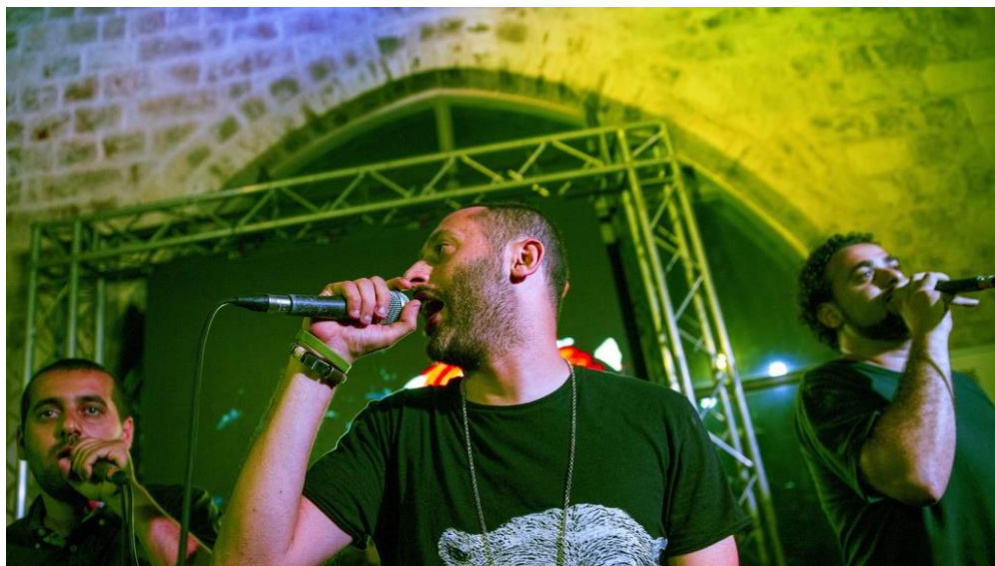




## MEI Kaleidoscope | Wild for hip-hop: Middle Eastern youth embrace genre as agent of change

By ZAFIRAH MOHAMED ZEIN

13 December 2018



*I broke the law? No, the law broke me  
Enough, enough, gentlemen  
I was born here, my grandparents too  
You will not sever me from my roots  
- Born here, DAM*

-

Anyone familiar with the culture of the Middle East or has lent a listening ear to Middle Eastern radio would know that Arab airwaves most often play crooning ballads and melodic love songs from the likes of legendary Egyptian singer Umm Khulthum and Lebanese star Fairuz to popular artists Amr Diab and Nancy Ajram. However, a bold and dynamic genre has emerged from the underground and gained momentum in the region for the social and political messages it holds: Hip-hop is now hailed as the voice of disenfranchised Arab youth.

Spouted by one of the first and most popular hip-hop groups in the Middle East, the aforementioned lines rapped by Palestinian trio DAM are an introduction to the rap and hip-hop scene in the region. [DAM popularised Arabic hip-hop, beginning in the 1990s, by referencing the pain and struggles faced by Palestinians](#) and the everyday oppressions suffered by different segments in society. But DAM did not only use rhyme to voice frustration with conflict and racial discrimination, it also addressed issues such as sexual harassment and violence against women in their songs.

DAM and others in the Middle East growing hip-hop scene were pioneers in creating politically-charged hip-hop music, using the power of music to protest against injustice, rally for social change and challenge stereotypes about Arabs and the region they call home. Before the Arab Spring, Palestine was the one place in the Levant where hip-hop had gained a following, leading the genre to greater popularity in the Middle East.

To many, hip-hop is known as a genre of music predisposed to discussing politics and oppression through beat and rhyme. Originating from the United States, it has long been the punchy arena where the afflictions of African-American communities are addressed. While the American version of the genre features more songs about fame, money and merry-making these days, the emerging hip-hop of the Middle East appears to parallel the beginnings of the genre as a sound of the streets and a voice against injustice.

Calling hip-hop [a music of struggle](#), 27-year-old Egyptian artist Deeb said in an interview that even though the genre's Arabian artists have been accused for promoting a Western import, hip-hop is closer to Arabic culture than people might think. After all, according to him, rap and rhyme are based on poetry, and Arabs are the forerunners of the oral tradition.

Sunaina Maira, author of "Jil Oslo: Palestinian Hip Hop, Youth Culture, and the Youth Movement", a book that focuses on the country's hip-hop and the youth movement that emerged at the start of the Arab Spring, [agreed](#): "Hip-hop is based on a tradition of oral poetry – which is actually intrinsic to Arabic poetry. The mixing of Arabic rap and lyrics with different forms of Arabic instrumentation and Arabic poetry has indigenised it."

According to Maira, Arabic hip-hop was not only inspired by American rap gods Tupac and NWA, but by musicians from the Maghreb that were the first to mingle Arabic rap with the indigenous rhymes North Africa was known for.

Today, the fusion of Arabic culture with hip-hop is most clearly epitomised by the work of Qusai, the popular Saudi artist who raps in both English and Arabic. Blending hip-hop with traditional Saudi folk melodies, Qusai explores everything from unemployment to marriage in his music. An interesting differentiating factor is an absence of profanities in his lyrics. He [explained](#): "When I express myself, I

have to respect my heritage, my culture, my ethnicity. Once people hear what I say, they might get influenced by it.”

Although hip-hop is still relatively new to the region, its revolutionary credentials have undoubtedly accelerated its rise and turned it into a dominant form of music that showcases the diversity of lyrical talent in the Middle East.

**Here are five hip-hop artists in the Middle East fighting for change through their music:**

### **1. Shadia Mansour**

Known as the “First Lady of Arabic hip-hop”, British-Palestinian rapper Shadia Mansour rose to fame for her political songs, which spoke out against oppression and called for the liberation of Palestine. Mansour has referred to herself as being part of a “musical intifada”, and often performs in a traditional Palestinian thawb.



### **2. El Général**

Born Hamada Ben Amor, Tunisia’s revolutionary hip-hop artist El Général began rapping at age 18 about issues such as corruption and violence. Just a few years later, in 2010, his song *Rais Lebled* would become the anthem of Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution, and was even sung by the protestors in Tahrir Square in Egypt.



### 3. Soultana

Soultana, Morocco's first female rapper, uses her songs to highlight the issue of women's rights and gender equality in her country. Starting out as part of all-female rap group Tigresse Flow, Soultana went solo after the group broke up under pressure due to the public hostility it faced as Morocco's only all-girl rap group.



*She gave him money, love and life. He gave her lies and violence.  
This is the Moroccan woman.  
This is one of a million.  
- The Voice of Women*

#### 4. Mohammed El Deeb

Hailing from Cairo, Mohammed El Deeb raps about social and political oppression, identity, cultural awareness and sexual harassment. His song, Masrah Deeb, was a strong symbol of the Egyptian revolution.



*Our revolution is a popular, peaceful, national revolution.  
We have demanded freedom, dignity, and social justice.  
We won on February 11, the joy of millions*

- *Stand Up, Egyptians*

#### 5. Qusai

Saudi-born Qusai is a hip-hop artist in the Middle East well-known for seamlessly blending English and Arabic in his rap music. He has worked with popular rappers in the United States, and only returned home to Jeddah after a song he wrote about his city gained a massive following in Saudi Arabia.





*This world is not worth it, killing for the power and the money  
And the media tells half of the truth, ain't that funny  
Exterminated my people, humanity is silenced  
And died with the rest of you that was replaced with violence  
What are we living for? The question is outdated*

- *The World is a Ghetto*