

## 3.2. Underground politics: “I am sure they know we are not the devil’s son and that metal is against corruption” – heavy metal as (sub-) cultural expressions in authoritarian regimes

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### Abstract

Can heavy metal be at all political? Different from the clearly recognizable political culture of punk, heavy metal is often described as non-political and/or as a rarely "political pop culture", although different studies validated the political potential of heavy metal but not as an overall political culture, and only in certain segments. Since heavy metal is a global phenomenon, the political moment of the scene is not only limited to the western part of the world. For example the political potential of heavy metal can also be found in the Middle East. Different to the European or American heavy metal scene protagonists in these areas have to deal with different variations of censorship and repressions against their cultural scene. Furthermore, the scene is characterized by its deep rooted connection to the underground.

**Keywords:** Heavy metal, Social Science, Politics, MENA, Censorship and Repressions

The combination of heavy metal and Islam, or in other words, heavy metal in an Arab or Islamic context, is unimaginable for a lot of people. The media have given the majority of the population a mostly monolithic view of the Islamic world (terrorism, backward thinking, unscrupulous rulers, etc.). This view of the Arabic and/or Islamic world in combination with heavy metal is therefore surprising to many because for the majority population it seems that both do not really fit together. People with long hair, black outfit, who consume alcohol and drugs and who listen to loud, aggressive and unaesthetic music are mainly associated with heavy metal. Thus, this stereotype point of view on heavy metal culture stands in clear contrast to the picture people mostly have of Islam. In fact, the various countries and different cultures which extend over an area from Morocco to Pakistan and Southeast Asia (such as Indonesia and Malaysia), are diverse and differ from each other, e.g. religion, politics and music (cf. Le Vine, 2009, p. 21). This diversity also includes young people who wear a Mohican haircut or Gothic make-up (cf. Le Vine, 2008, p. 3).

Like other forms of popular music cultures, such as hip-hop, the phenomenon of heavy metal spread in the MENA<sup>2</sup> countries in various forms, so that the thesis of Weinstein turns out to be wrong. "[...] the pull of Islam seems to be strong enough, even outside the Middle

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<sup>2</sup> The term MENA stands for "Middle East and North Africa" and is mostly used in an academic or economic context. Under the term the Middle East and the Muslim coined North African states are subsumed. This area therefore extends from northwest Africa (Morocco) to Iran in Southwest Asia.

East, so preclude metal from getting a foothold among Moslem youth" (Weinstein, 2000, p. 120). Nowadays heavy metal is a global phenomenon that first emerged in the UK, spread across the U.S., Europe and the rest of the world which also affected the countries of the so-called third world or threshold countries, e.g. the former states of the Eastern bloc, Africa and also the Arab and Islamic world. The oriental heavy metal scene has recently grown rapidly. If one is paying attention to the statement of Iron Maidens lead singer Bruce Dickinson, the Orient will have a strong influence on the heavy metal music in the next ten years (cf. Stratmann, 2010, p. 42).

As a result, it should not be surprising to find this multi-faceted music culture in all its dimensions also in the MENA, from which one normally would never be expected to find a vibrant and versatile heavy metal scene with diverse bands and a wide range of fans. In fact, an exemplary documentary called "Global Metal" (Dunn & McFadyen, 2008) and others such as "Heavy Metal in Baghdad" (Alvi & Moretti, 2008) refer to the local scene but scientific contributions as exemplified by Le Vine (2008, 2009), Hecker (2010, 2012) and Epp (2011) on these issues represent an exception up to now.

## **The geographical extension of heavy metal in the MENA**

The phenomenon heavy metal first appeared in the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s in the MENA region more than a decade after the term heavy metal emerged to describe a music style (cf. Le Vine, 2009, p. 12 and 21). Heavy metal music in Europe and the U.S. had already flourished and the British band Iron Maiden which belongs to the "New Wave of British Heavy Metal" registered commercial successes. Heavy Metal came with the globalization and the economical opening (or rather the constraint of opening) into the MENA (cf. *ibid.*, p. 13). Parts of the Islamic world, as well as many people from the western world, only have a critical point of view about the globalization and attest it as a negative impact on various phenomena. Thereby, the reality is much more complex than these assumptions would suggest: globalisation enabled a broader cultural liberalisation, communication and solidarity within the region of the MENA, as well as between Muslims and the western world. Nowhere is the "positive" potential of globalisation more apparent than in the media and the popular cultures of that region. Globalisation for example, spread through satellite television and the growth of international travel Baywatch and Britney Spears in the Middle East but also hip-hop and heavy metal such as Tupac Shakur and Iron Maiden. A circulation of the heavy metal music took place with the help of tourists, flight attendants, who spent their time during their stay in the U.S. or Europe in (alternative) music stores or bars (cf. Le Vine, 2008, p. 6ff.) and the international media exchange, the so-called "tape trading". Then, the music reached the MENA in the form of physical sound carriers because mp3 files or hosting services for music did not exist yet. Furthermore, heavy metal appeared with the phenomenon of the so-called "youth bulge". The progressive youthfulness of a society – the disproportionate protuberance of the demographic age pyramid (cf. Le Vine, 2009, p. 21ff.). Younger people wanted their voices to be heard and found a medium in heavy metal with which they can express themselves. Thus, the cultural consequences of globalisation have changed the musical landscape of the MENA (cf. Le Vine, 2008, p. 10). The scene became bigger and bigger at the beginning of the twenty-first century primarily through the spread of the internet and the emergence of acquirable music software for recordings. The internet plays a significant role in these regions for networking between the metal-heads and the distribution of their music.

The internet possesses a special role due to the circumstances of censorship. It is problematic and even risky for the local heavy metal scene to represent themselves as a metal-head in public in some countries. In certain countries, especially in the MENA, listening to heavy metal and/or its occurrence with its cultural codes is (un)officially considered a criminal offense and its exertion is connected with repressions (cf. Epp, 2011, p. 347ff.). If their followers want to participate and exchange with the scene, they need to find other/new ways of communication to avoid any repressions. The fact that new media enables a more (or less) secure exchange, networking and participation cannot be publicly dismissed. The possibilities of new media are not only important for the connection and exchange with the heavy metal scene outside of the MENA but also much more important for the networking within the MENA. With the help of the internet they can connect with new people, promote legal and illegal concerts in their region etc. Furthermore, due to the lack of public meeting points, such as bars and clubs, where metal-heads meet, talk, party and exchange etc. the internet seems to be a much safer and freer space where metal-heads can participate with and within the heavy metal scene without fear. The heavy metal scene in the MENA differs in its structural significance between the scenes in Europe and North America. For example, this implies the before mentioned lack of bars and clubs, so that for example concerts rarely take place – mostly in hidden places – so that the possibility of touring or playing concerts for bands is really limited inside the MENA. The structures of labels also differ in the western part of the world. One can rarely find small D.I.Y. labels, even finding bigger independent labels or major labels as for example Nuclear Blast from Europe is impossible. Taking these circumstances into account, the heavy metal scene of the MENA is characterized by a much greater connection to the D.I.Y. spirit in its whole rather than the scenes in Europe or North America.

The heavy metal scene in the different countries of the MENA, seen from a superficial perspective, share many similarities like censorship, repression, the historical background of heavy metal in the MENA, the political system, the importance of the internet and the connection to the D.I.Y. spirit. At a second glance, the differences show up especially in the sectors of censorship and repression. Thus, certain strategies and experiences from one area are not easily transferable to another heavy metal scene of the region. Experience has shown, that each scene and the (external) circumstances in another country can be seen as unique which are worth being discussed and considered separately (cf. Le Vine, 2009, p. 34).

## **Moral panics, censorship and repression**

The MENA metal-heads have to deal with, according to the political system, highly variable and very different types and forms of repression and censorship. This range varies from simple stage bans to imprisonment and torture. In Egypt (1997), Turkey (1990, 1999) and Morocco (2000), for example, metal-heads were arrested during several crackdowns by security police and held for months because they were accused of undermining the foundation pillars of the Islamic faith as well the public morality. Some spiritual (both Christian and Islamic) and political leaders even demanded the death penalty for those involved (cf. Le Vine, 2008, p. 28ff. and 2009, p. 36ff.; Hecker, 2012, p. 82ff.). Turkish security authorities placed Satanism and heavy metal temporarily on the same level as the activities of the PKK, and thought about establishing an anti-Satanist task force (cf. Hecker, 2012, 107ff.). In Iran, metal-heads are also arbitrarily arrested by the state executive and mistreated in prison. It is not uncommon that their hair got cut off or even torn out violently by police officers (cf. Le Vine, 2009, p. 49ff.).

The following excerpt from an interview with a band from Egypt could illustrate the "criminal" potential of heavy metal: "I once got arrested with three other friends of mine (one of them happens to be our other guitarist) only because we were wearing Black T-shirts and head banging to an S.O.A.D. song in the street. See how criminal we were?". Hecker also confirms that in the Turkish metal scene the personal freedom is restricted on an extensive dimension because of this constant fear.

The police continued to indiscriminately arrest young people with black clothes, long hair, and tattoos. [...] In addition to that, the police raided music shops and private homes, confiscating magazines, CDs, and other items they believed to have satanic content. Out of fear being arrested, most metal-heads temporarily avoided wearing black T-shirts or going out to bars (Hecker, 2012, p. 101f.).

Thus, metal-heads are and have been in constant fear not only due to the police but also to attacks from the public which is clarified by the following excerpt from an interview about Hecker's study.

They shot at our [rehearsal] studio twice – with guns. While we were inside. [pauses]. Just people from the streets. They heard the music and they knocked at the door. I supposed they were friends, so I opened and I saw a man I didn't know. And I just shot the door. And he knocked again, knocked again, knocked again. [...] We played for five minutes, maybe less than that. And there was a big bang. They were hitting the door with a crowbar or something. We were shocked, not knowing what happened. But they couldn't open the door. So they went. We were scared. And then they shot at the door and the windows of our studio and we lay down (cf. *ibid.*, p. 178).

These so called moral panics blamed heavy metal culture not only for undermining the foundation pillars of the Islamic faith and the public morality but also made them responsible for several suicides of young people in the late 1990s (cf. *ibid.*, p. 23ff.). "A myriad of allegations, lawsuits, and charges has blamed heavy metal for seducing youngsters into Satanism, blasphemy, suicide, violence, sexual perversion, drugs and alcohol abuse" (*ibid.*, p. 23). Those in power as well as the media justified the suicides officially by listening to heavy metal music. From their point of view, heavy metal is a satanic practice and their followers want to fan out with the help of the musical Satanism into society. "Turkish metalheads were publicly perceived as an "army of Satan"" (*ibid.*, p. 111). These ideas are primarily spread by the media in society. Heavy metal followers are thus mainly confronted with the stereotypes which are associated with heavy metal. These ideas and arguments are mostly taken up by the media with enthusiasm and dissemination, as the following example from the Turkish daily newspaper Zaman proves (cf. Hecker 2012, Le Vine 2008, 2009):

Crimes committed by Satanists snowball ... They worship the devil, perform ceremonies, and sacrifice virgins. They drink the blood of animals and offer sacrifices to Satan in collective rituals. They participate in horrific murders and suicides destroying all boundaries by rebellious actions; sexuality plays a major role in this (Hecker, 2012, p. 95f.).

The moral panics, censorship and repressions illustrate that heavy metal is also a political issue in the MENA, as in the western world. Since emerging towards the end of the 1970s, heavy metal has been a political issue (vgl. Hjelm, Kahn-Harris & Le Vine, 2013, 3ff.; Wehrli, 2012, 61ff.). On the other hand one can question if heavy metal also includes political potential in its expression?



## Political? Definition of political music

The difference between the political culture of punk and heavy metal is clearly recognisable and is described as non-political and/or as a rarely "political pop culture" as told by Kleiner and Anastasiadis (2011, p. 393). Statements expressed by both fans and bands say that heavy metal is not political at all but just metal. Furthermore, its heterogeneity is considered as an important argument against a political classification of its culture. Heavy metal has diversified into a multitude of different genres since the beginning of the 1970s. This not only concerns the different sub- or sub sub-genres of heavy metal, e.g. Death-, Black-, Thrash- and Speed metal but also the different fan cultures. Thus, it is hard to speak of heavy metal as a compact culture with a clearly political message. To understand the metal scene as a homogeneous (sub-) culture seems difficult, if not impossible. The term heavy metal has been used since its inception in the early 1970s as a broad label by the outside world to describe a large group of otherwise diverse musical forms. Internally that diversity has always been acknowledged (cf. Heinisch, 2011, p. 411), so that it is difficult to speak of heavy metal as a political movement as a whole. Heavy metal can certainly be a location for alternative and subversive statements and circulation of daily and historical themes demonstrated by Kleiner and Anastasiadis (2011) in their longitudinal analysis which broaches the issue of war in heavy metal. They illustrate that heavy metal could indeed be political mainly through reductive and plain phrases within the lyrics on various issues. Therefore, it appears political and also has a politicising effect but only in certain segments not as a macro-culture (cf. Kleiner & Anastasiadis, 2011, p. 396 ff.).

What can exactly be understood as political? If one takes a look at the definition of what "political" exactly means, it would be problematic and one could have issues generally because there is no accepted definition of politics. In "Lexikon der Politikwissenschaften" (encyclopedia of political science), different definitions for the term "political" can be found (cf. Nohlen & Schultze, 2004, p. 669ff.); herein, the question is raised on which political understanding the later analysis is based on. It refers back to Nieland's (2009, p. 33) opinion about politics which is divided into three areas:

1. "Polity" refers to the formal dimension (the norms and institutional structure) and understands politics as a framework.
2. "Politics" captures the procedural dimension; it focuses on the process, conflict resolution and understands politics as a process.
3. "Policy" refers to the content dimension, thus the editing and treatment of social problems and understanding of politics therefore as content.

## Political potential of heavy metal in the MENA?!

The question of political potential in heavy metal has always been related to regions where heavy metal is seen as something different but on a governmental level, not generally prohibited. In Europe and the U.S. each metal-head, whether fan or musician, is protected on a very basic level through the freedom of opinion and the right to freely express and develop one's own personality. This situation is fundamentally different in the various MENA countries as shown (cf. Epp, Othmer & Masurek, 2011, p. 34).

In order to find out if there is any political potential in heavy metal music in the MENA, it is important to take a look at the lyrics of the metal bands, if there is any message, attitude, quotation or allusion to be found. Kleiner and Anastasiadis (2011) also did this in their study

about the political moments of heavy metal bands in Europe and the U.S. The majority of the bands from the MENA countries, e.g. Inner Guilt (Lebanon) or Massive Scar Era (Egypt) as well as bands from other non-English speaking countries (Heaven Shall Burn and Sodom in Germany and At The Gates and Arch Enemy in Scandinavia) write their lyrics in English which make it easier for non-Arabic speakers to understand and analyse them. English language used by the bands in the MENA can be seen, on a political level, as subversive because it arises from western culture. In these countries Metal with all its cultural and moral impacts is seen by the conservative forces as a metaphor for westernisation. English as a language is also used to mask and lessen the significance of statements which are made in the lyrics. "Furthermore, they increasingly prefer English over Turkish lyrics – due partly to political reasons, for the Turkish police usually do not understand English" (Hecker, 2012, p. 62). It is difficult to find explicit political statements on a textual level due to the danger and fear of censorship and/or repression. This is illustrated by the song "Freedom" from the Egyptian band Massive Scar Era. The song starts with the Narrator's statement that she has not yet shaped her life according to her own wishes and desires but has always attempted to meet the wishes and desires of others. She follows and does everything one tells her. Suddenly she reflects her situation and notices that she never lived her life up to her own views and conceptions. Thereby, if the narrator refers to the rulers (powerbloc) or someone else who is criticised remains implicitly since no counterpart is directly addressed. Nevertheless, it is clear that in the shown excerpt, decisions of authorities are critically reflected; whether it is people in general or the autocratic rulers is a matter of interpretation.

It can be mainly stated that in selected and analysed lyrics that no clearly marked criticism about those in power is found. Those in power are not addressed directly; the statements stay very general – the criticism is kept implicit and hidden. This should not be surprising at all, regarding the outlined circumstances (repression, torture, etc.). The authors of the lyrics cannot be blamed for the infiltration of the system through the statements in their lyrics because of vague descriptions of anonymous enemies predominant within the lyrics, as well as the desire for freedom and independence. Therefore, it is hard to find explicit political statements in the lyrics of heavy metal bands from the MENA.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out by Epp, Masurek and Othmer (2011) due to problems about ambiguity and hidden statements in the lyrics in order to find out whether subversive potential is assimilated in them or not. The following results should be illustrated in summary.

One conclusion is that the protagonists we asked concerning their lyrics and its expressions all mentioned a critical attitude against the power bloc (those in power) or at least, they mentioned a kind of socio-critical position. Parallel to this we also found an interesting difference in the data whether heavy metal is seen as political or not. We found protagonists, who see heavy metal definitely not as a political movement or with any bond to political terms or messages. In their opinion heavy metal is not political at all, or if it is, than only in a very small dimension. This should be underlined by the responses to the question "Do you consider metal to be political?". Protagonist A: "Hell no man! Metal is Metal. It has always been this way, although there are a lot of Metal bands who base their lyrical theme on the ugly politics!" Interestingly, this group of people for whom heavy metal is not, or just in a small degree, political, engages a socio-critical position in their lyrics and they see freedom (both the personal and artistic freedom) as an important part of their lives which the band uses as a central part in their lyrics. As explained, these people see metal without any political potential but on the

other hand the same individuals focus on a critical attitude to their lyrics towards society and above all, against the authorities. Protagonist A: "Our lyrics aren't to be read as resistance movement against anyone but to free one's mind from these slanderous societies" [...] "Metal is about freedom to choose a lifestyle not the way that these societies force you to live!!" [...] "Our lyrical theme explains the authority's power against the poor and the weak". Furthermore, heavy metal for the protagonists is strongly connected with freedom which is inherent in their point of view. Protagonist A: "We have a dear friend who described Metal as freedom, and that is 100% true in our opinion". "In our country we can't resist but we try to survive against all those anointed religious parties who try to confront a genre which can free people's mind and lifestyle". The critical moment apart from the governmental authorities also includes religious organizations.

We also found out in the interviews that metal and not just heavy metal is definitely seen as political as the following statements clarify: Protagonist B: "Not just metal, music in general. Any type of music has the different political view, have message, some issues to discuss, have society, that's why music is politics and that's why they try to forbid music to control the minds and that's why the resistance use music to freeing minds", Protagonist C: "A lot of bands took that direction in writing, even when I started a side project it's going in that direction, so yeah I can say that 70% of it is pretty much political". These protagonists see metal, in particular, as resistance against authorities and/or against authoritarian systems – against the rulers (powerbloc). They also engage a social-critical position in their lyrics, which the following statements should clarify: Protagonist B: "Against those who need to make mankind just machines, those who need to control the mankind minds I think metal is world revolution". The music is clearly expressed here and its lyrics are targeted against those who try to control others and to manipulate them to take their autonomy. The individual's autonomy here is foremost. The individual wants to decide for himself about his life and does not want to be patronised and restricted by governmental authorities, especially in his artistic freedom. Protagonist C: "If it's resistance we're talking about, be sure it's against the government". It is not surprising at all that the protagonists of the heavy metal scene critically question the corrupt systems (power bloc) against which in many parts of the MENA entire populations have resisted in the last few years (Arabic Spring). Protagonist B: "I'm sure they know well we are not the devil sons and they are know that metal is Resistance against any corruption, that's why they are against metal culture".

A common denominator can be clearly seen when comparing the two different positions, as already mentioned. Both positions represent a critical view – one can speak of a socio-critical perspective – towards the reigning systems and organizations. Furthermore, both perspectives focus on the individual freedom in their explanations. Protagonist C: "Well some people say metal is just my favorite music another says metal is lifestyle, but I think metal music is full independent life", Protagonist A: "Freedom to choose a lifestyle not the way that these societies force you to live!". The protagonists' similarity is exemplified by the latter statements. Whether the actors consider heavy metal as political or apolitical, they engage in their writings in response to the restrictions and repression they face and experience a constant idea of freedom and the right to express it. In regards to the aforementioned circumstances these criticisms are more hidden and less direct because of the repressions the protagonists have to worry about. Thus, the environment is critically reflected and the protagonists altercate explicitly with the regional circumstances of their environment (cf. Epp, Othmer & Masurek, 2011, p. 39ff.).

When taking a look at the study of Hecker about Turkish metal, he comes to the same conclusion. Here, heavy metal can also be seen as a secular culture that opposes the Islamisation of the public sphere. Mostly in all interviews and conversations metal-heads mentioned a “vehement antipathy toward government policies of increasingly limiting the consumption of alcohol, preventing the public display of nudity, fostering the re-emergence of headscarves at university campuses, or hampering the teaching of evolutionary theory in the classroom” (Hecker, 2012, 193).

Of course this subversive potential in the lyrics is not omnipresent. Moreover, it is more “hidden” because a concrete counterpart is not addressed. Thus, heavy metal in the MENA cannot be seen as a political movement in its totality but as a location of alternative and subversive statements and circulation of daily and historical themes.

These statements revealed that heavy metal in the MENA possesses and features a social critical point of view. Now the question arises about how this critical point of view on society can be linked and referred to Nieland’s opinion about politics? Based on what Nieland says, the political examination with its politicised and political potentials, heavy metal relates to the level of “policy”. The protagonists try to deal with and handle their society’s problems within their lyrics (due to the fear of repression). Hence the political moment according to Nieland can be seen as content. Otherwise, is politics only limited to the category of “policy”? Therefore, the horizon must be widened. A potential perspective can be seen in the pro-democracy movements in these regions. For example, in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, where metal-heads

become major activists in pro-democracy movements as they’ve grown into adulthood, playing important roles in the revolutionary protests in Tunisia and Egypt. Alaa Abdel Fatah, one of Egypt’s main first generation metal-heads, was arrested (and later released) by the post-Mubarak military junta because of his political activities (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris & Le Vine, 2013, p. 11).

Therefore, the political potential is not only limited to the category of “policy” but it can also be found on the level of “politics” (process of action) according to Nieland.

## Conclusion

As mentioned the protagonists associate heavy metal consciously and unconsciously with protest. One could also speak of heavy metal as protest music from a macro-perspective. The individuals question the power bloc, such as the political system, the religious leaders and in general the patriarchal structures of their societies with the help of the music. Therefore, it is not surprising that heavy metal has been (since its emergence in the MENA) frequently in the focus of the power bloc who tries to attack and ban this cultural phenomenon. So it was not only the hardness and distortion of the music but rather the lyrics which despise the authorities and question them critically as well as society in general. Bands like Slayer, Metallica, Machine Head, Lamb of God, Kreator, Testament and many other groups captured the attention and hearts of mainly young people because they critically see an answer and reaction to deal with the social conditions like corruption and personal limitations etc. in the music and its content. Furthermore, heavy metal seems to be an alternative to the very dominant traditional Arabic music as well to the extremely commercialized form of Arabic pop music which dominates the radio and TV channels in the MENA (cf. Le Vine, 2009, p. 21f.).

Heavy metal can be seen in Islamic countries as a kind of protest movement which Stratmann (2010, p. 41) also sees in the band The Kordz from Lebanon who deal in their lyrics for example with suicide bombers, question the alleged heroes of their culture and engage a critical position about the reasons for war between Muslims and Jews. Furthermore, Le Vine sees in this political potential of heavy metal in the MENA a return to its roots because the lyrics deal with socio-critical issues, such as the heavy metal movement of the early days before the music had established itself as mainstream and was commercialized (cf. Le Vine, 2008, p. 5).

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