The Grand (Hip-Hop) Chessboard

Race, Rap and Raison d'État

Hishaam Aidi

In November 2006, the film *The Making of a Kamikaze* by Nouri Bouzid, a respected Tunisian director, was screened to great fanfare at the Carthage Film Festival. The film, a collaboration between the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Tunisian Ministries of Interior, Defense and Culture, examines the grievances of Tunisian youth through the story of a young hip-hopper named Chokri, better known by his b-boy moniker, Bahta. The film opens in a coastal town where Bahta and his crew—made up of other unemployed youths—roam the streets, hounded by baton-wielding police, looking for a spot to practice. The atmosphere is tense, the frustration palpable. The United States has just invaded Iraq, and satellite-channel broadcasts in homes and cafés speak of occupation and resistance. A gangly, volatile youth, Bahta splits his time watching television, dancing and seeking a boat to smuggle him across the Mediterranean Sea to Italy. But due to the Iraq war, the Italians have tightened their naval patrols; very few *harraga* (boat people) are getting across. As doors close in his face, and police maltreatment increases, Bahta turns to petty crime, angry outbursts and wacky behavior, in one scene moonwalking across a café floor in a stolen police uniform, loudly promising all the patrons passports so they can travel legally. He eventually falls in with a crowd of Islamists, who drill him with sermons about the sinfulness of music, democracy and the West, wooing him toward martyrdom.

Making was mauled by French critics—"unconvincing," "politically correct"—and not without reason: The characters are caricatures, the break-dance scenes are routine and the pace plodding. The Islamists' tirades, which aim to show precisely how a suicide bomber is made, are in particular need of editing. Finally, the film's posing of hip-hop and Islamism as mutually exclusive opposites is very simplistic, overlooking the dense relationship between the two countercultures: Islamists listen to hip-hop, and rappers with Islamist—even jihadi—sympathies abound. The plot implies that both countercultures are a reaction to authoritarianism, but as the film was produced and marketed by organs of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's police state, the question arises whether the regime's preferred counterculture—hip-hop—has become a mechanism of state control. The most interesting parts of *Making* come when Lotfi Abdelli, who plays Bahta, drops out of character and storms off the set to confront filmmaker Bouzid. The ensuing grainy, documentary-style footage purports to show "the making of" the film itself. Abdelli asks why he, an up-and-coming actor, is being told that dancing is *haram* and why his character is being turned into a terrorist. "Where are you taking this film? You're using this film to attack Muslims." Worried it will land him in trouble, he shouts, "I'm not your puppet!" Bouzid calmly explains his secular worldview—religion and politics should be kept separate—and Abdelli resumes his role.

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It is unclear why Bouzid inserted these awkward snippets. Perhaps he did so to signal that he had little wiggle room in reflecting the Ben Ali regime's secular outlook and the Culture Ministry's vision of hip-hop as a counter to jihadi thought. The film went on to win the regime's accolades, including the Golden Tanit at the Carthage exposition, which is put on by the state. Praised for its exposure of the "process of brainwashing" used by jihadi groups, *Making* would be shown in European and North African cities. The Pakistani Ministry of Culture co-sponsored a screening at the Tunisian embassy in Islamabad. State officials and diplomats introducing the film reiterated the message that hip-hop is the antithesis of radical Islamism, perhaps even the antidote to it.

What *Making* left out was not just the possibility of Islamist hip-hop, but also of youth music directed against the regime, and it was precisely those two trends that rose to the fore as Ben Ali's dominion began to crumble in late December 2010. The regime had long harassed dissident rappers, banning Mohammed Jandoubi—aka Psycho M—an artist with Islamist sympathies, from the airwaves, in part for a track exhorting listeners to pick up Kalashnikovs and shoot Nouri Bouzid for his negative depiction of Islam in *Making*. In December, Psycho M, who had a large following on Facebook, stirred more controversy with "Manipulation," in which he angrily attacked Western imperialism, official Tunisian *laïcité*, the country's personal status code (which bans the headscarf in schools) and a range of secular figures from Voltaire and Marx to Nasser and Atatürk. By the time mass protests spread in early January, other Tunisian rappers with varying political perspectives—DJ Costa, Armada Bizerta, Laky—had posted tracks on Facebook capturing the growing rage and memorializing Mohamed Bouazizi, the man who had set himself on fire. The regime swiftly issued warnings to the artists and shut down their Facebook pages. At 3 am on January 6, the police burst into the home of Hamada Ben Amor, 22, the rapper known as El General. His track, "Mr. President" (*Rais Lebled*)—an open letter to Ben Ali excoriating the lack of freedom and

anti-veiling laws—had become the unofficial anthem of the revolt. Ben Amor was locked up for three days. The authorities banned his song, blacked out his MySpace page and cut off his cell phone service, but Al Jazeera had already snatched up the recording. It would resound from Tahrir Square in Egypt to Pearl Circle in Bahrain.

Much has been said about the role of rappers in the Arab revolts. French media spoke of "*le printemps des rappeurs*," and *Time* magazine gave the title "Rage, Rap and Revolution" to its cover story on the "Arab youthquake." *Time* would go on to name Ben Amor one of the "100 Most Influential People of 2011," ranking him higher than President Barack Obama. It is true that, as security forces rampaged in the streets, artists in Tunis, Cairo and Benghazi were writing lyrics and cobbling together protest footage, beats and rhymes, which they uploaded to proxy servers. The impromptu songs were then played at gatherings and solidarity marches in London, New York and Washington; exile opposition groups and Muslim communities responded with musical tributes. Five Muslim American rappers fronted by Omar Offendum uploaded the track "#jan25" in support of the Tahrir Square protesters on February 6; the song received 40,000 hits on YouTube overnight. "I heard 'em say the revolution won't be televised," Omar led off. "Al Jazeera proved 'em wrong; Twitter has 'em paralyzed." The "rap loop" between protesters and the Muslim diaspora galvanized youth on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, but the role of music should not be exaggerated: Hip-hop did not cause the revolts anymore than Twitter or Facebook did. The countries in the region with the most vibrant hip-hop scenes, Morocco and Algeria, have not seen revolts. Moreover, the cross-border spread of popular movements is not a new phenomenon in the Arab world; the uprisings of 1919, which engulfed Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, occurred long before the advent of the Internet, social media or rap.[1]

What is intriguing is that Arab states saw hip-hop as a threat, monitoring and censoring local rappers, long before the 2011 upheavals began. And they were not alone. In the last decade, as hip-hop has emerged as a political force among youth, regimes across the world have intervened to promote some sub-styles and sideline others, in an attempt to press-gang the genre to disparate political ends. In 2002, the Cuban Ministry of Culture founded the Cuban Rap Agency, along with the magazine *Movimiento*, to create a "revolutionary" hip-hop sound that would give voice to the "downtrodden of the world," and to make sure tracks suspected of "ideological deviation" were given no airtime. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez funds hip-hop schools around the country, and invites Bolivarian *raperos* onto his Sunday television show, "*Aló, Presidente*." In the US, Michael Steele has tried to give the Republican Party a "hip-hop makeover" to bring its ideas to "urban-suburban hip-hop settings." The US Army, in partnership with *The Source* magazine, has used hip-hop culture in its "Taking It to the Streets" campaign to recruit African-American youth.[2]

Governments are also sending hip-hop culture to far-flung corners of the globe. From its putative birthplace in the Bronx, hip-hop has traveled to become, at once, a means of protest and a tool of public diplomacy, counter-terrorism, democracy promotion and economic development. It is in the post-September 11 "war on terror" and in Western states' dealings with Muslim-majority states and Muslims in Europe that government mobilization of hip-hop is most noticeable. While European states are using the genre to integrate and "moderate" their Muslim populations, the US has made hip-hop part of its outreach to the Muslim world. The very music blamed for a range of social ills at home—violence, misogyny, consumerism, academic underperformance—is being deployed abroad in the hopes of making America safer and better liked. The officials behind the sundry hip-hop diplomacy initiatives invariably point to the success of jazz diplomacy during the Cold War as evidence of the "smart power" potential of music.

"Sound Diplomacy"

After World War II, as French and British colonies gained their independence, they found themselves courted by two superpowers eager to expand their spheres of influence. Forty such countries had become sovereign states by 1960, but Washington's efforts to attract them into its orbit were complicated by Soviet propaganda, which focused on racial discrimination and strife in the American South. Images of the killing of Emmett Till and the violent backlash to *Brown v. Board of Education* were broadcast around the world, and President Dwight Eisenhower, who had been rather complacent about civil rights, began to see that, internationally, race was America's Achilles' heel. The State Department commenced organizing high-profile jazz tours to alter impressions. The tours were the brainchild of the Democratic Congressman from Harlem, Adam Clayton Powell, who conceived of jazz as a Cold War weapon after attending the Afro-Asian Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. Powell was repelled by claims that the Soviet Union was more progressive on race than the US, as well as the Third Worldist rhetoric he heard at the conference. Upon returning, he proposed to the State Department that bands led by Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie and Louis Armstrong be sent abroad to improve America's image. As Powell would explain to Eisenhower, "One dark face from the US is of as much value as millions of dollars in economic aid."

Top diplomats welcomed the idea. The main goals of the tours were to bolster alliances and persuade non-aligned states that the US was different from European colonial powers and the Soviet Union. "Before long, jazz will become an arm of this country's foreign policy in such places as the Far East, Middle East and Africa," observed the *New York Times* in November 1955. "Bands will go into countries where communism has a foothold."[3] In March 1956, Dizzy Gillespie and his arranger, a young trumpeter named Quincy Jones, embarked on the first tour;

their first performance took place in Iran, where three years earlier a CIA-backed coup had reinstalled the Shah in power. With the Soviet Union expanding into the Middle East and an insolvent Britain unable to keep troops in Greece, the US assumed the role of containing Communism and protecting oil resources in the region. Gillespie's 18-piece band performed in Iran before moving on to Syria, Lebanon and Pakistan and ending in Turkey, Greece and Yugoslavia. The jazz tours targeted areas where Communism was gaining a foothold, and zones rich in oil and uranium; as Penny Von Eschen writes in her pioneering study *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, the tours often moved "in tandem with covert CIA operations."[4] The "jambassadors" were often dispatched as first responders to trouble spots. "They sent us to every post where there were problems and we got nothing but raves: We were the black kamikaze band," writes Quincy Jones in his memoir. "The American embassy in Athens was getting its ass kicked, being stoned by the Cypriot students, so they rushed us over there from Ankara, Turkey, and the Greek people loved it."[5] In 1958, John Foster Dulles extended a tour sending Dave Brubeck's band into Iraq, the only Arab state in the anti-Communist Baghdad Pact, hoping that while the jazz ambassadors performed, US officials could help quell the discord within the Iraqi army's ranks.

Karen Hughes, undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, dances with a Moroccan hip-hopper in Marrakesh in 2006.
JALIL BOUNHAR/AP PHOTO

Integrated bands led by Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman visited the Soviet Union and parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, their performances aimed at generating good will and getting citizenries to identify with "the American way of life." The bands were intended to be symbols of the triumph of democracy, with jazz serving as an embodiment of America's liberal ideals, in its improvisational pluralism and its universal, race-transcending quality. The irony, of course, is that these black musicians were deployed to improve the country's image and legitimate policies at a time when the US was still a Jim Crow nation. Vast swathes of the American public opposed the tours, in fact, leading the State Department to disguise their full extent. Yet the tours, which ended in the 1970s, are widely considered a success. Pianist Brubeck, for instance, thinks the jazz ambassadors helped end the Cold War.

In 2005, the jazz diplomacy initiative was revived in a program called Rhythm Road, a partnership of the State

Department, Jazz at Lincoln Center, the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Kennedy Center. Karen Hughes, the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, introduced the program after being appointed by President George W. Bush in the wake of Abu Ghraib and the resurgence of the Taliban. Since its inception, Rhythm Road has included jazz and "urban/hip-hop" music, recognizing hip-hop's dominance and role as a "global musical language." The program today also invites bands of other genres to audition—bluegrass, country, gospel, Cajun, zydeco and folk—but the initiative still relies heavily on black music.

In 2005, the State Department began sending "hip-hop envoys"—rappers, dancers, DJs—to perform and speak in different parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Toni Blackman, a poet, was the first such "hip-hop ambassador." Other groups that have been sent are Chen Lo and the Liberation Family, Legacy, the Vice Versa Alliance, the Reminders, Native Deen and Kokayi. The tours have covered the broad arc of the Muslim world, with performances taking place in Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire, across North Africa, the Levant and Arabia, and extending to Mongolia, Pakistan and Indonesia. The artists stage performances and hold workshops; the hip-hop ambassadors who are Muslim talk to local media about being Muslim in America.

The choice of jazz, during the Cold War, was not simply due to its international appeal. As von Eschen suggests, the State Department felt African-American culture could convey "a sense of shared suffering, as well as the conviction that equality could be gained under the American political system" to peoples who had suffered European colonialism.[6] Similar thinking underpins the "hip-hop diplomacy" initiative. The choice of hip-hop, widely derided as libertine, to represent the US in a rather conservative part of the world is not self-evident. Yet the State Department planners who are calling for "the leveraging of hip-hop" in US foreign policy lay stress on "the importance of Islam to the roots of hip-hop in America."[7] A Brookings report authored by the program's architects notes that hip-hop began as "outsiders' protest" against the American system, and now resonates among marginalized Muslim youth worldwide; from the Parisian *banlieues* to Palestine to Kyrgyzstan, "hip-hop reflects struggle against authority" and expresses a "pain" that transcends language barriers. Moreover, note the authors, hip-hop's pioneers were inner-city Muslims who "carry on an African-American Muslim tradition of protest against authority, most powerfully represented by Malcolm X." The report concludes by calling for a "greater exploitation of this natural connector to the Muslim world."

Islam's central role in hip-hop has been amply documented. Islamic motifs and Arabic terms have threaded through the genre's fabric since its genesis in 1973, when Afrika Bambaataa founded the Zulu Nation, reflecting the range of Islamic and quasi-Islamic ideologies and cultures that have coexisted for decades in America's urban centers.[8] In March 1991, *The Source* magazine devoted an issue, titled "Islamic Summit," to the relationship between Islam and hip-hop. In that golden age of "politically conscious hip-hop," Rakim and Public Enemy peppered their rhymes with Arabic phrases invoking Islam—"*al-hamdu lillah*," "*al-salam 'alaykum*"—and excerpted the speeches of Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad. As the Five Percent Nation, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam, gained ascendancy in the 1990s, mostly among youth in the Northeast, the movement's wordplay found its way into the lyrics of Gang Starr, Poor Righteous Teachers and Brand Nubian. As hip-hop went global around the same time, these allusions were transmitted around the world. In the 2000s, Sunni Muslim artists—Mos Def, Lupe Fiasco, Busta Rhymes, Q-Tip, Rhymefest and others—became popular, exposing mainstream fans to Islamic references like *salat* (prayer), *zakat* (alms) and *shahada* (profession of Muslim faith). American hip-hop's relationship to Islam is thus inextricably linked to the century-long presence of Islam in the American inner city. References to Islam and Arabic terms are so legion that, for many young Americans weaned on hip-hop, rap videos and lyrics provide regular exposure to Islam. And Muslim youth abroad are keenly aware that, as popular wisdom has it, "Islam is hip-hop's official religion," and that Muslims like Busta Rhymes and Mos Def are some of rap's biggest players.

State Department publications show that diplomats are aware of this "Muslim hip-hop" history and the kinship Muslim youth feel for these artists. The hip-hop ambassadors program fits into a larger effort to showcase America's model integration of Muslims, to demonstrate, as the State Department book *Muslims in America* (2009) says, "that Muslim Americans are endowed by right with the same freedoms, privileges and responsibilities as other Americans." In late 2002, the State Department began producing public service announcements—wherein Muslim American professionals spoke of the religious tolerance in America—that were televised in Muslim-majority countries. The aim was to show that the "Muslim American population is an extraordinary mosaic," that post-September 11 "fears and suspicions" had dipped and that integration was proceeding. "Distinctions that possibly loomed larger elsewhere are instead in America 'diluted' in the deep pool of pluralism that characterizes American society," declares *Muslims in America*. African-American Muslims figure prominently in the State Department's public diplomacy initiatives in the Muslim world, because of their long presence in America and the broad appeal of their culture and history. *Muslims in America* describes African-American Muslims as "indigenous," and comes with a "mini-poster" displaying mostly African-American entertainers who are Muslim—comedian Dave Chappelle, rappers Q-Tip, RZA of Wu Tang Clan and Mos Def, pianist Ahmed Jamal and Ronald Bell of Kool and the Gang. Not surprisingly, a significant number of the "hip-hop ambassadors" sent to the Muslim world—like Native Deen and the Reminders—are African-American Muslims.

The deployment of African-American Muslims to show how economically and politically integrated Muslims are in America

Louis Armstrong receives a triumphal welcome in Dusseldorf in 1952. ALBERT GILLHAUSEN/AP PHOTO

is ironic on multiple levels: African-Americans constitute the least affluent segment of the American Muslim community, and are geographically the most segregated, with significant numbers concentrated in inner-city areas and prisons. This community—at least since Mike Wallace's 1959 documentary, *The Hate That Hate Produced*—has also been portrayed as extremist, separatist, illiberal and "not really Muslim." Yet over the last decade, diplomats have begun to celebrate the "indigenous" African-American Muslims, perhaps in a realization that as with the jazz tours, what is maligned at home can yield dividends abroad. Adam Clayton Powell may have recoiled at the Third Worldism on display at Bandung, and was fully aware that a number of jazz musicians sympathized with it. Some had espoused Ahmadi Islam, and others, like Dizzy Gillespie, were card-carrying members of the Communist Party. But Powell—and liberal internationalists in Foggy Bottom—believed jazz diplomacy could advance American interests and aid the civil rights struggle. So the jazz artists were dispatched, while State Department officials at home scrambled to prevent images of the tours from reaching southern segregationists. In this task, ironically, they were aided by the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act, which barred the output of the US Information Agency from distribution within the US. The legislation passed when Congress suspected that the State Department was staffed with Communists. It remains in effect, and prohibits media outlets financed by the US government—like the Arabic-language TV channel al-Hurra—from broadcasting at home, to "prevent the government from aiming propaganda at its own citizens," as the *Washington Post* explains.[9]

"Perception Management"

The divergent attitudes of State Department liberals and Southern nativists toward Islam rose to the fore during the summer 2010 anti-mosque controversy. In May of that year, a pipe bomb exploded at a mosque in northern Florida. It was the opening salvo of the Tea Party movement's campaign against the construction of mosques, which spread slowly from Florida to Tennessee, Kentucky, Kansas and Texas. After President Obama spoke in support of the construction of an Islamic center in lower Manhattan, the anti-mosque campaign turned into a furor, reaching northern states. Republican leaders and radio personalities across the country denounced the president. Soon "Leaving Islam" ads began appearing on buses and taxis in major cities ("Fatwa on your head? Is your family threatening you? Leaving Islam? Got Questions? Get Answers.") Agitators started showing up at mosques and proposed mosque sites—from Staten Island to San Diego—often led by Tea Partiers or the activists of ACT! for America, a Florida-based outfit whose aim is to prevent the imposition of *shari'a* in America. The anti-mosque protests had familiar themes: Members of a local Tea Party chapter would appear at Friday congregational prayers with picket signs that read "No Sharia in America," bringing dogs along and blaring the

A 2009 concert by Minneapolis bluesman Bernard Allison in the old theater in Constantine, Algeria. ALFRED DE MONTESQUIOU/AP PHOTO

song "Born in the USA" by Bruce Springsteen. The fever-pitch rhetoric soon morphed into violence, with pipe bombs tossed at mosques in Tennessee and upstate New York, worshippers pelted with pork and headscarves yanked off women's heads.

The outpouring of rancor against Muslims was worse than what followed the September 11 attacks, when President Bush had declared Islam "a religion of peace," embraced Muslim leaders and cautioned against scapegoating "our Muslim neighbors." The Republican Party of 2010 suddenly adopted an overtly harsh stance toward Islam, reflecting a shift of strategy. Gearing up for midterm elections, GOP candidates sought to inject the mosque issue into their local races.[10] The Republicans' new policy toward American Islam was also a (delayed) reaction to the election of Obama, who had shifted the "rhetorical framework" of American diplomacy and made diplomatic overtures that infuriated the Republican base. In August 2010, 20 percent of the American public thought Obama was Muslim, and 52 percent of Republicans believed he was planning to impose Islamic law on America.[11]

Since September 11, Muslim activists had focused their political energy on challenging state repression—policies of deportation, rendition, profiling, wiretapping—but the anti-mosque campaign, spearheaded by the Tea Party, the most dynamic segment of the Republican base, led them to shift gears. They launched a campaign to raise awareness about the Muslim presence in America, starting with the history of Muslim slaves brought to the New World from the 1500s onward. At the multiple rallies (and counter-rallies) at Ground Zero, a ubiquitous sign on the "pro-mosque" side showed a picture of an African in a white robe next to a sketch of a slave ship, under large red letters, "Islam Has Been in New York for 400 Years." Activists pointed to the African Burial Ground, discovered in 1991 at Broadway and Reade Street, a few blocks from the proposed mosque site, and recounted the story of Mohammah Baququa, a sailor and slave who in 1847 escaped from a Brazilian ship docked in lower Manhattan, and went on to write *The Biography of Mahommah G. Baququa*, an important slave narrative that begins with a description of his Muslim upbringing in Bergoo (now northern Benin).

Muslim Americans of immigrant background have taken a keen interest in the history of Muslim slaves in America, especially their written narratives, the Arabic texts that these West Africans left behind. Until recently, it was historians of the antebellum South who studied these texts—the writings of Ayub bin Suleyman (known as "Job the Son of Solomon"), Omar ibn Said of North Carolina, Bilali Mohamed of Sapelo Island—to understand the lives of Muslim slaves and how their literacy and Muslim identity often challenged racial hierarchies and ideologies.[12] Today, the children of immigrant Muslims are showcasing these marvelous parchments in Arabic script to underline that Islam was present at America's founding and hence is "indigenous." The State Department has also developed an interest in the history of Muslim slaves.

In the midst of the mosque furor, Imam Faisal Abdulraouf, then the leader of the Park 51 Center, was sent on a diplomatic tour of the Persian Gulf to, in the White House's words, bring "a moderate perspective to foreign audiences on what it's like to be a practicing Muslim in the United States." Raouf was recruited in February 2006 by Karen Hughes and had traveled widely in the Middle East and Asia, presenting conservative groups like Hizb al-Tahrir with his Sufi approach to Islam and arguing that American liberalism accords with the fundamentals of *shari'a*. Raouf, like other Muslim good will ambassadors, believed that patriotically representing the US overseas could

dampen anti-Muslim sentiment at home and build political support for his institution building. (Despite his diplomatic services, when the time came, Hughes asked the imam to move the mosque as a "sign of unity" and "courtesy.") The imam's public diplomacy—and his mosque project—divided the Muslim American community, often along North-South lines, with many disliking his overseas defense of American liberalism at a time of extreme political duress (partly fomented by his project). Muslims in the South resented his insistence on building a center close to Ground Zero, when they, below the Mason-Dixon line, were catching the brunt of the backlash.

While Imam Raouf was touring the Gulf, hip-hop envoys were visiting other parts of the Islamic world. In July 2010, State Department-sponsored break-dancers were doing shows in Morocco and Algeria; in September, rappers Tyson and Kumasi were performing in Indonesia. Along with these tours, films about Islam and hip-hop in America were screened at US embassies in Asia and Africa. The film *New Muslim Cool* about a Puerto Rican rapper who embraces Islam popped up at US embassies in Jordan, Iraq, Angola and Bahrain. Another film shown in Senegal, Gambia and Bangladesh was *Prince Among Slaves*, which tells the extraordinary story of Ibrahima Abdal Rahman, who was born in 1762 to the king of Timbo, ruler of the Fulbe people in today's Guinea. The prince rose to take command of his father's army, when at the age of 26, he was captured in war and hauled across the Atlantic, ending up on an auction block in Natchez, Mississippi. His royal background and literacy would lead to his manumission in 1828, whereupon he traveled north and spoke to large audiences about his conversion to Christianity, writing in Arabic script for fascinated Northerners to raise money to buy his children's freedom. In addition to films, the actual narratives of Muslims enslaved in America are exhibited at diplomatic outposts. US embassies in Nigeria and Qatar have displayed the 13-page Arabic text written by Bilali Muhammad in 1829, a leather-bound collection of sheets in North African Arabic script, while the US mission at the UN has showcased Omar ibn Said's text from 1836.

Ironically, the last time these writings drew government attention was in the mid-nineteenth century, when the young American republic sought to make inroads into the Muslim parts of Africa, specifically the Barbary Coast and the area that would become Liberia. Ibrahima, the aforementioned Fulbe prince, would gain his freedom because President John Quincy Adams, Secretary of State Henry Clay and the American Colonization Society (which took up his cause) thought his manumission could further US interests. Clay believed that Ibrahima, once freed, could be "returned" to Morocco (his Arabic script apparently betrayed North African influence) and used as a bargaining chip to release Americans held captive by Sultan 'Abd al-Rahman II.[13] The American Colonization Society's interest in Muslim slaves is fascinating. This organization, founded by Clay in 1817 to "repatriate" African slaves to Liberia, saw Muslim slaves with their Arabic literacy as a valuable tool for opening up West Africa to US economic and religious interests. America's African Muslims were seen as natural intermediaries in dealings with the Muslims and pagans of the West African Coast; the Muslim slaves had (at least nominally) embraced Christianity, were indebted to the US for their newfound freedom, and could help spread the gospel and American civilization in Africa. As the repatriation movement grew in influence, literate Muslim slaves and their narratives gained greater political significance in the US. Some would feign conversion to Christianity, and the American Colonization Society (or the Royal Africa Company of England) would send them to Liberia and Sierra Leone bearing Arabic-language Bibles.[14]

Today, as the US is trying to consolidate its position across the Saharan belt, the African-American Muslim is again emerging as an intermediary. It is curious that Washington would adopt this policy at a time when numerous Americans suspect that the country's first black president is a secret Muslim and join campaigns to ban *shari'a* in American cities and restrict the building of mosques and Islamic schools. As with the jazz tours of the 1950s, the conservatives warning of "creeping sharia" today would probably be displeased to know that the State Department is exhibiting Arabic slave narratives to show that Muslims have existed in America since the sixteenth century, or that photographs of the Wu Tang Clan grace State Department brochures. And the idea of the African-American as intermediary with the Muslim world is not limited to public diplomacy. "African-Americans are emerging in popular culture as leaders of the American nation and empire," writes the literary critic Moustafa Bayoumi, noting a sub-genre of films—*The Siege*, *The Kingdom*, *The Traitor* and the HBO series *Sleeper Cell*—that portray "blacks at the helm" of a liberal American imperium, people who, because of their past suffering, can achieve a level of human communication with Arabs and Muslims that whites cannot.[15]

European governments are also sending their Muslim citizens on diplomatic missions. The British Home Office sends young British Muslim professionals and former extremists (who have been "de-radicalized") on tours to Pakistan and Egypt to speak to young audiences about the successes and freedoms of Muslims in Britain. European states have also started sending their Muslim hip-hop artists to perform in Muslim-majority countries. The French and German embassies in Yemen have sponsored festivals and workshops (called "Common Beats") that bring French-Muslim and German-Muslim rappers together with their Yemeni counterparts. The British Council twice dispatched the hip-hop duo, Mecca2Medina, to perform in northern Nigeria, an area of high sectarian tensions. Following a 2007 performance in Kano, one of 12 Nigerian states under *shari'a* law, the head of the morality police who scour the streets for "un-Islamic" behavior, publicly praised the rap duo for being Western yet pious. The British Council also began organizing hip-hop workshops in Tripoli, and sponsoring Electric Steps, "Libya's only hip-hop band," as a way to promote political reform in that country.

In front of the Martin Luther King grade school in Villiers-le-Bel. SIPA VIA AP IMAGES

In Europe, however, more than for diplomacy, governments are using hip-hop to integrate their Muslim minorities, and in so doing, they are bumping up against US hip-hop initiatives.

Uncle Sam in the Banlieues

The Wikileaks cables that probably stirred the most anger in European capitals were those wherein US diplomats castigated allies—France, Britain, Holland—for mistreating their Muslim minorities. Since the arrests of "twentieth hijacker" Zacarias Moussaoui and "shoe bomber" Richard Reid, US officials have been concerned about the alienation of European Muslims, which they fear may seep across the Atlantic. The cables show diplomats generally unimpressed with European efforts to combat this "new threat," and reveal that US embassies were funding Muslim groups in various European cities. In August 2006, the US embassy in London sent a cable to Washington stating that "little progress" had been made in combating extremism and warning of rising tensions between the Muslim community and the government. Follow-up reports stressed that while Muslims make up only 3 to 4 percent of Britain's population, outreach to this audience is vital to US interests. The US embassy subsequently established a project called "Reverse Radicalism," focusing on "at-risk" youth to help "raise the standard of dialogue on extremism and promote understanding between Britain's Muslim and non-Muslim communities."

The embassy also organized cultural activities, including the "Ramadan Festival" (first held by the US embassy in Amsterdam), to highlight the diversity of British Muslims and invited various American Muslim artists. The cables stressed the importance of performances by American Muslims. "The message their performance would send—of American Muslims, proud to be both 'American' and 'Muslim'—is a powerful message that would open British Muslim eyes to American cultural and religious diversity," notes one missive, "as well as encourage reflection on the part of the British Muslim community in a positive, self-defining direction." Explaining why the US-based "Allah Made Me Funny" comedy troupe should be invited, an officer says its "positive messages" would likely reach "thousand[s] of British Muslims, including the disproportionately high youth population." The integration of American Muslims—contrasted with the segregation of Muslims in Europe—is offered as evidence that America is not at war with Islam.

The London cables also describe the embassy's efforts to reach "moderate" Muslim communities that "lack the institutional infrastructure to actively mobilize against radicalizing influences." There is little agreement, however, on what "moderate" means. The British press was unhappy with the embassy's "secret campaign" to de-radicalize British Muslims, and especially with the embassy's outreach to mosques considered "radical" in Britain, such as the Finsbury Park mosque in northern London, frequented by both Moussaoui and Reid.[16] In December 2010, Ambassador Louis Susman drew criticism from conservative Britons and secular British Muslims for visiting and expressing his "great admiration" for the East London Mosque (a mosque that allegedly hosted Anwar al-Awlaqi some years ago), and inviting its youth to participate in embassy-funded trips to the US.[17] Dispatches from the US embassy in Amsterdam describe similar displeasure by Dutch officials and Dutch Muslim leaders worried that the embassy's outreach programs see European Muslims as a "collective problem" and "associate the integration of European Muslims primarily with efforts to counter radicalization."

But it is, perhaps not surprisingly, in France that the State Department's activities have triggered the most outrage. The dispatches from Paris are blunt in their appraisal: "The French have a well-known problem with discrimination against minorities." Some cables read like descriptions of pre-civil rights America: "The French media remains overwhelmingly white.... Among French elite educational institutions, we are only aware that Sciences Po has taken serious steps to integrate." The thrust of the correspondence argues that the French approach to assimilation has not worked, because of an "official blindness to all racial and ethnic differences." Institutions are "insufficiently flexible," unable to reflect the country's changing complexion. And the fear is not only that young

French Muslims will gravitate toward extremism—Washington "takes seriously the potentially global threat of disenfranchised and disadvantaged minorities in France"—but that ethnic and racial conflict will weaken France. "We believe that if France, over the long term, does not succeed in improving prospects for its minorities and give them true political representation, it could become weaker, more divided and perhaps inclined toward crises…and a less effective ally as a result."

The US embassy staff acknowledge France's reluctance to accept the American model of integration or to "partner" with the embassy, but the cables describe numerous outreach projects involving exchange programs, tours, festivals, conferences and media appearances to raise awareness among state and non-state actors about America's civil rights movement ("sharing of our American experiences in managing diversity"). Through such efforts, and by pressing the French government and NGOs to improve the lot of French Muslims, the embassy has tried to alter French Muslim perceptions of the US, to show that America respects Islam and "is engaged for good in the Arab-Muslim worlds." By explaining how America manages diversity, the embassy's outreach aims to inspire "a workable French model for addressing ethnic conflict" and help France live up to its egalitarian ideals. "While direct development assistance…is not likely to be available for France," notes one cable, there should be funds available "to address the consequences of discrimination and minority exclusion in France" through exchange programs, grants and media intervention. The author underscores that, given France's self-image, "such an effort will continue to require considerable discretion, sensitivity and tact on our part."

These depictions of France as a prejudiced country in need of American aid and tutelage were not well received. France has long viewed itself as being immune to American-style racial politics, priding itself on providing refuge, since the late nineteenth century, to African-Americans fleeing discrimination. The cable that drew the most indignant response from French state officials was written by then Ambassador Craig Stephenson, at the height of the Parisian civil unrest in November 2005: "The real problem is the failure of white Christian France to view its dark-skinned and Muslim compatriots as citizens in their own rights." Speaking on a television show, former Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin scoffed, "This [cable] shows the limits of American diplomacy." He added that US diplomats were wrongly reading the *banlieues* crisis through their own history, and viewing France's urban crisis through a religious prism. The French media, in turn, was riled by revelations that the US had since 2003 been deeply involved in the integration process—pushing to shift the media discourse, to get French leaders to rethink their "terminology" and "intellectual frameworks" regarding minority inclusion, to generate public debate about "affirmative action," "multiculturalism" and hyphenated identity, to reform French history curricula and to encourage French museums to exhibit the contributions of minorities.

French journalists expressed anger at this exercise in US "soft power," saying that the "head-hunting" of future Muslim leaders constituted "direct interference" that was infringing on French sovereignty and undermining the authority of French institutions. When the US ambassador, Charles Rivkin, a former Hollywood executive, brought actor Samuel L. Jackson to visit a community center in the *banlieue* of Bondy, and Jackson, addressing a group of youth, compared their struggle to the hardships of his childhood in segregated Tennessee, French media resented the comparison. Another awkward moment came at the unveiling of a painted mural for the civil rights leader Martin Luther King at the Collège Martin Luther King in Villiers-le-Bel, another restive Parisian suburb, when a group of African and Arab children stood around Ambassador Rivkin and sang "We Shall Overcome."

But it is the embassy's efforts to empower "moderate" Muslim voices that have infuriated the French, for again, one state's "moderate" is another state's "extremist." One of the Muslim organizations supported by the embassy was the online magazine *Oumma.com*, described by the ambassador as a "remarkable website." French conservatives, who see the site as extremist because of its alleged sympathies for the Muslim Brothers, charged that the American right and French Muslims were allying to undermine French *laïcité*. The embassy's hip-hop diplomacy program, whereby French rappers are flown to the US, to spend time in Harlem and meet with artists and civil rights activists, has also raised hackles.[18] One of the artists invited by the State Department was rapper Ekoué Labitey of La Rumeur, one of the groups that Nicolas Sarkozy, as minister of interior, had sued for libel for their lyrics about the brutality and impunity of French police.

"Jihadi Cool"

One of the odder phenomena of the last decade is hearing national security elites, terrorism experts and career diplomats discuss the finer points of "flow," "bling" and the "politics of cool." American and European terrorism experts have increasingly expressed concerns over "anti-American hip-hop," accenting the radicalizing influence of the genre. Noting that the Shabaab, the Somali-based Islamist group, uses "jihad rap" in its recruitment videos, Jessica Stern writes in *Foreign Affairs*, "The first- and second-generation Muslim children I interviewed for a study of the sources of radicalization in the Netherlands seemed to think that talking about jihad was cool, in the same way that listening to gangster rap is in some youth circles."[19] Others have advocated mobilizing certain substyles of hip-hop against "jihadi cool." Warning that Osama bin Laden's associate Abu Yahya al-Libi has made al-Qaeda look "cool," one terrorism expert recommends that the US respond "with one of America's coolest exports: hip-hop," specifically with a "subgroup" thereof. "Muslim hip-hop is Muslim poetry set to drum beats," he explains. "Add in the emotional parallels between the plight of African-Americans

French rapper Abd Al Malik, right, after winning the best male artist award at the Victoires de la Musique, Paris, 2008. FRANCOIS MORI/AP PHOTO

and, for example, impoverished Algerians living in ghettos outside of Paris or Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and the analogy becomes even clearer."[20] But it is unclear how "Muslim hip-hop" will exert a moderating influence: Will a performance by an African-American Muslim group trigger a particular calming "affect" pushing young Muslim men away from extremist ideas? Nor is it clear what constitutes "Muslim hip-hop": Does the fact that Busta Rhymes is a Sunni Muslim make his music "Islamic"?

In Europe, hip-hop is being enlisted in a broad ideological offensive to counter domestic extremism. As in America, some of the biggest stars on the European hip-hop scene are Muslim, the children of immigrants and/or converts, a number of whom have been embroiled in controversies about freedom of expression, national identity and extremism. Britain became the first country to deal with the issue of "Muslim hate rap," when, in 2004, the song "Dirty Kuffar" was released online by rap group Sheikh Terra and the Soul Salah Crew. The video, splicing together images from Iraq, Palestine and Chechnya, praises Osama bin Laden and denounces Bush, Tony Blair, Ariel Sharon, Husni Mubarak and Saudi Arabia's King 'Abdallah as "dirty infidels." The track drew the attention of the Home Office and Labor MPs, who saw the lyrics and imagery as advocating violence. In 2006, Aki Nawaz of the popular hip-hop-techno group Fun-Da-Mental released an album "All Is War," with a cover depicting the Statue of Liberty hooded and wired like an Abu Ghraib prisoner, and a song ("Che Bin Pt 2") comparing bin Laden to Che Guevara. Two MPs called for his arrest.[21]

Realizing the influence of hip-hop, when in April 2007 the Home Office introduced PREVENT, an initiative to stop British Muslim youth from being lured into violent extremism, it made sure that hip-hop figured prominently. Muslim organizations in Britain receive PREVENT funding to organize "Spittin' Light" hip-hop shows, where American and British Muslim rappers with "mainstream interpretations" of Islam parade their talents. The initiative is directed at younger Muslims, who may not be associated with mosques or other religious institutions. PREVENT's advocates claim that "art and culture can provide Muslims with an acceptable outlet for strong emotions."

Other European governments are worrying about hip-hop and extremism. In Berlin, the Tunisian-German rap star Bushido, who has won awards from MTV, angered many with the verse, "I am a Taliban.... I have set your city on fire." In the Netherlands, the government is at a loss over what kind of rap to support. In 2007, there was a controversy surrounding the Dutch-Moroccan star Salah Eddin and his video "*Het Land Van*" ("This Country Of"), in which he describes being Muslim in an increasingly conservative country and lists what he likes and does not like about the Netherlands. Among other things, he does not like racial profiling and the red-light district—"this

land that sells women behind window panes." The rapper first appears clean-shaven in a plaid shirt; as the video progresses, his facial hair grows longer until, by the end, he is wearing a scraggly beard and an orange Guantánamo jumpsuit. The uproar was not only about this content, but the fact that Salah Eddin had received a grant from the Dutch Ministry of Culture for the video's production. Voters complained that their tax money was underwriting radicalism, and government officials felt duped: They had given Salah Eddin a grant thinking he was "moderate," but he turned out to be "radical." (A right-wing media watchdog in the US has leveled a similar critique at the State Department after studying the lyrics of Chen Lo, one of the "hip-hop envoys," and finding his patriotism wanting.)

European officials (along with US embassy officials) are scrutinizing hip-hop practices in their cities' immigrant neighborhoods, trying to decide which Muslim hip-hop artists to legitimate and which to push aside. The debate over hip-hop, Europe's dominant youth culture, stands in for a much larger debate about race, immigration and national identity. With many of the biggest stars being Muslim, the disputes over which Muslim hip-hop artists are "moderate" or "radical" are also disagreements over what kind of Islam to allow into the public space. This debate is playing out most poignantly in France, the country with the largest Muslim community in Europe, the second largest hip-hop market in the world and a place whose traditions of *laïcité* aggressively restrict expressions of religion in the public sphere.

"Hamdoulah Ça Va"

Hip-hop has long encapsulated France's anxieties about both American domination and Islam. In the 1990s, fear of Americanization, and the introduction of English words and phrases through music, led to the establishment of national quotas to protect the French language. The 1994 Carignon media law required that a minimum of 40 percent of musical programming on radio stations be by French musicians and 20 percent by contemporary French artists. This quota actually encouraged the growth and commercialization of French hip-hop, as FM mega-stations shifted their playlists from Anglophone-dominated pop and rock to rap, where they thought the French-language quotas could be met more easily. French record labels began expanding their hip-hop portfolios and sending scouts into the *banlieues* looking for talent.[22] Thus, ironically, a law designed to protect the "French identity" from Americanization, helped promote the French form of an American genre, one that now amplifies the voices of religious and ethnic minorities seen as a domestic threat to national identity.

As part of its cultural policy, the French government has actively promoted hip-hop, at the local and national level, bringing rappers onto the stage of the National Opera of Bordeaux, sponsoring concerts and funding local institutions in troubled neighborhoods. The French government has invested in hip-hop partly in an effort to recognize marginalized cultures and identities and partly to foster a hip-hop conducive to integration. Yet the question is what kind of hip-hop best aids integration, and which rappers to invite to the Grand Palais. As sociologist Loïc Lafargue de Grangeneuve notes, "hip-hop policy" in France tries to discover artists and promote them as role models for the *banlieusards*, yet successful hip-hop artists rarely appreciate being held up by politicians as models of successful integration, often because government validation separates them from their base. Moreover, as he notes, the "instrumentalization" of hip-hop culture risks emptying the genre of its political power and generating a different kind of contestation[23]—between rappers validated by the state and those who are not. Precisely this process is occurring in France, as seen in the interplay between Abd Al Malik and Médine.

Probably the most celebrated French hip-hop artist of the last decade is French-Congolese rapper Abd Al Malik. A former street hustler raised in a housing project outside of Strasbourg, he embraced Islam as a teenager, joining the Islamist Tablighi Jama'at. He then achieved some notoriety with his rap group New African Poets, before embracing Sufism and shifting from gangsta rap to spoken word poetry (*le slam*). Malik's poetry, accompanied by riffs of jazz and *la chanson française*, speaks of the value of hard work, education and the power of "spirituality." In his music and his autobiography, *May Allah Bless France (Qu'Allah benisse la France)*, Malik extols the Republic's values—*liberté*, *egalité*, *fraternité*—saying they should be reinvigorated. He says the notion of *laïcité* is broad enough to include an Islamic spirituality. Malik has won all kinds of artistic and non-artistic plaudits; he is raved about by elites as a Muslim role model and a symbol of a new multicultural France, *la France pluriel*.[24] In January 2008, the Ministry of Culture awarded Malik the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres, one of France's most prestigious cultural honors. As hip-hop gains public acceptance and rises to the level of high culture, French cultural and political elites are carefully monitoring the kind of Islam that is being diffused over the rap airwaves, and Malik's music embodies the kind of Islamic piety that can be permitted into the French public square.

If Malik's music makes no political demands, his would-be rival, Médine, a popular "undergound" hip-hop artist, hits all the issues that the Sufi poet evades: the social exclusion of non-white French youth, conditions in the *banlieues* and Western depredations in the Third World. Sporting a bald dome and fierce beard, Médine raps in harsh, halting tones over hard-core instrumentals, about colonialism, Malcolm X, Afghanistan, the PATRIOT Act, police brutality and segregation. His videos show graphic images of war, street protests and waterboarding. His critiques of the French model of integration are blunt and forceful, the gist being that France's urban and youth crisis must be understood in light of the country's colonial past and Western imperialism in general. Médine, unlike Malik, is not particularly vocal about his own religiosity, speaking more about rights for Muslims. Yet the mainstream media

has largely ignored him, and some radio stations boycott him, saying he promotes a Muslim *communautarisme*. The more overtly pious Malik is celebrated, in part because he declares his love for the Republic, sees Islamic identity as compatible with the Republic's values and, while he refers to the country's colonial past, is not enraged at the French state. Médine's confrontational manner, however, resonates more widely with France's disaffected youth than does Malik's approach. The more praise showered upon the clean-shaven Sufi poet, the less appeal Malik's brand of flow and Islam has, with critics speaking of the rise of "lackey" hip-hop and "good Muslim" rappers versus "bad Muslim" rappers.[25]

US embassies have slowly inserted themselves into this delicate dance between European governments and their hip-hop counter-publics. The Wikileaks cables released thus far do not explicitly speak of hip-hop diplomacy, or rap as a tool for de-radicalization. One dispatch from the US embassy in London describes the arts as "an important way to reach potentially hostile audiences" and recommends the screening of two films, *New Muslim Cool* and *Deen Tight*, both of which describe minority converts who discovered Islam through hip-hop. But hip-hop is at the heart of US embassies' outreach to Muslim communities. Farah Pandith, the State Department's special representative to Muslim communities, has agued that hip-hop can convey a "different narrative" to counter the foreign "violent ideology" that youth are exposed to.[26] Muslim American rap artists are invited to perform at embassies in Europe. Local artists are invited to the embassy. The ambassador to France has sponsored hip-hop conferences, inviting rappers to his residence, including the controversial K.ommando Toxik (who at the US embassy performed a tribute to two boys who were killed by the French police in November 2007, an incident that triggered a wave of riots).

Western states have a long history of intervening in the Muslim world to protect and empower religious minorities. In the nineteenth century, the French sheltered the Maronites, the Russians patronized the Orthodox Christians and American missionaries in Syria courted the Druze. The great powers assumed the protection of these religious minorities in part to expand their influence in the region. This practice continues, in different forms, to this day, but it is unprecedented for allied Western states to court each other's minorities. And yet the US is spending millions of dollars to win the hearts and minds of Europe's disaffected Muslim communities, often vying with European states' own local outreach efforts. If the aim was to create positive impressions of the US, the effort seems to be working: European Muslim activists appreciate the brutal candor of the cables. In France, in particular, perhaps because of the country's contentious alliance with the US, positive opinion of the US has risen sharply since 2008. But the State Department's outreach to Muslims, conceived in response to Europe's "nativist surge," seems to be further inflaming the right, who see Washington's rap-infused initiatives as infringing on their sovereignty and are even more chary of their Muslim compatriots' allegiance. If European Muslims are often accused of being loyal to their land of origin or some transnational Islamic movement, now they are suspected of being a fifth column of the United States (just as religious minorities in the Muslim world are). French right-wingers are warning of a Muslim "Trojan horse," comparing the State Department-sponsored trips taken by young French Muslims to the US to the Soviet-sponsored trips of the 1920s and 1930s that took French intellectuals to Russia to experience the benefits of socialism firsthand.[27] Overheated as such rhetoric may be, it seems true that the US counterinsurgency initiatives in Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan now have a kinder, gentler corollary directed at Western Europe's urban periphery.

And the US embassies are not the only ones pursuing Muslim outreach strategies. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and a host of Arab states are also monitoring their diasporas in Europe, assertively promoting interpretations of Islam and trying to win the support of Europe's Muslim populations. The Great Game of the twenty-first century—the ideological and geopolitical tussles centered around post-colonial Africa and the Middle East—is increasingly playing out in Europe's immigrant neighborhoods.

"Soundtrack to the Struggle"?

Following a rap crew's 2010 performance in Damascus, Hillary Clinton was asked about hip-hop diplomacy. "Hip-hop is America," she said, noting that rap and other musical forms can help "rebuild the image" of America. "You know it may be a little bit hopeful, because I can't point to a change in Syrian policy because Chen Lo and the Liberation Family showed up. But I think we have to use every tool at our disposal." The hip-hop diplomacy programs launched by the US and European governments aim to rebrand their states and push Muslim youth away from extremism, but the US initiative is more ambitious, trying to promote democracy, development and even alter the behavior of other states. Unlike the European states who promote certain kinds of hip-hop over others, the US government's approach to hip-hop at home is mostly *laissez faire*. But at the international level, US hip-hop diplomacy is more interventionist. "You have to bet at the end of the day, people will choose freedom over tyranny if they're given a choice," Clinton observed, stating that cultural diplomacy is a complex game of "multidimensional chess." "Hip-hop can be a chess piece?" asked the interviewer. "Absolutely!" responded the secretary of state.

Liberal analysts see the jazz tours of the 1950s and 1960s as a success. By showcasing racial progress, jazz diplomacy, it is argued, countered Soviet propaganda and created positive impressions of the United States. But hip-hop is not jazz; the rap stars of today are not the jazz greats of the 1950s and 1960s; and, for all the parallels drawn, the "war on terror" is not the Cold War. The jazz tours resonated with people across Africa, the Middle East and South Asia because the post-war US was seen

as an anti-colonial power, a counterweight to French, British and Italian dominance. Indeed, the US did parry European colonial thrusts in Libya in 1950 and the Suez Canal Zone in 1956. Moreover, the civil rights struggle resounded globally; the black freedom movement was seen as an ally of the decolonized world. Its sounds—jazz, in particular—had a powerful moral appeal, as jazz musicians, influenced by the Afro-Asian unity discourse of Bandung and the Nation of Islam, wrote compositions like "Uhuru Afrika" and "Freedom Now Suite" linking the civil rights movement with anti-colonial struggles in Asia and Africa. But the honeymoon with America slowly came to an end as Cold War politics led to myriad interventions and proxy wars, and the US gradually became, along with France and Britain, the backer of a repressive state system extending from the Barbary Coast to Pakistan. As the US relationship to the region changed, and the Vietnam war wore on, the jazz ambassadors would find themselves increasingly challenged by local audiences on their role in the American foreign policy establishment. Von Eschen describes an incident in Algiers in April 1967, when young Algerians asked jazz ambassadors how they, as African-Americans, could represent a country that was "committing atrocities" in Vietnam.

The jazz tours would continue in the Soviet bloc, as did Voice of America broadcasts of jazz behind the Iron Curtain. And black internationalism did not lose its appeal in the Muslim world. Through the 1970s, Africans and Asians languishing under authoritarian rule appreciated the statements of solidarity from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, TransAfrica, the Black Panthers, Jesse Jackson, Randall Robinson and other black leaders. Ordinary people fasted ahead of Muhammad Ali's big fights. As hip-hop emerged, its beats and lyrics, as the public diplomacy experts correctly note, would quickly resound with Muslim youth. But the best-loved music was the politically "conscious," Afrocentric hip-hop of the 1980s and early 1990s that paid tribute to Africa, Asia and Islam. At some point in the mid-1990s—critics debate the precise date—"conscious" hip-hop would be sidelined by commercial rap, a form more concerned with the acquisition of wealth than solidarity with the post-colonial world.

And while references to Islam remain legion, they are not necessarily political or flattering. In December 2002, Lil Kim appeared on the cover of *OneWorld* magazine wearing a burka and a bikini, saying "Fuck Afghanistan." 50 Cent's track "Ghetto Quran" is about dealing drugs and "snitchin'." Foxy Brown charmed some and infuriated others with her song "Hot Spot," saying, "MCs wanna eat me but it's Ramadan." More disturbing was the video "Hard" released in late 2009 by the diva Rihanna, in which she appears decked out in military garb, heavily armed and straddling a tank's gun turret in a Middle Eastern war setting. An Arabic tattoo beneath her bronze bra reads, "Freedom Through Christ"; on a wall is the Qur'anic verse, "We belong to God, and to Him we shall return," recited to honor the dead, and not an uncommon wall inscription in war-torn Muslim societies. The point is that not all Islam-alluding hip-hop resonates with Muslim youth. Those hip-hop stars—Lupe Fiasco, Mos Def, Rakim—who are beloved among Muslim youth are appreciated because they work their Muslim identity into their art and because they forthrightly criticize US foreign policy. On his latest album, Lupe raps: "Gaza Strip was getting burned; Obama didn't say shit." But none of these gentlemen are likely to be invited on a State Department tour.

The Cold War jazz tours were never popular among progressive black intellectuals. Frantz Fanon and the Guyanese historian Walter Rodney both resented how Louis Armstrong and others were used as "emissaries of the Voice of America," how the music of "oppressed black people" was transformed into "propaganda."[28] Similar charges are leveled at the hip-hop diplomacy program today—though they are laced, in some cases, with ad hominem attacks upon the artists themselves. The artists, it should be noted, have assumed some personal risk. In July 2007, as part of the Rhythm Road program, Toni Blackman was driven in an armored vehicle, flanked by a convoy of trucks carrying UN blue helmets, to perform in the largely Muslim, rebel-held north of Cote d'Ivoire. In January 2006, she was performing for an outdoor audience in Medan, Indonesia, when a throng of men on motorbikes carrying what the *New York Times* described as "anti-American banners" drove into the concert area, clambered onto the stage, shoved Blackman aside and began shouting anti-American statements into the microphone. The concerts are often seen as an attempt to sugarcoat unpopular policies, and African-American rap artists are asked about their newfound role as good will ambassadors. The Muslim hip-hop envoys are particularly aware of the way they are perceived overseas. One member of Native Deen expressed the ambivalence he felt when first approached by the State Department: "'Should we do it?' 'Should we not do it?' Some people were saying, 'Y'all are going to be puppets, going over there saying: Everything's OK. We're bombing your country, but we have Muslims, too!'"[29]

Realists have little illusion about the role that hip-hop can play in power politics. Samuel Huntington, 15 years ago, cautioned policymakers not to put too much faith in "cultural fads": "Somewhere in the Middle East a half-dozen young men could well be dressed in jeans, drinking Coke, listening to rap, and, between their bows to Mecca, putting together a bomb to blow up an American airliner." As with the jazz tours, it is the liberal internationalists who believe in the geostrategic potential of music. US embassies across the developing world are reaching out to hip-hop groups, supporting artistic communities as a development strategy, which is causing friction between US-backed artists and "independent" artists. In Bolivia, for instance, following the protests of October 2003 against water privatization and a gas export scheme, the US embassy and various development agencies began supporting indigenous hip-hop groups in the restive city of El Alto, in competition with the Cuban and Venezuelan embassies, which were also reaching out to rappers. Claims that the US Agency

PHILIP SCOTT ANDREWS/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

Native Deen (from left, Naeem Muhammad, Joshua Salaam and Abdul-Malik Ahmad).

for International Development was funding some rap groups to prevent another "Octubre" exacerbated long-standing tensions between that organization and the Bolivian state, leading analysts to speak of the "geopolitics of Andean rap."[30]

Most curious is the claim that just as jazz embodied and disseminated democratic values, hip-hop diplomacy in the Islamic world is promoting democracy and fostering dissent because the music expresses a tradition of African-American Muslim protest, represented by Malcolm X. By all accounts, the hip-hop envoys avoid political issues in their embassy performances; local authorities will often carefully comb through lyrics ahead of time. Yet Maura Pally, assistant secretary of state for educational and cultural affairs, contends that when Yemeni youth enter the gates of the embassy in Sanaa and witness a hip-hop show, the experience is "opening minds" and altering perceptions. The critics retort that, after the show, the youngsters are still aware that US power is fully behind the dictatorship under which they live. And this is the crux of the growing debate over hip-hop diplomacy: Proponents claim that hip-hop can have the same liberating and rebranding effect as jazz did in the 1950s, somehow overlooking Washington's close alliances with the authoritarian regimes of North Africa and the Middle East. The Cold War is not the "war on terror." The US could use jazz to "sell" America behind the Iron Curtain and foster dissent in Soviet-backed regimes, but can American "soft power" liberate people in US-backed tyrannies? The hip-hop initiatives may be more successful in generating good will in Europe, where Muslims are marginalized, but do enjoy some rights, or in a non-allied dictatorship like Burma, where rap artists are heavily censored, than in authoritarian regimes backed by US hard power.

The hip-hop diplomacy initiatives have sparked a heated debate over the purpose of hip-hop: whether it is "protest music" or "party music"; whether it is the "soundtrack to the struggle," as the immensely popular Lowkey titled his latest album, or to American unipolarity; whether to accept embassy assistance or not; and what it means that states—not just corporations—have entered the hip-hop game. Hip-hop activists have long been concerned about how to protect their music from corporate power, but now that the music is being used in diplomacy and counter-terrorism, the conversation is shifting. "Hip-hop at its best has exposed power, challenged power, it hasn't served power," says the London-based "underground" rapper Lowkey. "When the US government loves the same rappers you love, whose interests are those rappers serving?" These clashing visions of hip-hop are playing out in Third World cities like Tunis and El Alto, and in immigrant neighborhoods in the West. Hip-hop NGOs that use music for pedagogy, anti-war activism, neighborhood stabilization and "grassroots diplomacy," institutions like Gangway Beatz of Berlin, the Brooklyn-based Existence is Resistance and the Rebel Diaz Arts Collective in the South Bronx, all of whom invite artists and youth from similarly marginalized neighborhoods in other countries, operate in the same areas where local authorities and foreign embassies are pushing their own hip-hop initiatives. The Rebel Diaz Arts Collective, the Bronx's first "hip-hop community center," advocates for immigrants, organizes workshops and leads anti-war protests, for instance staging a rap concert outside the School of the Americas in Georgia. Rebel Diaz receives some money from Citgo, the Venezuelan oil company, which provides subsidized oil to the Bronx. Not too far from the collective is the Bronx Museum, whose State Department-funded "smARTpower" initiative sends cultural ambassadors to countries, among them Venezuela, to improve America's image.

The debate about hip-hop and US "soft power" has not led to a backlash against the genre, just to more criticism of American hip-hop and the increasingly frequent claim that non-American rappers are rap's true standard bearers. In the Arab world, Islamists and others have long denounced hip-hop as foreign and corrupting, but in 2011, local hip-hoppers have been embraced and celebrated for their role in the revolts. After Ben Ali's ouster, Tunisian rappers—then only known online—were invited on television. The Popular Democratic Party, an opposition group that joined the new Tunisian government, organized a massive concert for these rap heroes. Following Mubarak's departure in Egypt, Hamada Ben Amor was invited to perform in Tahrir Square, but he could not travel because he did not have a passport. Meanwhile, no less a figure than Chuck D, the iconic headman of Public Enemy, has lent support to the argument that "international" hip-hoppers are more faithful to the music's mission than their American counterparts. In January, while visiting South Africa, "the godfather of hip-hop" wrote a scathing open letter to American hip-hoppers, blasting its ruling elite for their materialism, arrogance and lack of commitment to community, noting that the balance of power had shifted. "The world has parity now and have [sic] surpassed the USA in all of the basic fundamentals of hip-hop."

Hip-hop today is everywhere, unlike jazz in the 1960s. It is readily available over the Internet, and there are rich hip-hop scenes in cities worldwide. As a result, American hip-hop emissaries do not draw the crowds that the "jambassadors" did. The officials organizing the hip-hop tours will concede that Kokayi and the Vice Versa Alliance do not have the star power of Gillespie, Armstrong and Ellington, but they insist that the artists are portraying an unseen side of America and that the diversity they embody can alter perceptions. Diversity is the buzzword of hip-hop diplomacy, encountered again and again in reports and speeches. For State Department officials, the hip-hop initiatives in Europe and in Muslim-majority states exhibit the diversity and integration of post-civil rights America. The multi-hued hip-hop acts sent overseas represent a post-racial or post-racist American dream, and exhibit the achievements of the civil rights movement, a uniquely American moment that European leaders and others can learn from.

But it is unclear how persuasive this racialized imagery is. Muslims do not resent the US for its lack of diversity. Where perceptions are poor, it is because of foreign policy as, well as, increasingly, domestic policies that target Muslims. Perhaps the greatest irony of the State Department's efforts to showcase the model integration of American Muslims, and to deploy the moral and symbolic capital of the civil rights movement, is that these tours—as with the jazz tours—are occurring against a backdrop of unfavorable (and racialized) media images of Qur'an burnings, anti-mosque rallies and accusatory Congressional hearings, as one of most alarming waves of nativism in recent American history surges northward. The anti-mosque movement has now morphed into a larger "anti-sharia" movement, says the Southern Poverty Law Center. Thirteen states from South Carolina to Arizona to Alaska have introduced bills banning Islamic law. The Texas Board of Education passed a resolution rejecting high-school textbooks that are "pro-Islam [and] anti-Christian," and a similar campaign is underway in Florida. American Muslims are also facing a rising tide of discrimination and a hostile media climate that will no doubt worsen as the 2012 presidential campaign kicks off. As for the Democrats, maybe it is politically easier to be photographed with Muslims in Paris singing "We Shall Overcome" than to challenge the organized bigotry brewing at home.

At any rate, the chessboard is convulsing. The revolts in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have rippled across the Mediterranean, stirring Muslim enclaves in European cities—self-immolations have occurred in Amsterdam, Palermo and Marseilles—and rattling European governments and far-right parties that fear a flood of refugees. Western states, scrambling to calibrate their foreign policies and public diplomacy, are concerned with the flow of peoples across the Mediterranean, but increasingly with musical flows, and the possible impact of North Africa's revolutionary lyricists on Europe. Twice in 2011 to date, to much protest, BBC Radio1 Xtra tuned out the words "Free Palestine" in a song by the rapper Mic Righteous, saying that "an edit was made to Mic Righteous' freestyle to ensure that impartiality was maintained."[30] Given the purported role of rap in the Arab revolts, hip-hop diplomacy will continue to be used as a bridge to the democratic youth movements. It is too soon to tell if the revolts will usher in a new era in relations between the US and the Arab world, or between Europe and North Africa. Hopes that the Libya intervention presaged a realignment of US power away from the oppressor to the oppressed are increasingly giving way to the resigned realization that the 2011 tumult may very well produce a softer, but still compliant authoritarianism. If the latter, perceptions will remain poor, and no dose of black music or "diversity talk" will change that. ■

Endnotes

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