

9-2-2019

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## Recommended Citation

Alsadoon, Mina, "Effects of American Pop Culture on the political stability of the Arab Spring!" (2019). *Advanced Writing: Pop Culture Intersections*. 35.

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02-9-2019

# Effects of American Pop Culture on the political stability of the Arab Spring!

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ENGL 106

Dr. Hendricks

28 August 2019

Effects of American Pop Culture on the political stability of the Arab Spring!

"Mr. President... people have become like animals... We are living like dogs." (El General,2010)

Powerful and strong words from a young Tunisian rapper his real unknown name is Hamada Ben Amor, his most famous song Rais Le Bled It was released at the end of 2010 when El General was attacking in it the former president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali directly and his regime. El General was angry, frustrated from unemployment, and the corruption situation that the country was going through, he posted a simple video on his personal Facebook and within days it was shared by millions of people and gone viral, everyone in Tunisia was singing the words of his song as people demonstrated out on the streets and that when the government shut down the access to the Internet. Moreover, at the same time when a policewoman slapped a young boy in public when he was trying to sell merch on the sidewalk to support his family, the boy resulted in burning himself in public as it's a shameful thing that a woman hit a man. That in a way started a revolution to enlighten people's minds, and be conscience to reality. This effect of the Tunisian Revolution went viral and spread very fast among different five other

Middle Eastern countries: Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, where either the regime was toppled or major uprisings and social violence occurred, including riots, civil wars or insurgencies. According to (Sadiki, 2017) in his book, we see how he highlighted in the chapter The Wider Middle East and how it started with boycotting the governments to address the dictatorship era as the people were sick of it.

The Arab spring is the most fundamental and important events that happened in the Middle East in the twenty-first century, The Arab Spring in Arabic: (الربيع العربي) “was a series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across North Africa and the Middle East in the early 2010s. It began in response to oppressive regimes and a low standard of living, starting with protests in Tunisia.” According to (History.com Editors, 2018). In 2009, the Middle East started to get more Americanized and influenced by the most dominant culture in the world through its music, videos, movies, and TV programs. From Arab/American rap songs to Jon Stewart shows that were copied in a way to “the Arabic version.” I want to expand on this conversation by comparing lyrics from American famous rap songs and modern and most recent Arabic rap songs, and also show how TV shows like “Al Bernameg” by Dr. Bassem Youssef made a big change in the political arena in Egypt. Although American pop culture affects political stability around the world and the Middle East in an indirect way, nevertheless, Arab's tend to copy the Western's dominant pop culture in art, music, and movies because it helps them to ask for democracy instead of dictatorship, freedom of speech and expression, freedom of the press, solve issues with poverty and unemployment.

Young people in the Middle East tend to copy the Western style in clothes, trends, music, and movies. People look up for America as it's every man/woman dream to come to the

United States to live the life of freedom life and feel what is real democracy. Even when I came to America 5 and half years ago I was the first shock by how people can make jokes about their president in songs and movies, how people can be in public gay or lesbian. This is what makes America beautiful and unique and why many people dream to come here, it's a mix of love, and cultures. America's largest recent historical movement was the Civil Rights movement, and that what made America what it is today. Living in the US writing in a newspaper your true opinion about the government or the police and you don't get arrested, making TV shows like Jhon Stuart and making fun of everyday political day to day events, or writing songs about your opinion in the president if you are with or against, that is something every Arab dream of. Have you ever seen a president give away his chair to his son as he is the success? Egypt would have been right now ruled by the son of the former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak by having the presidency inherited to him as the next person in line, although it's not a crown ruled country. Instead, because of the American influence of its pop culture to the world and especially the Middle East, they would never have moved toward the Arab Spring. Arab youth are asking for basic civil rights. In the book of (Hoffman, 2019) he was talking about the making of the new Middle East, "Less attention has been paid to the rampant abuse of human rights in the region; both residents and analysts assumed the durability of entrenched authoritarian regimes and the hopelessness of active struggle for justice." How youth came up together, took the streets, used American and European media and art to help them in getting their needs met.

## **Background**

America has influenced the world with hip hop and rap pop music, and this is how it changed the Middle East's destiny forever. But before I start to critique the impact of music, let's talk about the history of protest songs in the United States of America, it is important that we understand where America stands right now. America is a new country, it started with the arrival of the explorer Christopher Columbus in 1492, later Spain brought slaves from Africa to help with building this new country and find gold. Till recent time in early December 1865 slavery had stopped but that did not end the bad treatment to African Americans or Mexican Americans. Discrimination, starvation, and mistreating them by the police, it had to stop in a way, farmers and workers started demonstrating and making work songs, using pop culture in making blue songs or dance. "These musical texts not only testify to the origins of a musical tradition that would later grow and develop into jazz and blues, among other genres, they also provide an unbiased historical account of life on the plantations and of the hazardous everyday conditions experienced by slaves in the South." (Ibarraran, 2017) They started singing from the struggle in their daily lives. Being black or Mexican at that time was not easy, we find many sad stories and unequal treatment or even tortured and we find many strong words to describe the terrible living and horrible working conditions. An example of a song lyrics from the Handcox' King Cotton:

*King Cotton The planters celebrated King Cotton in Memphis, May fifteen. It was the largest gathering you most ever seen. People came from far and near-to celebrate King Cotton. Whom the planters love so dear. IBARRARAN-BIGALONDO 9 of 17 Thousands of flags were hung in the street, But they left thousands of sharecroppers on their farms with nothing to eat. Why do we celebrate cotton? Here, I'll make it clear. Because they beat, cheat and take it away*

*from labor every year. Cotton is King, and will always be, Until labor in the South is set free. The money spent for decorations and flags, Would sure have helped poor sharecroppers who are hungry and in rags Oh, King Cotton, today you have millions of slaves And have cause many poor workers to be in lonesome graves When Cotton is King of any nation it means wealth to the planter-to the laborer starvation. (Honey, 2013, p. 43)*

In this song slaves around 1800s were treated badly in North America and they wanted to talk about how they work all year round and European at that time come and take the nice cotton.

Another popular song from 1930s lyrics “give an inkling of a group-state-of-mind which has been forming for many, many years,” held Johnson (241).

Lay down late, getting’ up soon, Twelve o ’clock an ’Ih a s no noon.

A ll I w ant’s dese col’ iron shackles Off my leg. Work all de summer, summer, Work  
all de fall, fall

— Gonna make dis Chris'mas, Chris'mas, Chris'mas in mah overall.

How long, brethren, how long M us ’ my people weep an ’ mourn? So long my people  
been asleep,

— White folks plowin ’ niggers' soul down deep,

— How long, brethren, how long. Johnson (241).

This song highlights the words like working around the clock and no rest, how white people still treat them bad, also we have a word saying “how long” its from frustration he repeats it again.

This had resulted in a big change and the largest social and political movement in America in the early 1900s when Dr. Martin Luther King was trying to provide justice for all and this was the start of the Civil Rights Movement where America had started a new chapter where is justice and equality for all, it has to start with someone who pushes with words or action others to enlighten their minds and show the truth to change for the better. At the same time James Brown said “we’d rather die on our feet than be livin on our knees.” (Lynskey, 2011) people from all around the world are sick of racism and inequality and they choose art and songs to communicate with each other.

### **Research songs**

Revolutions can happen anywhere everywhere! Peaceful or violence, many of us question what it would be like if there was no civil right movement or the Arab Spring? Hunger, homelessness, living in fear, being a slave to your government, that what caused rebellion by the youth to ask for freedom, a relief from the dictatorship era and transition to democracy. In a survey conducted by the National Center for Social and Criminological Research in Egypt and its results published by the daily (n.d.), just a week before the beginning of the uprising, the sample of 2956 people expressed their primary dreams: 42.4% of the surveyed declared that providing clean drinking water was among the top priority in improving amenities, 42.2%

demanded improvement in the sewage system and 36.8% dreamed of a solution to unemployment. It's unfortunate that many people die and get severe life injured to ask for a change, but the price of freedom is high. According to (Hammond, 2017) he highlighted in his book that Arabs have used media as a very strong tool to fight the regime, and used the modern tools such as twitter, facebook, youtube as a third stage to ask for their needs. I have witnessed myself the Arab spring and I was watching the demonstration that started in the American University in Cairo, it was in the incident, later called the Battle of the Camels, supporters of then-President Hosni Mubarak charged protesters in Tahrir Square. It became one of the most notorious incidents of the anti-Mubarak uprising and left nearly a dozen people dead. I am lucky to be here today so I can tell my story and express how people can come together against injustice. I lived in Egypt for 9 years and I love it so much, but my family and we had to leave and settle in a different country, as a foreigner in Egypt we couldn't survive the injustice in the daily life, what about the people how they felt? It became really expensive and politically unstable, with no jobs, laws only enforced poor people because the rich can bribe the cops. So we had to leave the country and flee to the United States of America and became refugees for five and a half years.

Music in the aura of the Arab Spring before and after, we find many important singers and producers who used American pop culture and TV shows to influence people in Egypt. "Rap and metal are by no means the only genres of music that have inspired and mobilized people during the last two years." (LeVine, 2012) We find many popular names that used rap, hip-hop songs or got influenced by the words and used it, For example, the word Rebel was used in many different countries in the Middle East and one famous band used it in their song in

Egypt, according to Wikipedia the Arabian Knightz formed in 2005 after current group members, Karim Adel a.k.a. Rush, and Hesham Abed a.k.a. Sphinx, met in Cairo after a hip hop concert. The last member, Ehab Adel a.k.a. E-Money joined the group after collaborating with Rush on hip hop instrumentals and engaging in freestyle rap. An example of their lyrics that had a mix of both Arabic and English languages:

*You wanna keep me here forever...*

*Mr. Politician, I got a little question:*

*How come you are eating and all your peoples isn't?*

*I am on a mission to break up out of this prison*

*If you're with me and share my vision, let's start by saving the children!*

*We walk with dignity and confidence in ourselves*

*We crushed your laws with our steadfastness and blood*

*If your conscience was giving you peace, you wouldn't be speaking from behind a gun*

*Tell me who's the one not getting sleep at night?*

*While you build your checkpoints, we raise our kids*

*And we will keep increasing the number [of them]*

*We are the reason you don't dare to blink*

*There is a big difference between a man of resistance and decision-makers*

(Records, 2011)

We can notice the usage of words of the prisoner, Ms. politician, free, and injustice. The Middle East did not have any rap or hip-hop songs before the 2000s, Qi stated that before 2010, the Middle East was still in the pro serger of growing rap music and it was not that well known

to the public until internal was the big help to spread it out during the Arab Spring began. Since then, from Tunisian street protests to demonstrations against Gaddafi, later rap music has become very famous art as a way of how younger people use it to communicate the demand freedom. “Songs like Tupac's "Changes," pointing out the legacy of institutionalized racism, and N.W.A.'s aptly named "F·ck Tha Police" brought public attention to the realities of minority communities commonly stereotyped as drug-infested, welfare-dependent "inner city" neighborhoods.” (Qi, 2019) This was one of the changing gears that the Arab youth was listening too when I used to like in Egypt, they wear really impressed and inspired by how American artist uses strong words like this to explain their frustrations toward their government.

Again we find this band uses the words of asking for freedom and basic civil right through their song:

*I want a country free of injustice!*

*I want a country free of oppression!*

*I want a country free of evil!*

*I want [it for] my land and the land of the Arabs - yeah! (Records, 2011)*

After examining this wonderful song by Arabian Knightz and how incredible their performance was, it was published on Facebook and Youtube and because of it the Internet was cut for 10 days in Egypt in the revolution, we can understand the Arab Spring was successful with the young youth needs. Over One Million people were attending the revolution and they used media to pressure the government and the president to step down, finally their needs were met and the former president of Egypt Hussni Mubarak announced in the national TV live

broadcasting that he is stepping down, he was the president from October 14, 1981 – February 11, 2011. While songs were important in growing feelings of Egyptian dignity and that artistes did a great job in reaching people's hearts. "Less attention has been paid to the rampant abuse of human rights in the region; both residents and analysts assumed the durability of entrenched authoritarian regimes and the hopelessness of active struggle for justice." (Hoffman, 2019) Now let's talk about celebrities and how they affect the world around them, most celebrities collaborate when there is a crisis like Haiti crisis 1994 and we saw tons of celebrities gather together to bring the world attention for Haiti and its people, they sang "we are the world we are the people" The same thing happened in Egypt where many famous actresses and actors gathered and made a circle around the Egyptian museum to protect it and bring the press attention to Tahrir Square and the revolution to be peaceful. Singing is a way of demonstration, not agreeing with your country's leader, performers and artists started singing rap and hip-hop songs in a way to open people's eyes to the truth. (Chang, 2007)

### **Research TV program**

In this section, I will cover a concern question that was in my conference presentation and will cover some of this section. Have any of the Arab Spring artists spoken about specific American songs or artists that inspired them to create their protest music? Or do you think it was the general example of American protest music during civil rights, etc., that they found inspiring? To answer that concern I would say that artists never come out and said we got inspired by the American singers. But Dr. Bassem Youssef and his TV/youtube show he said he

was inspired by his colleague Mr. John Stewart. Dr. Bassem Youssef left his job as a heart surgeon to stand up comedy. “Youssef incorporated his observations from Jon Stewart's "The Daily Show" into "Al Bernameg," the first political satire show in Egypt. Thirty million viewers watched each episode.” (Tickling, 2019) and he was open about how he was inspired and they are both close friends and how he did his show exactly in the same way, using freedom of speech. In one of his shows, he was joking about the Egyptian government in 2014 and made fun of the president in a sarcastic way not being offensive, but that resulted in banning him from entering the country again. The picture shows how he was mocking of the president in a way that to demonstrate freedom of the press, and how American pop culture influenced him:



That's how he got in trouble after that and got kicked out of the country, unfortunately. But that didn't stop him and he still makes videos and shows online from Polo Alto, California now talking about the Middle East and Egypt. "They used the best weapon known to man: fear. Fear works. Fear wins. Fear is the perfect weapon," Youssef says, referring to the Egyptian

government. "Sarcasm is the perfect remedy to fear. When you laugh, you're not afraid anymore." (Picard, 2019)

Here we have an example of a song after the revolution and how the artist Ahmed Mekky uses rap to express his words and young people frustration from hunger and no jobs, he defends the Egyptian dignity and how people deserve better:

*January 25th,*

*the greatest date of an Egyptian revolution against the bitterness of many years.*

*The youth raised their heads up high. They're not wearing shackles.*

*They want their legitimate rights. They asked for them with all politeness.*

*They turned the other cheek in Tahrir Square.*

*If you'll meet them, smile and your heart will almost fly away.*

*The youth understood the meaning of unity. They united and made change.*

*The Egyptian's value as a human being today, after the revolution, is so much greater!*

*The Egyptian's dignity will solve so much.*

*He doesn't want humiliation and injustice and insults - he wants to be valued!*

*His country that he has is like an exhibit. He's afraid for it to change.*

*He will restore his dignity himself and corruption will fly away.*

*He demands change! Yes, he wants change!*

*He's patient, yes! But if the country explodes, he will be a dangerous weapon.*

*If you go out to Tahrir Square, you will find a small nation within the nation,*

*a nation where if someone strikes you, he will tell you, "sorry."*

*And if someone wants to trespass, he will tell you, "only with your permission."*

*And if someone wants to see your identity card, he will tell you "don't think too much of it.*

*We're required to."*

*Within [the nation], you often hear the word "Haasib" because women pass by freely.*

*Within it, there is no contrariness or sexual harassment.*

*When the Christian prays, the Muslim guards his back.*

*When the Muslim prays, the Christian guards his back.*

*This is the Egypt that we want. (O'Keefe, 1970)*

Mekky here talks about how Egyptian people are united and have each other's back, and how they should work together and get to the new change. He reminds people when its a crisis time to take care of women and be aware they are like brothers and sisters to have each other back. According to (Dillane, Power, Devereux, & Haynes, 2018) The mediation between individual participation and community engagement through hip-hop is where Civil Society can be employed as a critical concept and analytical tool, and as a form of protest. Songs are the way how people communicate their feelings, emotions, and needs. They empower each other throughout this since centuries ago.

To sum up, I will suggest that Arabs may feel better in duplicating many pop cultural trends in Hollywood movies and programs not due to creativity, but as I mentioned before when Middle Eastern sees how the United States of America has reached this level of democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, etc. they want to reach that level of democracy as well.

In closing, Music is just like any other art it inspires people and influences social and political events. The Arab Spring was an act of rebellion by the youth to ask for freedom of speech, a relief from the dictatorship era, and to demand basic civil rights. Today contemporary activists, protesting in Tahrir Square in the last decade always meant "a battle to control the space, especially under an authoritarian regime and heavy police state." In an environment where people distrust formal politics, they find the streets almost the only space available to them to express their grievances, discontent, and solidarity. I would like to highlight how artists can work together with people's needs. How celebrities communicate with each other from different countries and choose art as their communication tools to bring justice to people and human rights. Also, we had many resources that supported how African -American protest in the United States from 1948 to 1997, why did the protest happen and what was the circumstance in America at that period. How the cold war and how the government solved the political issues. Arabs want to reach the same level of how America is now in democracy and stability with equality. Everywhere in the world, they choose art to be a peaceful weapon.

I would like to include some pictures from my own personal camera, reporting the Arab Spring events the day that I went:



An army truck was burned down as a way of demonstration.



We notice here how people were having signs in English.

In this picture, it is me with the Egyptian flag, in Tahrir Square, downtown Cairo. Egypt





Another big sign to bring reporters attention and to the rest of the world.



Young people climbed the traffic light to direct people which way is the demonstration.



A sign made to ask for Facebook support after the internet was cut.



**The Mogamma** is the building on the left corner people were demonstrating in front of it because, governmental building, where all paperwork such as, driver's license, issue a visa, Tax Evasion Investigations Offices, the Fire Fighting Organization, and the Passport Offices.

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