Rap and Resistance: Following the Beat from the Bronx to Benghazi

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In the wake of the Arab Spring, much has been made internationally of a seemingly new genre of popular music in the Middle East and its diasporas: Hip-Hop. From Buenos Aires to Tokyo to Marseilles, Hip-Hop is spreading as an amplifier for the voices of the underrepresented and the Arab world is no exception. Artists in the MENA and in the diaspora are communicating the collective slouching off of fear and the embrace of courage felt and enacted by a generation of Arab youth through their beats and lyrics.

Many of these artists have located their initial attraction to Hip-Hop and rap in the early 1990s in the work of prominent African-American rappers and MCs. The early work of these American musicians articulated resistance against racism in the urban US and sought to reclaim the dignity and relieve the oppression lived by predominantly African-American youth. While Arab and Iranian artists today have developed and built off of (and in many ways away from) mainstream Hip-Hop and rap in the States, the legacy of the latter is still tangible.

This essay examines the exchange of models and modes of articulated resistance from African-American communities to Arab/Middle-Eastern ones in the diaspora and on the ground in the MENA through the medium of Hip-Hop and rap. How is the articulation of “resistance” in this art form changing and remaining constant as it is used and appropriated by one group or another? Can we see an appropriation of “blackness” by young Hip-Hop artists worldwide regardless of race? And if so, what are the implications on the genre, the cultural study of this genre of music, and political studies of popular music? I seek to answer these questions and others through an examination of contemporary work by performers in the Middle East and in the United States.