



LEBANON

Music and the Power of Blood

Of all the countries I've visited in the Muslim world, I've always felt most at home in Lebanon. Perhaps it's because of the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Beirut, a city that seems at once fully Arab, European, and quintessentially Mediterranean. Or that, like its neighbor and enemy to the south, Israel, Lebanon's geography is among the most beautifully diverse in the world, especially for a country no bigger than New Jersey. Or it could be that Lebanese Arabic is one of the dialects of Arabic I know best.

Maybe it's the abiding warmth of the people despite the war, violence, and political disappointments they've had to endure in the last two generations. Ultimately, however, I think I love Beirut because, like the New York I grew up in during the 1980s and early 1990s, its vibe is just a bit more intense, hedonistic, and dangerous than most cities. Within, at most, an hour's drive from downtown Beirut you'll find a

hyper-consumer culture obsessed with copying the latest Euro-American trends in fashion, music, and plastic surgery, a resurgent Shi'ism nurtured on poverty, political discrimination, and military discipline, a foreign-sponsored Sunni radicalism spreading virally through the Palestinian camps and Sunni areas, and the shifting alliances of Lebanese politics—Shi'a Muslims with Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims with the breakaway Druze sect, conservative Hezbollah with secular Syria. Lebanon is the Middle East in miniature.

Beirut is also one of the most open cities in the MENA. Friends from Egypt or Morocco are shocked at how young women walk around the streets, even in Hezbollah-controlled neighborhoods, in tight jeans, often without headscarves. "They could never walk around like this in Cairo," Egyptian blogger Alaa Abdel Fatah exclaimed as we toured the rubble-strewn streets of the Hezbollah stronghold of Haret al-Hreik, in the south of the city, less than a year after the Israel-Hezbollah war.

But Beirut is also a supremely divided city, just as Lebanon is a divided country. If people are relatively tolerant of each other on the street, Lebanon has one of the most toxic political environments in the world, having been poisoned by two centuries of foreign meddling, war, and corruption. In a way, the country was created by the French to establish a Maronite (the 1,500-year-old Eastern Catholic Church) enclave in Syria that would be loyal to France. It suffered over a dozen years of civil war (1975–1989), almost thirty years of de facto Syrian political and economic control of the country (1975–2006), eighteen years of Israeli occupation (briefly in 1978, and then 1982–2000), and most recently the short but incredibly destructive Israeli-Hezbollah war (summer 2006).

The bombing that killed former prime minister Rafiq Harriri on February 14, 2005, split a country that had never fully healed from the wounds of civil war and Israeli occupation. On the one side stood most Sunnis, the majority of Maronite Christians, the Druze, and much of the educated upper middle class more broadly. At the initiative of thousands of young activists, artists, scholars, and NGO workers, upwards of one million citizens thronged the streets in several mass protests after Harriri's assassination. They blamed his murder on Syria, and used it as the spark for what became known as the Cedar Revolution or "Cedar Spring" (the Lebanese flag has a cedar tree in its center).

The huge rallies, and the sprawling tent city that emerged overnight at the site of Harriri's murder, achieved the previously unimaginable dream of ridding Lebanon of its thirty-year direct occupation by Syria. In the process, the Cedar Revolution nurtured a sense of possibility and community that inspired peace-and-democracy activists around the world.

Arrayed against the Cedar revolutionaries, however, was the majority of Lebanon's Shi'i population, long marginalized despite being Lebanon's most populous group. Along with a sizable segment of the Maronites and the Palestinian refugee population, they were either scared of a Sunni and Druze power grab, or they supported Syria's presence in Lebanon because of its support for Hezbollah's resistance against the eighteen-year-long Israeli occupation.

This split made it extremely difficult for the activists behind the Cedar Revolution to create an environment that would support national reconciliation, democracy, and an end to corruption and foreign interference. And when, despite these obstacles, the movement seemed to be poised to

challenge the various entrenched interests behind the status quo, the Israel-Hezbollah war of the summer of 2006 ensured that arms and money, rather than a common, post-conflict vision of Lebanon's future, would continue to rule the country's politics.

While the Cedar Revolution ultimately fizzled, for the first time a peaceful grassroots democratic movement in the MENA managed to upset an existing system and throw the power elite on its heels, forcing it to adapt and compromise to stay in power. The memory of that accomplishment continues to inspire Lebanese, and activists around the Arab world, today.

A Long History of War and Music

Despite political stagnation, intermittent violence, and occasional war, Beirut remains one of the world's cutting-edge locations for dance music, hip-hop, and alternative rock. Before the 2006 conflict, well over 5,000 partyers would hit the clubs on a good night. The number is not that much lower today.

An evening for young Beirutis might begin with dinner or drinks at one of the innumerable trendy bars in the bohemian quarters of al-Hamreh, Gemayzeh, or Achrefiya (my favorite, purely for the irony, is the Che Bar, whose prices would make Che Guevara turn over in his grave), followed by a visit to one of the city's famed dance clubs. These include Acid, where for twenty dollars you can indulge in an open bar until dawn and dance the night away with Christian and Shi'i lesbians and/or Sunni and Druze gay men. Or you can go to what for me is one of the most interesting nightclubs in the world, the legendary BO-18, whose retractable roof, sleek and

modern styling, and coffins for tables—it was built next to the site of a wartime massacre—allow you to dance under the moon and stars.

Add to these the underground parties that occur on a regular basis, and it's not surprising that only months before the 2006 Israeli invasion, at least one travel writer predicted that Beirut would soon be "the new Ibiza"—once the hottest party scene in Europe, if not the world. This would have been a good development not just for clubgoers, but for the country at large, since the emergence of freewheeling Ibiza coincided with the demise of Franco's decades-long dictatorial rule in Spain. Today Beirut still has an Ibizan air, but the political atmosphere remains as polluted as it's been any time since the end of the civil war a generation ago.



It didn't have to be this way. About six months after the assassination of former prime minister Harriri, I was standing on the stage of Club Nova, located in the upper middle class neighborhood of Sin el Fil. Some of the hottest clubs in the Eastern Mediterranean are located nearby, and the mix of modern architecture sprinkled with much older buildings gives the quarter, and Beirut, its unique feel.

Surrounding me on the stage were the members of The Kordz, one of the biggest rock bands in Lebanon and the Middle East, and to my mind, one of the best hard-rock bands anywhere. Also present were Reda Zine and Amine Hamma, who'd come with me from Paris for a conference I'd organized with Layla al-Zubaydi and the Danish organization Free Muse on the censorship of music in the MENA.

Earlier that evening the four of us had started work on the

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song “Marhaba,” and we were itching to translate the energy of our studio collaboration onto the stage. As big a thrill was that joining us was Salman Ahmed, founder and lead guitarist of Junoon. Labeled by fans and music critics around the world as “the U2 of Asia”—Bono is in fact a fan of the band—Junoon is unquestionably the biggest rock band in history east of Berlin (millions of albums sold, but, sadly for band members, most of them pirated). Organizing an impromptu all-star jam session is always a risky proposition. Luckily, our potentially discordant group of musicians—Lebanese, Moroccan, Pakistani, and American—clicked from the moment we took out our instruments and began to play. “Isn’t that what music is supposed to be about?” Salman asked rhetorically after the show, as audience members lingered around to meet the band.

Salman’s happiness at playing a good set was overshadowed by the news that several members of his family were missing and presumed dead in a massive earthquake that had struck Pakistan earlier that day. Instead of flying home to New York with me as planned, Salman was now arranging to go to Pakistan to help dig through the rubble to search for his family members, who lived about 100 kilometers north of the capital of Islamabad. “My uncle is digging right now for them, but it’s probably too late,” Salman explained, with a calmness that caught me by surprise. “What am I supposed to do? I’m a Sufi, so I have to believe that whatever happens does so for a reason, and all we can do is remember our loved ones and honor them by bringing joy to others. Let’s play some music.”

We hit the stage for the next set, and Ahmed ripped through a few guitar solos before taking over the microphone

to sing with Kordz lead singer Moe Hamzeh. After an impromptu version of one of Junoon's biggest hits, "Sayonee," he explained to the crowd what had happened to his family earlier in the day. With that, he called out U2's "With or Without You" and started strumming the chords. I'm not sure any of the rest of us had performed this song live before, but by the second verse it had taken on a life of its own.

By the time the second chorus was over, much of the audience, and the musicians as well, were in tears. It remains one of the most intense and meaningful performances I've ever been part of. Yet it was only a prelude to what was for me the most important moment of the night, The Kordz's Arab-metal version of Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall."

As I tried to play an Arabic-sounding yet funky rhythm under guitarist Nadim Sioufi's Arabesque version of David Gilmore's famous solo, it suddenly hit me: one of the most hopeful visions of the future of the Middle East I would ever come across was standing—well, headbanging, really—before my eyes. As I watched the reaction of an audience full of Sunnis, Shi'is, and Christians, Druze, and foreigners of various persuasions to the song, the idea of rock 'n' roll helping to move a country away from violence and authoritarianism and toward greater tolerance, peace, and democracy seemed not just plausible but natural.

It also became clear that the anger exploding from the lyrics to "Another Brick in the Wall" was never intended to indict merely the stifling conformity of post-World War II Britain. It was equally relevant to the post-civil-war Lebanese political system. In post-Cedar Revolution Beirut—a city that Pink Floyd founder Roger Waters holds close to his heart, and

has named a song after (“Leaving Beirut”)—the wall evoked by the song is the one that has long closed various Lebanese communities off from each other, denied Lebanon an independent future, and sealed the Arab/Muslim world off from the rest of the world. As Moe pointed out a few hours later as we stood outside an all-night hummus-and-chicken shack ordering food, when the crowd pumped their fists in unison with “All in all, you’re just another brick in the wall,” they were declaring their refusal to continue being cogs in the machine of the occupations, violence, corruption, and repression that for so long have defined Lebanon.

Building a Temple of Rock

Moe Hamzeh has always loved two things, rock music and rocks. Before he became a professional musician, he received his BA and then his master’s degree in hydrogeology. As he jokes, “Geology is rocks, I do rock ’n’ roll. So it was a natural move. In fact, Beirut for me was the original ‘school of rock.’ I studied rocks in the morning and played rock ’n’ roll at night.”

Listening to classic heavy metal—Zeppelin, Hendrix, Deep Purple, Black Sabbath, and Iron Maiden—was his way of dealing with the strains of the country’s long civil war. “I was always into rock, because it was my only way to forget where I was, with bombs going off all the time. The music was my only companion. I’d put on the headphones and listen to one of the great albums and try to sleep at night while the bombs exploded near my parents’ house,” he continued. “And when I’d wake up the next morning I’d put on Bob Marley in order to give me hope as I started a new day.”

But what about Oum Kalthoum, I wondered, or even the timeless diva Fairuz, acclaimed as the “soul of Lebanon” because of her popularity among Lebanese regardless of creed or communal affiliation? “Honestly,” Moe responded, “far more than Arab music, rock spoke to me because of how it reflected the reality of war. And when *The Wall* came out 1979, it became a symbol of tearing down the walls that kept us apart, and forced us to live with the worst kind of ‘thought control.’ ”

Aside from music, what rescued Moe was attending the American University of Beirut (AUB), where he could enroll thanks to a scholarship from Rafiq Harriri, one of thousands the billionaire turned prime minister provided for young Lebanese to attend college. “It might seem ironic, since it was established by American missionaries to reflect Western superiority, but AUB opened me to different perspectives, a crucial experience because we were so closed off from other people outside our immediate community during and right after the war. It also gave me the ability to pursue a dream, music, that my parents thought was irrational. If I had gone to another university, where there wasn’t the sort of interaction with other groups from Lebanese society, not to mention Americans and other foreigners, I would have become a much more narrow-minded person.

“I remember at AUB I had friends from Hezbollah—they would laugh at me as a rocker, but I wasn’t a threat to them, nor they to me. We respected each other, studied, debated, hung out, and challenged each other, even during the war. Our discussions helped us all to learn to say to each other, ‘Respect my space and I’ll respect yours.’ And it is precisely this that is no longer happening in the larger society today, outside of the music scene.”

Indeed, today the trend in education has moved toward sectarian universities that cater primarily to one group or sub-culture within Lebanon's communal tapestry. For Moe, this development is a bad omen for the country's future. The chances of a twenty-year-old rock singer and his Hezbollah counterpart meeting and learning to understand and even respect each other are drastically reduced today, and are growing more narrow still. But as most every artist, activist, and scholar I know agrees, if these two poles of youth culture can't find some common ground, pulling everyone between them just a little bit closer in the process, Lebanon is doomed. And so is the Middle East.

The TRUTH of Music—and War

Moe may not have the air of authority of the talking heads who regularly appear on LBC (the main Lebanese television network) or al-Jazeera to comment on "the situation" in Lebanon, but his experience has taught him how complicated globalization has become in a small, multiethnic, and multi-religious country like Lebanon that, paradoxically, has long been a primary center of cultural production for the larger Arab world. On the one hand, the "civilized chaos" that defines the urban fabric of Beirut meshes with the periodic violence wrought by forces inside and outside the country to produce a spirited, edgily innovative music scene. On the other hand, the country's diva-driven pop scene has been more or less taken over by the Saudi-owned media conglomerate Rotana, whose roster of cookie-cutter singers fits right in with the homogenization and vacuity of Lebanon's famous fashion- and style-obsessed culture.

And yet, at the same time, the forces that have produced this culture create a hit television show like *Superstar* (an Arab take on *American Idol*). As author Allegra Stratton wrote in her fascinating portrayal of millennial Arab hipsters, *Muhajababes*, such programs are among the most honest expressions of contemporary Arab pop musical tastes, since winners are chosen by the votes of 15 million viewers across the Arab world—more people, the program’s producers never tire of pointing out, than have ever voted in a free election in the Arab world.

These contradictions fueled the uplifting yet ambivalent dynamics of the Cedar Spring. A photograph of the back of Moe’s head, with the word TRUTH shaved into his hair as he stands on a balcony overlooking a million protesters, is one of the iconic images of the protests. A decade of full exposure to the globalized economy had forced Moe and his musical comrades to adapt to producing their art in the cracks of Lebanon’s liberalized and corporatized cultural economy. But with Harriri’s assassination, the cracks became chasms. The TRUTH shaved into Moe’s hair was the truth staring up at Lebanese from the chasms dividing the country.

As Moe was surveying the huge crowd from the balcony on that beautiful spring day, three things became clear: first, that he and other young Lebanese had a positive obligation to rebel against the system—“our parents’ system,” as many Lebanese have described it to me—that produced Lebanon’s intractable problems; second, that any such challenge had to be spiritually grounded rather than focusing merely on personal or cultural freedoms (“Both rebellion and spirituality are very important for me, and I think for the future of our people,” he explained after one of our gigs together); and,

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third, that the violence, anger, and false hopes that have defined life for so many of his generation mean that nothing less than the most distorted guitars, the hardest beats, and the most fiery voices will convey what Moe and so many other Lebanese of his generation have felt in growing up as the children of Lebanon's long and brutal civil war.

"From a very early age we were taught to take sides, to differentiate between ourselves and the other sects and ethnicities," Moe reflects sadly. "But at the same time that I started to love rock 'n' roll, I started to ask questions, such as 'Why are we fighting?' 'Why would I hate a Christian?' 'What's the difference between us?' And this made me doubt everything and question everything, challenging everybody." As he gazed upon the sea of people below him, Moe felt that "there was really a chance for a sincere change, the kind Bob Marley sang about in 'Redemption Song,' which gave me so much hope during the war."

Artists like the Kordz and their fans were instrumental to the success of the Cedar Spring precisely because the older generation had become so disempowered and depoliticized by decades of Syrian dominance that it no longer believed it could have a critical impact. One well-known professor of history put it this way to me about a year before Harriri's assassination: "You know, in Lebanon we can say or write almost anything we want to, but that's because nothing we say or do matters." For members of the rock scene, this was certainly not believed to be the case.

But the Cedar Revolution never had the chance to transform Lebanese society at large. In good measure this was because the political elite managed to structure the national

elections that the marchers demanded so that they were in fact less competitive than those held under Syrian control. The coup de grâce, however, was the Israel-Hezbollah war of 2006, which destroyed whatever momentum was left to the reform movement. In its wake, Hezbollah became the main power in Lebanon.

Even before the 2006 war, the potentially bright future for Lebanon heralded by the Cedar Spring—free elections, more-equitable economic development, the end of Syrian influence, and a more balanced political system—was by no means assured. As Moe explained when I was in Beirut a few months before the Israeli invasion, “The young kids are being brainwashed by their communal leaders and not being exposed to other people or points of view the way we were only a few years ago. They didn’t have the war to force them to question things, so they just follow their leaders blindly because they haven’t been forced to understand the consequences of such an attitude. And this, frighteningly, is giving me flashbacks of what led to the war.”

It was also clear that many of the young and often secular activists (regardless of their religious background) participating in the sit-ins of the Cedar Revolution were there as much out of a desire for personal freedoms as they were to learn about how to transform the political system. There’s nothing wrong with mixing personal and political liberation, or protest and pleasure, as long as the aims of each don’t conflict with the other. But in this case, perhaps, the personal and the hedonistic shared a bit too much space with the political and the revolutionary. The U.S. media dubbed the protests the Cedar Revolution in celebration of its supposedly national character.

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But according to one Lebanese colleague, an equally if not more apt characterization would have been “the Gucci Revolution,” because, it seemed, so many of the protesters were as interested in high-end fashion as in refashioning a more equitable national arrangement among the country’s various communities and social classes.



Gucci or Cedar, for many of the young people at the heart of the protests of the spring of 2005, they took on the character of a giant dance party. Since the 2006 war, the dance scene is still going strong, but it’s the city’s small experimental music scene that has become most culturally, and politically, significant. Like Palestine’s Ramallah Underground, some of Beirut’s most innovative artists are more interested in creating soundscapes inspired by everything from John Cage to the latest fighting than they are in forging songs out of traditional melodies and harmonies. These soundcatchers and splicers overlap with Lebanon’s hip-hop scene, and particularly Lebanese hip-hop pioneer Rayess Bek. Like other urban locales around the world stricken by poverty and violence, Beirut produces an abundance of artists who are adept at mining their harsh realities for aesthetic gold.

One particularly well-known group is the duo Soap Kills, which made a name for itself in Paris as well as Beirut when singer Jasmin Hamdan and guitarist Seid discovered that they could combine European electronica with Arab melodies, lyrics, and accents to great effect. They then changed styles from rock to the relatively slow-tempo combination of acid house and hip-hop known as trip-hop, and since then have been spreading their music via the Internet, which allows

them to be free of the corporate control that would constrain their creativity for commercial considerations.

Soap Kills seems to have imagined itself as an anti-Rotana. Picking up on the diagnosis of Morocco's ills by Hoba Hoba Spirit, Jasmin argues that it's "schizophrenic" that an adherent of Saudi Arabia's ultraconservative Islam (and a senior Royal, no less) would create a record label and multiplatform media company that promotes sexual fantasies via scantily clad singers in order to sell insipid, soul-deadening music. As important, this schizophrenia is inseparable from authoritarianism, which in turn is responsible for more personal problems. "Censorship is the reason for sexual frustration," Jasmin remarked, "and the female Arab pop singers serve as sex fantasies." That's why she and Seid decided they were going to use music to "break down the bonds of patriarchy and class bias that have made it so hard for alternative music to break through to the mainstream in the Arab world."



While not quite so avant-garde, both rock and heavy metal have long been extremely popular in Lebanon. The genres were ubiquitous on the country's most popular radio programs because they appealed to young people during the civil war. Once the violence ended, an actual scene developed. But as in Egypt, the Lebanese metal scene suffered a serious blow in 1997, when a depressed teenage metal fan, Michel Jammal, whose father was a ranking army officer, killed himself. This was followed by a severe crackdown by the government on the music.

Yet the crackdown also carried the seeds of metal's renewal in Lebanon. Elias Abboud, a Christian from the north

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of Lebanon, was a classmate of Jammal's, and five years later he founded one of the most distinctive Death Metal/Grind bands in the MENA, Oath to Vanquish, with his brother Carlos. With his shaved head and goatee, Elias looks like a harder version of Moe; and indeed, Oath to Vanquish's music is a harder and more industrial version of The Kordz's classic metal sound.

"A friend slipped me a tape and that was it," he explained as we chatted in Moe's living room in the upper-middle-class neighborhood of Khoreitem. "You're exposed to so many kinds of music here that everything becomes a part of it. By the early nineties the scene was actually quite big, but there was also constant harassment that culminated in the 1997 scare. After my classmate's suicide we were brought into the principal's office and shown TV programs to teach us how bad metal is. They even showed a video of someone playing 'Stairway to Heaven' backwards in order to scare us."

The government also banned the sale of CDs by bands such as Metallica and Nirvana, although they remained easily obtainable in record stores and, increasingly, on the Internet. And the scene continued to grow, albeit slowly. By 2002, after returning from the UK, where both brothers obtained degrees in mechanical engineering, Elias and Carlos divided their time between running a profitable plastics manufacturing business and performing as Oath to Vanquish every few months at some of the biggest clubs in Beirut and at other venues across Lebanon. Their songs took on many social and political issues facing the country. "But not directly," both point out. Instead, playing off the same psychosocial distress that motivated Soap Kills, they developed what they call an "applied schizophrenic science," exploring and developing

political commentary “through the veil of allegory and unsettling imagery.”

The formula seems to have paid off. Oath to Vanquish is one of a handful of Arab metal bands signed to a foreign label, the UK-based Grindethic Records. But the farther you are from the mainstream in Lebanon, the greater the risk of persecution. “The police have continued to harass and even arrest rock musicians. So have the intelligence services, especially during the Syrian era, because metalheads were activists.” Even today, Carlos added, undercover cops would come to shows and plant drugs on people, then raid the club a bit later and close it down.

Moe has also had his run-ins with the police in the last few years. “They asked me questions like, ‘Do you think your fans worship Satan?’ What they were really asking was whether our fans follow the official political line and obey authority.” At one point the Ministry of Culture sent two men to film one of The Kordz’s weekly shows at Nova. “We knew in advance, and made sure our crowd did as well. But after a half hour of a subdued set, I couldn’t take it anymore and just said, ‘Fuck it,’ and played the rest of our set at full energy. Anyway, the owner made sure to get the guys drunk enough so that they couldn’t remember anything. After the show, one of them actually stumbled over, slapped me on my shoulder, and slurred, ‘Great job! Don’t stop singing.’ ”

Perhaps the best evidence of the resilience of Lebanese rock are bands like Blend, Nadine Khoury, and the post-punk group The New Government. Founded only a year after the 1997 satanic scare, Blend was the first Arab rock band ever signed to an international label, EMI. Their biggest song was the 2003 hit “Belong,” which deals with the post-civil-war

generation's search for identity in the midst of the continued conflict and growing sectarian and class divisions.

On the other end of the sonic spectrum, Nadine Khoury's folk inspired rock offers trenchant analysis of the violence, rampant inequality, and the easy escapism into drugs and alcohol to which many of her peers have fallen prey. But the most overtly political lyrics in Lebanese rock today belong to the group The New Government, whose debut album featured the lyrics "I killed the prime minister / I killed the famous journalist" as a way of critiquing the mafia-like tactics that continued to govern the country's politics after the Cedar Revolution.

Despite being well outside the Rotana mold, all these bands have used the Internet, festivals, and other networks for cultural transmission not controlled by the mainstream media to reach a growing audience. They have taken to heart the words of the Nigerian Afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuti, who declared not long before his death that "music is the weapon of the future." Beirut-based rock journalist and radio DJ Ramsay Short, who often began his popular show with one of Kuti's hits, feels that Kuti's point couldn't be more relevant to Lebanon: "Music is the one medium of expression with the power to cross all borders, speak the truth, be political, and affect change in societies across the globe."

Similar to the man from Morocco's Makhzen in Reda Al-lali's story, however, Short is only half right. Music is clearly a powerful motivator and organizing tool for change. But much like Morocco's Justice and Spirituality Association, in Lebanon Hezbollah sees itself as possessing the very same qualities Short and Kuti ascribe to popular music. And it has real weapons, not just good songs. The problem is that the

majority of what could be termed Lebanon's musical jihadis are the well-educated, cosmopolitan, and politically progressive Lebanese young people of central and northern Beirut and other big cities. If they can't connect to the mass of working-class, often less educated young Lebanese, whether in the Shi'i neighborhoods of southern Beirut or the Sunni, Druze, and Maronite villages of the country's interior, it's hard to imagine how the outstretched arm with a Fender guitar can compete with the outstretched arm with a Kalashnikov—Hezbollah's brilliant yet disheartening riff on the cover of Bob Marley's *Uprising* album, which not so long ago helped a generation of Lebanese make it through another war-torn day.

The Sheikh Who Said Yes

Not far from Moe Hamzeh lives Sheikh Ibrahim al-Mardini, who has his own way of preaching peace and tolerance against the power of war. He lives with his wife and two small children in a tiny two-room apartment on the roof of his family's building in the working-class neighborhood of Verdun. Despite possessing a keen mind and an advanced theology degree, his unorthodox ideas—particularly that secular music, including rock and heavy metal, is not prohibited by Islamic law—have meant that he has to work 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 with a wan smile when explaining why he doesn't have a mosque at which to preach the *qutba*, or Friday-afternoon sermon, as do most religious scholars with his training.

Al-Mardini, whose smile and lotus-crossed legs radiate equanimity and wisdom even in the face of adversity, has refused to give up his interest in music despite the financial and professional costs. Though he doesn't have specific musical training himself, his writings on music and its permissibility in Islam have been circulated across the Muslim world. For him, support or opposition to music represents the fault line between an Islam that is open to the world and tolerant, and one that is not. As he explained to me, "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."

Al-Mardini's writings on the subject are more explicit. He bluntly reminds readers that "there is no Qur'anic text banning music," and explains that seventy of the eighty sayings of the Prophet Muhammad traditionally used to prove music unlawful are considered legally "weak or very weak" (and so not binding for Muslims). 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. And if this is how the Prophet felt about music, its prohibition must "exist mostly to preserve regimes, not Muslim societies of some sort of Islamic personality."

Once again, we see a religious scholar offering a critique of his country's political establishment that echoes those offered by musicians. But Sheikh al-Mardini didn't take up the cause of promoting the Islamic legitimacy of popular music because he's a fan of heavy metal or hip-hop. His musical tastes are more traditional. What he does believe is that the opposition to music by conservatives indicates an even more serious threat to the public sphere in Lebanon. In a political

environment riven with factionalism and hostility toward anyone who wants to change the status quo, music is one of the few channels for positively critiquing, and even transcending, the present situation.

As we concluded our first meeting, al-Mardini explained, “A musical culture is necessary for people to develop themselves; any limitations on the arts will encourage the opposite of what a healthy religious system should call for, because culture is something owned by everyone, and not something that a few persons should decide upon.” Ultimately, al-Mardini wants Muslims to go back to the original sources and learn what they have to say about music and even more crucial issues.

Moreover, just as the opening of the Muslim public sphere 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 The Kordz urge listeners in their song, “Deeper In,” “Your mind is in despair and lost in a dream / Bring it out again from somewhere deeper in.”

Rotana’s “Dominate or Die” Versus Metal’s DIY

It is no secret that religious forces can be regressive when it comes to artistic and musical freedom. Today, however, conservative religious groups like Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, Morocco’s Justice and Spirituality Association, and even Hezbollah, are adopting something approaching a live-and-let-live policy toward most artists. Direct government censorship, whether motivated by political or religious considerations,

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has also silenced musicians. But these days, being censored by the government in the MENA tends to increase sales in much the same way that “explicit lyrics” stickers do for artists in the United States.

In today’s globalized media environment, many leading Arab artists have come to feel that today the growing power of the major Arab media companies poses a greater threat to their artistic freedom than do either government censorship or religiously grounded attacks. The epitome of this trend is Rotana. Founded in 1987, and with a market capitalization valued at over \$1 billion, the Saudi-owned media conglomerate is the biggest Arab media company by far. Under its umbrella are television stations in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Dubai; recording studios; record labels; at least six music video and cinema channels; production companies; management and publishing divisions; and even cafés where you can purchase the company’s products and get them signed by one of the company’s stars if they happen to be doing an in-store promotion.

As the company’s publicity boasts, Rotana’s “portfolio of more than 100 stars from the entire MENA region . . . certifies an 85-percent market share for Rotana in the Arabic music industry and four of the top ten channels viewed in the Arab world.” Its roster includes perhaps the most popular male singers in Arab music today, such as the Iraqi Kazem Al Saher; Egypt’s Amr Diab; Lebanese singers Najwa Karam, Julia Botros, Elissa, Georges Wassouf, and Wael Kafoury; and leading Kuwaiti singer Abdullah Rweished, who had a fatwa of death handed down against him by a Saudi cleric on an unsubstantiated charge of singing the opening verse of the Qur’an.

Along with its main Lebanese competitor, Future TV (founded by Harriri in 1993), Rotana's economic and cultural position in Lebanon epitomizes how deeply rooted globalization has become in the last two decades, thanks in good measure to the late prime minister's liberalization and privatization programs, which reshaped the country's economy toward the financial, service, and tourism sectors. But the price, as elsewhere in the MENA, has been increased inequality and poverty, skyrocketing foreign debt, and a retrenchment of sectarian and specifically Islamist politics, as personified by Hezbollah, in the poorer Shi'i communities that have experienced few benefits from the reforms. Not surprisingly, Hezbollah has developed its own increasingly globalized media structure centered around its al-Manar television network.

What makes Rotana different from its Western counterparts is that no Western entertainment company monopolizes every facet of the entertainment industry the way Rotana does, from managing an artist, owning her publishing rights, and distributing her album, video, and maybe even movie, playing them on its video music channels, and organizing her tours, the way Rotana does.

Rotana is both an international conglomerate and a "family business," one that remains tightly under the control of one person, Saudi Prince Walid bin Talal. In fact, Rotana is a new exemplar of the type of "family capitalism" that is not just typical of the wealthy Gulf petro-monarchies and sheikhdoms, but has long been the basis of Lebanon's grossly unequal distribution of wealth. While the company doesn't control every major artist in the Arab world, most of the ones not in its stable are established enough to demand similar

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budgets for recording, video production, and marketing their music from the few remaining labels that are willing to compete with it.

But with all but the biggest artists in the Arab world, Rotana doesn't have to negotiate or compromise. Operating under the same "dominate or die" philosophy that the *New York Times* once described as the modus operandi of contemporary corporate globalization, Rotana can make it very difficult for an artist to achieve mainstream success if he or she refuses to play by its rules, or decides to move beyond criticizing Israel and the United States to taking on the authoritarian political and social systems of the MENA, and especially the Persian Gulf.

In fact, what Moe Hamzeh describes as the "Rotana effect" has effectively put out of business both well-known local record companies such as Voie de l'Orient (the label of the seminal Lebanese singer Fairuz), the Saudi label Stallion, and the Egyptian label 'Alam al-fan. Even EMI closed up most of its local business in the Arab world because it couldn't compete with Rotana. And now other companies, especially mobile communications giants, are moving into the music production and distribution field, making it even harder for small producers to compete.

Thankfully, the categories of music that Rotana hasn't taken over yet have been Lebanon's alternative music scenes: rock, metal, and hip-hop. From Moe's perspective, Rotana's putting so many Arab labels out of business has actually created room for alternative groups to pursue a DIY strategy, not just in producing and distributing music, but also in producing their own videos, creating their own record labels, and even producing large-scale festivals. The only problem

is that once these activities achieve critical mass, they wind up on corporate radar and become vulnerable to corporate co-optation, as happened with the Boulevard Festival in Casablanca.

Two Months That Changed Everything

Around the time that Rafik Harriri was assassinated, a young Lebanese video producer had just returned from living in the United States for many years and took a job at Hezbollah's al-Manar television network. His particular talent was producing bloody music videos, in which the scenes of violence were timed to the beat of the music. His goal, according to one interview, was to remind people of the "power of blood"; more specifically, he wanted to encourage young Palestinians to become suicide bombers, which he could hope to do because al-Manar is the second-most-watched station in the West Bank.

The producer, who didn't reveal his true identity, is Moe Hamzeh's doppelgänger—his shadowy, somewhat nefarious twin. The two represent the poles of contemporary Lebanese popular culture; one is at the forefront of a politics of hope, the other of a culture of death. As Moe is the first to admit, it was the al-Manar producer who had the better time during the summer of 2006, when Hezbollah, almost simultaneously with Hamas, launched operations that kidnapped several Israeli soldiers for use as bargaining chips for their own prisoners, prompting a massive Israeli response that quickly escalated into full-scale war across much of Lebanon.

How did the hopeful promise of the Cedar Spring end up in a blood-soaked war between Israel and Hezbollah, a little over a year later? Conspiracy theories abound on all sides. But

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for me perhaps the most important, yet infrequently mentioned, reason for Hezbollah's unprovoked attack on Israeli territory was the fear by the movement's leaders that it was losing its once-vaunted social and political power. Almost a generation had passed since the civil war, and six years since Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon. Hezbollah's main patron, Syria, had been expelled by what started out as a rag-tag movement of various Lebanese grassroots groups using nonviolent cultural events (e.g., rallies and marches). The push toward a new political order would surely leave the movement, whose claim to fame was violent resistance (even though it owes its enduring power to its extensive health, educational, and other social networks), far less powerful than it had been. Rather than engage in the hard work of competing on equal footing in a new and more robust public and political sphere, the Hezbollah leadership realized that war would both raise its profile around the region and weaken its domestic opposition, which is exactly what happened.

During the war, Moe sent me the following e-mail from Beirut: "Personally, I am not that well, physically, and psychologically. I am going into very depressive time, watching how this war affected our future . . . I am not performing anymore . . . my band members left the country during the war and the main people are not coming back, I am also not able to secure any more money to record the album, etc. etc. . . . So it is a very delicate phase I am going through." Not everyone was that paralyzed, however. Layla and most of her activist friends were deeply involved in housing refugees, sometimes in their own apartments in the relatively safe areas of downtown and central Beirut.

Among musicians, the band Scrambled Eggs, one of the most distinctive bands in the Lebanon scene (its unique sound is forged out of the raw materials of progressive rock, no-wave, ambient, noise, and straight-ahead American rock 'n' roll), stayed in Beirut, even organizing a show to help build solidarity and raise awareness in the foreign press about what it felt were the underreported realities of the war. The concert was titled "Musicians AGAINST Monsters" and was held at Club Social in the trendy, century-old neighborhood of Gemayzeh, located next to the downtown/Solidaire region. Although only blocks from the fighting, it was attended by a large share of the foreign journalists in Beirut, and became one of the few hopeful stories of the summer.



Six months after the war ended, I was back in Beirut, lucky enough to see Blend and sit in with The Kordz on successive nights at Club Nova. Before Blend's show, Moe and his wife, Manal (pregnant with twins), and I met some friends at a restaurant in Gemayze. The last time I had been there, before the war, it was cordoned off by the army to provide security for a "National Unity" conference that was supposed to—but didn't—end the stalemate caused by the Cedar Revolution.

This time, months after the war, downtown was again cordoned off, but not for meetings between the competing members of the country's elite. Instead, the area had been turned into a refugee camp and protest site by Shī'is who had fled the Israeli destruction of their neighborhoods and towns. They knew, from press reports, of the tacit agreement between Hezbollah and Israel in which Hezbollah wouldn't fire

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rockets at Tel Aviv or Haifa if Israel didn't attack Solidaire and other upscale neighborhoods. A quarter that had been emptied of the poor and working class to make way for steel-and-glass high-rises, haute couture boutiques, and other attractions for the elite had been reoccupied by the same class that was expelled over a decade before.

"It's the revenge of the dispossessed," one dinner companion explained, who then pointed out that the this tent city had lasted far longer than the one erected by the organizers of the Cedar Revolution. Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah told his people that "your resistance and steadfastness dealt a severe blow to the New Middle East plan, which Condoleezza Rice said would be born in the July War. But it was stillborn because it was an illegitimate child."

It was clear from speaking with contacts in Hezbollah that the protesters had no plans to relinquish their hold on Beirut's downtown until they received a bigger piece of Lebanon's already heavily sliced pie. In the meantime, each night the residents of the tent city shone a huge spotlight on the Parliament building at one end of the central plaza and blasted al-Manar programs through the loudspeakers. They re-created what the seminal postwar German philosopher Jurgen Habermas once dismissed as a "plebian public sphere," a public sphere for the working-class masses right in the heart of Lebanon's global city. In doing so, they were trying to ensure that Hezbollah would wind up with more power than before the war, despite the fact that Lebanon remains more divided than ever.

When I arrived at Nova for Blend's show, and then the next night at The Kordz's concert, it was clear that things had also changed in Beirut's music scene. On the one hand, the

shows were attended by fewer people than attended the bands' shows before the war. But on the positive side, the smaller crowd exuded an intense level of camaraderie that was unusual even for the normally gregarious Lebanese. People were hugging and kissing hello with far more intensity, perhaps the result of the shared weeks of hell everyone had gone through.

There was another difference in the feel of the concerts, a kind of desperation in the bands that reflected the increasing lack of hope for most most people who weren't Hezbollah supporters in any kind of positive outcome for Lebanon. This sentiment was on display when Blend played a walloping Oriental metal version of the classic Rogers and Hammerstein song "My Favorite Things" near the end of their show. When the band's new lead singer screamed lyrics such as "When the dog bites and the bee stings and I'm feeling sad, / I simply remember my favorite things and then I don't feel so bad," the absurdity of war couldn't have been more obvious.

The music was certainly symbolic, but it couldn't compare with the feeling of actually walking through the rubble of southern Beirut, which looked like a nightmare that even Gazans or Baghdadis haven't yet woken up to. Almost a year after the war, much of Haret al-Hreik, Hezbollah's home base, remained utterly in ruins. The streets were filled with pancaked buildings. Sheets and clothing still billowed in the wind out of the now-sandwiched floors. Yet, amid the rubble, Hezbollah was directing a frantic rebuilding effort, and gelaterias, cafés, and small boutiques were filled with customers, in what passed for a normal day in southern Beirut.

Alaa Abdel Fatah and his wife, Manal, who'd joined me in Beirut for a conference on youth and the public sphere that

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Layla al-Zubaidi had organized, toured the neighborhood with me. Never having experienced war's devastation before, they were blown away. "It's so very intense," Alaa explained. "Lebanon was our—the Arabs' and Muslims'—hope. Everyone was very excited when they saw Hezbollah winning. But now, as I walk through here and see the result, it's so depressing. We always thought that if we brought hundreds of thousands of people into the streets, we could bring down the government, but this taught us otherwise."

As he processed his feelings during our tour of the rubble, two girls walked by wearing army fatigues, tight black T-shirts, and full headscarves. They were *muhajababes*, the object of media scrutiny ever since BBC producer Allegra Stratton published a book of that name, playing off the term *muhajaba* that was coined by young Arabs to describe their female peers who wore headscarves along with their tight jeans and T-shirts or designers' clothes.

Having baited our eyes with their outfits, they glared at us as they walked by. As we passed, I noticed that each was wearing a yellow rubber wrist band, which looked a lot like the Lance Armstrong cancer bracelet worn by millions of Americans. But then my eye caught the Hezbollah logo on them, and I realized they were merely the newest item of Hezbollah chic, easily purchased, I soon discovered, in the local stationery store along with etched crystal paperweights bearing Nasrallah's likeness inside, and innumerable Hezbollah books and videos about the war with catchy titles such as *Nasr min Allah*, or *Victory from God* (the Arabic is a play on Hassan Nasrallah's last name; the text isn't nearly as interesting).

However distasteful Americans might consider their

accessories to be, the young women walking through the rubble in their funky outfits and Hezbollah charms are as much the future of Lebanon as are their funkily dressed sisters in Gemayze or Hamra, musicians and fans alike. Their perspective on the world is global, yet their allegiance is at least partly to Hezbollah, not merely (or even primarily) for religious reasons, but because the movement has managed to defy Israel and the United States, increase the power of their historically marginalized community, run a fairly corruption-free local government, and allow them the space to define their own cultural avant-garde, which is every bit as radical as the one that's been crafted a few kilometers to the north.

In fact, for all we knew the girls were on their way to class at AUB (they certainly looked like AUB students). Even if they were, however, it wouldn't change the basic equation that divides southern Beirut, and the Lebanon it represents, from the central and northern parts of the city, and the neoliberal vision of the future that, several years after Harriri's murder, still governs the worldview and policies of the country's pro-American elite.

Sheikh al-Mardini captured the despondency felt by most Lebanese I know over Lebanon's postwar paralysis when I went to check on him and his family on the last day of my trip. As we sat in his bedroom, he recounted how much more divided Lebanese society is after the war. There was a moment after Harriri's assassination, he explained as his children crawled over him, stealing the cookies his wife had laid out for us, when everyone could have worked together. But Hezbollah only wanted to lead, not participate as an equal, in any move toward the future. "Today, each side in Lebanon has

its own culture, religious and other ideas. At the moment of the Cedar Revolution we could have offered a model not just for the Arab world, but for the whole world. But Syria, Iran, Israel, and other powers all preferred that we be a failed experiment rather than succeed and challenge the existing system, which they all benefit from.”

What troubled both the sheikh and Moe Hamzeh was how religion and culture were working against each other rather than for reform. 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 [leaders of various factions] if everyone stays asleep, lazy and humiliated.” Moe concurred, adding that “it’s the role of culture to force those questions on their leaders, and it’s the goal of leaders to stop those questions from being asked. And we’re more important than ever because the gap between intellectuals and the rest of society is growing. Society is lazy, the system is lazy, but music can’t be lazy.”

One thing’s for sure: both Hezbollah and Lebanon’s hard rockers are expert at reminding people of the “power of blood.” The difference is that Hezbollah and other political parties and militias use the symbolic power of blood to win support for shedding more of it when they deem necessary, while Lebanon’s metalheads and their comrades across the musical spectrum use the symbolic power of blood for the opposite reason: to evoke the futility of violence.

It’s hard to imagine who can initiate a dialogue on these issues, and in so doing give more space to the metaphorical, rather than actual, spilling of blood. Nevertheless, everyone agrees that such a dialogue is crucial to securing a peaceful future. (During one of the country’s periodic political crises,

in late 2007, a television ad was aired appealing for dialogue, “if not for us, then for our children. Talk to each other.”) Putting *The Kordz* or *Blend* into heavy rotation on al-Manar might be a good place to start. But given Hezbollah’s history of being ahead of the cultural-political curve, the movement might decide it’s more efficient to train its own generation of Islamic rockers to take to the streets, airwaves, and satellite channels by storm.

The question is, will they, or their comrades in Hezbollah’s political and military wings, be willing to share the stage with their peers? Or will an emboldened Hezbollah become more like Rotana and Wal-Mart, seeking merely to crush or buy out the opposition rather than engage it for the common good. Somewhere in the answer to this question lies the future of Lebanon, and of the Middle East as a whole.