's political system and her willingness to show up at court with her lips taped shut to demonstrate the government's desire to silence her. As she defiantly explains, 'Witches are witches because they think and act in different ways than other people. When people see a witch behaving differently, they get scared'.²³

It is not just Yassine—father or daughter—whom the government is scared of, but it is also the JSA and its over two million strong supporters as well. The threat to the system is powerful

enough so that the government regularly arrests members who gather in groups of larger than three. Yet the movement continues to hold regular meetings, and uses its strong web presence, which the government has never been able effectively to block in Morocco, to maintain its place as perhaps the most important oppositional force in the country.

Ultimately, while conversations with numerous members of the JSA reveal that most, young and older, are not metal or hip hop fans, neither do they spend any energy working against popular music either. This is, in fact, in sharp contrast to the country's officially tolerated Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party (JDP) that was active in the persecution of metalheads in the 2003 affair, and that continues to lash out at popular music and festivals. Like the Muslim Brotherhood, its Egyptian counterpart, however, the JSA has a lot more to worry about today than policing the musical tastes of young Moroccans.

Yet as in Egypt, in Morocco it seems as if many musicians are actually even less discriminating in their understanding of Moroccan Islamism than the average JSA member is about the differences between the various subgenres of extreme metal. 'That's the problem', one young woman at the meeting explained 'people have no idea what we're about, so [they] accuse us of all types of things or confuse us with other Islamist movements, like the Justice and Development Party, which plays the political game and has members in parliament, but who in fact was the group your friend was so angry at'. And the few times I have offered to set up meetings between metalheads and JSA members, it has always been the former, never the latter, who have told me to forget about it.

Muhajabes in the Rubble

The debate over the permissibility of music in Islam continues, in mosques and newspapers, and competing *fatwas* issued on the Internet. Some religious scholars, however, have come to agree with Salman Ahmed that the debate over music epitomizes the need to bring greater openness to Islamic thought and practice. Sheikh Ibrahim al-Mardini of Beirut, is one such scholar. Although Sheikh al-Mardini has an advanced degree in theology, he works

in a pharmacy to support his family. 'The Dar al-Ifta' [the official body responsible for issuing fatwas and approving Sunni imams] told me it would be better if I stayed away from mosques and madrasas', he said when explaining why he does not have a mosque at which to preach the *khutba*, or Friday prayer sermon, as do most religious scholars with his training.

For al-Mardini music clearly signifies a fault line between an Islam that is open to the world and tolerant, and one that is closed and negative. In his writings he argues that 'there is nothing in the Qur'an that says music should be prohibited. In fact, it can play a positive role in society as long as it's not insulting or offers views against Islam'. His most important work on the subject, titled *al-tibyan fi ahkam il-musiqi wa-l-athan*,²⁴ explains that since there is little religious justification for most prohibitions on music, its censorship 'exists mostly to preserve regimes, not Muslim societies of some sort of Islamic personality'.

Sheikh al-Mardini believes that the complete opposition to music by conservatives indicates an even more serious threat to the public sphere in Lebanon. In a factionalist political environment in which a formally democratic system is trumped by the regular use of violence to silence anyone who wants to change the status quo, al-Mardini believes that music, and popular culture more broadly, is one of the few avenues for positively critiquing, and even transcending, the present situation.

Ultimately, for al-Mardini a music culture is necessary for people to develop themselves; any limitation on the arts will encourage the opposite of what a healthy religious system should call for. He believes that Muslims as individuals must make up their own minds about how to interpret religious law, not blindly follow the dictates of scholars. For him, when the Prophet Muhammad said to one of his Companions, 'You came with a very good ear', he meant an ear both for music and for wise political judgment; the two, ultimately, are hard to separate.

Music, according to al-Mardini, is a crucial part of the larger job of Muslims taking their religion and culture into their own hands. Al-Mardini believes that Muslims should engage in the process of returning to their original sources to learn what these sources have to say about music, rather than relying on what 'religious leaders'

or 'learned men' dictate regarding these matters. Such a process has been occurring for over a century; if the downside of 'opening up the Gates of *Jithad*' is that Osama bin Laden (who has no religious training) can offer *fatwas*, or religious decrees, justifying mass murder, the upside is that over one billion other Muslims are entering the public sphere and slowly taking the future of their societies into their own hands.

But the opening of the Muslim public sphere to people outside the religious and political establishment is both inevitable and crucial for the future of Islam, as it has been for Christianity and Judaism. In the same way that it allows seemingly marginal religious thinkers to reshape the contours of Islam, it allows musicians to claim a space in which a different vision of Lebanon can be articulated. As al-Mardini explained, 'Religion and cultural reform don't just come with other reforms, they're crucial to them. That's why it's better for all of them if everyone stays asleep, lazy and humiliated'.

This is also precisely why people like Moe Hamzeh, the lead singer of the Lebanese heavy rock group The Kordez, as well as Sheikh al-Mardini, and numerous other activists (including many of the more progressive people inside Hezbollah), need to be kept marginalized from the larger, national debates. Moe Hamzeh explains succinctly:

Power always wants the status quo, not reform... it's the role of culture to force those questions on their leaders, and it's the goal of leaders to stop these questions from being asked. And we're more important than ever because the gap between intellectuals and rest of society is growing, and benefits the *sulha*, [the powers running society], much. Society is lazy, system is lazy, music can't be lazy.²⁵

Conclusion: Forging the Weapon of the Future—Popular Culture and the Public Sphere in the MENA

Not long before his death in 1997, the famed Nigerian musician Fela Kuti proclaimed that 'music is the weapon of the future'.²⁶ Having fought against the oppression and corruption of the Nigerian government for over two decades, Kuti knew very well that music or musicians could not change their societies alone. But he also understood that few attempts at large scale social and political

change succeed unless they are grounded in popular culture, and where artists help shape the discourse of resistance and change.

From a very different starting point, Frankfurt School pioneer Theodor Adorno, argued that it was not politics, but art, and particularly music, through which a critical voice could posit an 'otherwise' to the 'present' and offer a different vision for the future.²⁷ For Adorno, it was the modern classical music of Schoenberg, Webern and Berg that had the power to illuminate the 'absurd, blindly violent element of the system' and reveal the 'truths behind reality's masks'.²⁸ Such illumination was at the core of the kind of 'immanent critique' practiced by the Frankfurt School and first elaborated by Hegel, who saw it as a 'pathway of doubt, or more precisely as the way of despair'.²⁹

Today, extreme forms of rock, which in terms of dissonance and often atonality and sonic force are not only very much the descendants of the music Adorno held so dear, but are also among the most powerful locations for such an 'immanent critique' of society, balancing often brutal analysis with a refusal to succumb either to the violence and nihilism of their doppelgangers who profess extreme religious belief and praxis, or the uncritical consumerism of the majority of their peers. In so doing, they are not just musical performances, or more critically, performance art, but equally 'performance philosophy'. If the task of philosophy is to 'reliquify' 'congealed' ideological thought,³⁰ the force of the blast beats, guitar armies and brutal screams of the heavy metal performed and heard around the MENA have a similar power to liquefy, or at least shake up, their frozen political and social systems. As one of the founders of the Iranian metal scene put it to me, 'It's hard to understand how music about death can affirm life'. Similarly, Shady Nour explains, 'When I'm on the stage, I don't have any weapons, I only have my voice'.³¹

In truth, Nour and his musical comrades from Morocco to Pakistan have more than just their voices, guitars or drums. Their music, much of which constitutes an innovative blend of Euro-American metal and indigenous styles, instruments and sounds, can be understood not merely as a hybrid of cultures and genres, but in fact a kind of post-hybridity; a deeper hybridity that moves beyond the surface hybridities of more commercialized cultural

and sonic intermixing that characterizes the more well-known and commodified forms of 'world music' (from which Middle Eastern heavy metal, and the genre more broadly, are largely excluded) and which tend to obscure the continuing imbalances in power involved in musical meetings of East and West.

Not only does the hybridity of the metal scenes in the Middle East not lose the centrality of imbalanced power that shape them—indeed, that is one of the most important generators of the music—but it is also precisely in the groups and scenes where critiques of power and its abuses are most present that the sonic hybridity is more innovative and revealing of new identities that transcend both East and West towards something more holistic and positive.³² It is likely for this reason, among others, that Bruce Dickinson, lead singer of the group Iron Maiden (one of the most popular metal bands in the world with a huge fan base in the MENA) declared to me that the next Iron Maiden or Led Zeppelin might just as likely appear in Cairo or Karachi as in London or New York.³³

Ultimately, the dynamics of the metal and larger extreme music scenes across the MENA reveal more than just the mutual embeddedness of art and politics, but equally point to the implicate relationship between the public sphere and popular culture. That is, how popular culture can serve as a crucial site for the performance of 'publicness' when the more formal locations, such as newspapers and other media, clubs and associations of civil society, are too heavily monitored or policed to allow for free expression and exchange of ideas, identities and visions by all classes of society.

This understanding of the public sphere and its relationship to popular culture, and to music in particular, challenges the model of the public sphere developed by Habermas, who largely ignored non-bourgeois, or 'plebeian' publics while dismissing as episodic and 'ephemeral' the community and solidarity created by musical gatherings such as rock concerts. While feminists and subaltern historians have largely succeeded in demonstrating the problematic nature of his exclusion of women, workers or minorities from the public sphere on both empirical and normative grounds, few if any scholars have attempted to ensure that music and popular cultural scenes (so-called sub- or counter-cultures) also receive adequate attention by scholars of the public sphere.³⁴

Similar to the role of the press within the larger public sphere in societies in the midst either of evolving into nation-states or turning against colonial rule, music today can play a dual role as simultaneously a 'popular' and 'public' text, and as a site of both 'buffering' between societies and governments and when necessary resistance of the former against the latter. Where traditional media are not free and pop music or culture more broadly coopted or overly commodified, music scenes can perform 'agenda-setting functions' vis-à-vis larger public discourses and, at least for their members, become 'leaders of public opinion', defenders of the 'people's cause' and even sound the 'revolutionary tones' against the sclerotic and oppressive existing order.³⁵

To play this role, however, music and the metal scenes described in this chapter in particular, have to function as one location in a larger field of interaction between various sections of society—from religious to secular, bourgeois to working class, too old to rock 'n' roll, to too young fully to comprehend the political implications of their aesthetic choices. As societies across the MENA become increasingly frayed it is difficult to discern who can forge the kinds of relationships that would be necessary for such publics to force governments and economic elites to democratize. Moe Hamzeh, lead singer of the Kordz, put it this way:

When I was in college, I had many friends in Hizbullah. They'd tease me for being a rocker but we got along because we respected each other's views and gave each other space to express them and be who were were. But today more and more kids go to these new sectarian colleges and never meet Lebanese from outside their communities. How can they learn to trust, or even tolerate difference in such an environment?

For every Sheikh Anwar or Mardini and musician like Hamzeh Shady Nour, there are far more divisive figures that have even greater access to the public spheres within their societies and across the Arab/Muslim world. Ultimately, the answer to Hamzeh's question may well determine whether the rising generation of young people, not just in Lebanon, but across the MENA, can build a future that transcends the problems of the past, or whether instead the future will continue to repeat the past, with tragic results for the Muslim world and for the world at large.

BEYOND ISLAMISM AT WORK

CORPORATE ISLAM IN MALAYSIA

Patricia Sloane-White

In the mid-1990s, I attended a religious event in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; a *do'a*. Malay Muslims translate *do'a* as a supplication or prayer of thanks. This *do'a* occurred on a grand scale, held at the newly-built palatial house of a well-known Malay Muslim¹ entrepreneur. Many of Malaysia's most important Muslim political and corporate figures were invited, and so, too, was a well-known *ustaz*—a leader of a conservative *dakwah* or evangelical Muslim group with ties to the Islamic opposition party—and a band of his follower-students. Invitees had been informed that this *do'a* was an opportunity for the entrepreneur to publicly affirm and give thanks for his enormous good fortune. His fortune had indeed been bountiful. His honorific title of 'Dato' had recently been upgraded to 'Tan Sri'—in Malaysia this means he went from 'sir' to 'lord', a designation that can only be given by the sultan who rules as king.² Tan Sri Hassan, as he will be referred to in this chapter,³ was also one of the most successful, philanthropic, and politically-connected corporate figures in this dynamic, Muslim-majority Southeast Asian nation. He had not long ago passed his fortieth year, entering a stage of life which for Muslims is an age for self reflection. As