Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam

Deborah Wheeler
United States Naval Academy

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Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam

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Review by Deborah L. Wheeler, United States Naval Academy, Department of Political Science.

Mark Le Vine is a renaissance man. Both musician and professor, academic and activist, he has crafted a highly readable chronicle of the Muslim heavy metal scene with his Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam (Oxford: One World, 2008). With this study Le Vine alerts Western audiences, once again [1], to the resounding message of his life work, “that Muslim and Western cultures are more heterogeneous, complex, and ultimately alike than peddlers of the clash of civilizations, the war on terror and the unending jihad would have us believe.” [2] His account is enlivened by his unique form of participant observation, enabled in this case by his ability to make music with his subjects around the globe, including 20 visits to 16 countries. [3]

His fine book begins with an introductory chapter on the relationships between rock and resistance in Muslim youth subcultures. Following this introduction are six country-specific chapters which each provide an overview of politics and resistance music, including: Morocco, Egypt, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Iran and Pakistan. In each of these chapters, the unique character of local heavy metal and Islamic cultures are analyzed, along with an overview of how local governments have responded to the challenges these oppositional movements pose. For example, the chapter on Morocco states that “fourteen heavy-metal musicians and fans were arrested in February 2003, tried, and convicted of the absurd crime of being ‘Satanists who recruited for an international cult of devil-worship,’ and of ‘shaking the foundations of Islam,’ ‘infringing upon public morals,’ ‘undermining the faith of a Muslim,’ and ‘attempting to convert a Muslim to another faith’” [4] Le Vine observes that “Similar raids have occurred against heavy-metal-listening ‘devil worshippers’ in Lebanon, Egypt and Iran.” [5] An epilogue concludes the book, by taking a look at the future of Islamic societies where youths turn to “heavy metal and hip hop” to “cope with the stress produced by lives spent, at least on the surface, on the margins of their societies.” [6] The main thesis of the book is that:
To understand the peoples, cultures, and politics of the Muslim world today, especially the young people who are the majority of the citizens of the region, we need to follow the musicians and their fans as much as the mullahs and their followers. [7]

This is because, just as the mullahs are using the mosque and the Internet to create autonomous realms of religious authority with which to challenge authoritarianism, so too are counter-cultural musicians. According to Le Vine, “The MENA’s [Middle East and North Africa] metal and rap fans are converting their musical communities into spaces where they can carve out a bit of autonomy, if not freedom, within which they can imagine alternatives to the status quo.” [8]

Le Vine’s book coexists with an emerging community of texts that examine the relationships between freedoms, new media practices and new subcultures in Middle Eastern states. Examples include Marc Lynch’s analysis of “the new public sphere” created by Al-Jazeera audiences [9]; analysis of the development and impact of the Internet in the Middle East [10]; analysis of popular culture in the Arab world [11]; and analysis of media and politics in the Arab World more broadly defined [12]. Linkages between new media and resistance music are not accidental. Such activists use multiple media forums to get access to young publics. For example, Le Vine recounts a conversation with Egyptian metal musician “Marz” (not his real name) who is in the band Hate Suffocation. Marz observes that public performances “are crucial for Egyptian bands since hardly any of them have record deals. Their popularity rests on their live performances and the buzz created from songs downloaded from their MySpace sites.” [13] The interpenetration of Internet distribution and live performances reveal how musicians on the margins can access publics beyond the traditional gatekeepers; and beyond the authoritarian state, if they are careful not to exceed “a manageable level of dissent.” [14] In the same way that the Internet offers wider access to global publics, Le Vine shows how music offers Palestinians a ticket to ride, so to speak. He explains,

“Comrades don’t just rap as an alternative to throwing stones or building bombs. Being musicians offers these artists opportunities that most Palestinians are denied. They are able to travel outside of the country…tell their stories to a wide audience, and meet with people from around the world.” [15]

The same media spaces in which Arab metal heads attempt to carve out spaces for free expression can also be sites where their resistance is policed and often punished. Le Vine observes, “Refusing to conform to” Egyptian society’s norms, metal heads “have long been the object of ridicule and attacks in newspapers, on television, in live comedy, and in conservative religious discourse.” [16] Similarly, in Iran Le Vine notes, “the government routinely cracks down on alternative cultural expression.” [17] These forms of repression of alternative musical scenes, bloggers and other counter cultural forces in the region leave scholars and readers of Mark Le Vine’s book with a question: Will “the MENA’s metal and rap scene help to stimulate wider political and cultural transformations in the societies of the region?” [18] The author also leaves us with a contingent answer when he observes that it “depends on whether the increasingly
transnational communities of fans and activists can outwit the policies of ‘repressive tolerance’.”

[19] Le Vine closes on an optimistic note when he observes, “The fear, the violence, the hatred of the Middle East can seem deafening, but it’s still not loud enough to silence the voices of resistance.” [20]

In closing, Le Vine has composed a very interesting and easy to read analysis of how the alternative music scene in the Middle East is engaging in politics and social critique, reshaping identity, and carving out spaces for collective self-expression in new public spheres. The text is suitable for non-specialists, and would be a welcomed addition to undergraduate and graduate level courses on popular culture, the Middle East, communications studies, and political science.

Endnotes


[2] Le Vine, Heavy Metal Islam p. 3


[6] Ibid, p. 258

[7] Ibid, p. 3

[8] Ibid, p. 11


[13] Le Vine, Heavy Metal Islam p. 61
[14] Ibid, p. 61
[16] Ibid, p. 61
[17] Ibid, p. 178
[18] Ibid, p. 258
[19] Ibid, p. 254
[20] Ibid, p. 275

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