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**Possibilities for Peace: Israeli & Palestinian hip-hop as tools for achieving a stable, long-term peace in the Middle East**

On September 13, 2006, a hip-hop show in Manhattan commenced just like many others in numerous clubs and venues across the city that evening. MCs, DJs, and spoken-word artists used the stage at S.O.B.'s to rhyme, freestyle, scratch, and preach to a packed house about life, respect, political action, and peace. The event attracted artists from many backgrounds: male, female, black, white, there were some who hosted grudges for others also on the bill, some were unsigned, and some had best-selling records. While this scene could probably be applied to any number of hip hop festivals held in the city every year, this particular event was unique. It was the Hip-Hop Sulha, and it featured Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop artists together on the same stage as a method for promoting positive dialogue in the chaotic Middle East conflict [Korat].

Hip-hop has long been touted as the music of the 'hood, representing those forgotten, or worse yet, deliberately overlooked by the system, able to excite the masses into positive social action with thumping beats, witty, catchy flows, and stinging commentary of the status quo. While many scholars of hip-hop believe the corporate takeover of the nineties has left American hip-hop impotent, the same cannot be said for foreign hip-hop.

Hip-hop movements in both the Hebrew-speaking and Arabic-speaking parts of the Middle East are just entering their golden periods. Imports from America and Europe still dominate the charts, but homegrown hip-hop has outgrown its novelty phase, and over the past few years has been developing itself as a unique, insightful form of

expression in both Israel and Palestine. With the region perpetually on the brink of self-destruction, hip-hop has emerged as a viable medium of political activism and commentary. It is not always used for entirely peaceful ends, but hip-hop makes intangible the physical, political, religious, ethnic, cultural, and language barriers that create what often seems like such a vast chasm between Israel and Palestine.

The modern state of Israel was founded in 1948, but relations between the Jewish immigrants and Arab residents were already strained by the time the surrounding Arab nations attacked the newly created state that same year. At least four full-fledged wars and numerous conflicts and failed peace proposals later, relative external stability has opened the door for examination of the right to self-government in Israel and the Palestinian territories. All religious and historical claims aside, this same issue that arises whenever any two groups of people occupy the same space at the same time is that which makes up the core of the current Israeli-Palestinian crisis [Shalom]. Characteristic of a conflict that spans generations, the leadership and much of the populace of the two sides are now so convinced of their particular rhetoric that the hope for peaceful coexistence often seems null. It is against this backdrop that Palestinian and Israeli youth have emerged speaking not the ancestral, stigmatized language of their respective clans, but the language of their oppressed brothers from the South Bronx, hip-hop.

### **Israeli Hip-Hop**

Israeli hip-hop originates from a sudden influx of American and European hip-hop in the early 1990's. Shabak Samech, considered by many to be the founders of Israeli hip-hop with their debut album in 1995, are notable solely in that they pioneered the use of Hebrew in making rap music [Bernay]. Nigel Ha'admoor, a contemporary of

Shabak Samech, utilized foreign samples and styles in a similar, uncreative manner. Nonetheless, these two groups are crucial in the development of an Israeli hip-hop identity, one that uses internal Israeli elements for its language, samples, themes, and ideology, and is currently dominated by two groups, the left-wing Hadag Nachash, and their right-wing counterpoint, Subliminal.

Hadag Nachash is a Jerusalem-based septet that embodies the love-hate relationship many Israeli and Jewish youth in the Diaspora are developing with their self-proclaimed homeland [Korat]. Their first outright commentary on the political situation with Palestine came in their 2003 hit *Misparim* (Numbers), which contained a blunt acknowledgement of the eventuality of a two-state solution: “One is the number of countries from Jordan to the sea/ Two – the number of countries that one day there will be...” [Bernay]. The remainder of the song, like many of their others, features Shaanan Streett (Hadag Nachash’s MC) alternating between extolling Israel’s cultural virtues and condemning Israel’s abandonment of its core ideology in what he views as its shameful treatment of both Israeli and Palestinian Arabs.

Another one of Hadag Nachash’s hits, *Shirat H’Stickir* (The Sticker Song), was written by prominent Israeli novelist and left-wing activist David Grossman. Its verses are made up entirely of similarly phrased, yet conflicting slogans from Israeli bumper stickers representing the paradoxical nature of the Israeli consciousness. Many of the issues highlighted by the song have to do with relations between Israel and Palestine [Ungerlieder]. The chorus is a blatant denunciation of Israeli behavior: “How much evil can we swallow?/ Father, please have mercy” [Korat]. The massive popularity of Hadag Nachash both in Israel and in the US demonstrates the appetite that Israeli and American-

Jewish youth have for pro-equality, two-state rhetoric. Unfortunately, Streett and company never supplies any methods for achieving such desirable ends.

Subliminal, on the other hand, has a lot to say about how Israel should approach the Palestinians. Kobi Shimon, as Subliminal is known off-stage, along with his partner The Shadow (Yoav Eliasi) and their crew TACT (Tel Aviv City Team), is the dominant figure in Israeli hip-hop. In a country the size of New Jersey, Subliminal successfully fuses nationalism and Israeli pride with a desire for peace without sacrificing Israel's security to excite and motivate Israeli youth [Newman]. Subliminal's contribution to the broader Israeli-Palestinian dialogue is complex: his nationalism serves to galvanize Israeli youth [Bernay], his rhetoric is aligned with that of the broad American-Israeli lobby, and he is officially supported by the center-right government of Israel [Great Divide]. Although his feelings come from a very "real" place, as his parents were both members of oppressed Jewish minorities in Muslim countries, his desire for a peaceful, stable Middle East (such as in the song "Peace in the Middle East") seems to conflict with his rhymes that promote a sole Jewish state in the region, something that would necessitate the displacement of millions of Palestinian Arabs (like in the song "Biladi," which is Arabic for "My Land") [Hartog].

Despite these contradictions, Subliminal is taking the steps needed for Israeli rap to effect peace. He raps in Arabic in many of his songs [Khazzoom], something that makes him one of the only Israeli artists who can and does communicate to both Jewish Israelis and Arabs. He also has invited rabidly anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist French rapper Sniper to come to Israel for both a freestyle battle and to see what Israel really is like [Khazzoom].

The indelible marks Hadag Nachash and Subliminal have left on the hip-hop consuming market in Israel are very important to the continued utility of Israeli hip-hop in developing a peaceful region. Biting political commentary is now a central theme in the Israeli hip-hop model, and Israeli record labels are swamped with demo tapes from burgeoning rappers with something to say [Mitnick].

### **Palestinian Hip-Hop**

Arabic language hip-hop is a new phenomenon as well. Islamic controversies over pop music as well as strong anti-Americanization campaigns in place when hip-hop went global successfully prevented the birth of hip-hop in Muslim countries. The origin of Arabic hip-hop in the Middle East is generally credited to Israeli Arabs, though Arabic rap soon became popular elsewhere as well.

DAM (Da Arab MC's) was the first Palestinian group to record Arabic-language rap music in the Middle East. Even though all three members of the group are Israeli Arabs, they identify with the Palestinian struggle and see many parallels not only between the plights of Arabs in and outside of Israel, but also with Black youth in America. Tamer Nafar, DAM's lead MC, identifies Black marginality in America with Palestinian and Israeli Arab marginality in the Middle East [El-Sabawi]. Nafar describes DAM's music as "protest rap...[with] philosophical, poetic, even ironic overtones." [Nafar]. Similar to the way Hadag Nachash calls on both Israelis and Palestinians to clean up their acts, DAM strongly denounces Israeli politics while also protesting against Arab dictatorships, neighborhood drug dealers, superficial MCs [Thomas], and misogyny in the Arab world [Nafar].

DAM represents a very important facet in Palestinian hip-hop's push for peace. They speak out with a moderate's voice against corruption and close-mindedness in both their own community and in Israel, and, perhaps most importantly, they often rap in Hebrew and English [Nafar]. While internal social commentary is important, DAM recognizes that teaching the "enemy" is much more important; as Israeli Arabs, they grew up never fully part of either Israel or Palestine, and can see the large degree to which each side fears and misunderstands the other [Thomas].

The struggle of the Palestinians has also been recognized by activist rappers both within and without the Palestinian Diaspora. *Free the P* is a compilation mixtape that contains work from over 20 MCs and groups. The CD's producers, The Philistines, claim inspiration for the compilation from both the specific struggle of the Palestinians and "the global struggle for peace and justice" [Youmans]. The production boasts contribution not only from top Palestinian MCs DAM, but also from Immortal Technique, an MC out of New York, Iron Sheik, a rapper from Michigan, and Suheir Hammad. Hammad is notable in her mastery of spoken-word poetry, and explains perfectly the importance of hip hop in achieving peace in the Middle East: "Hip hop has a tradition of...imparting your parents' historical legacy when that history has been marginalized in schools and in the mainstream. I understand the Palestinian diasporic situation better through hip hop," [El-Sabawi].

In addition to being a tool for political activism, Palestinian hip-hop provides an alternative to violence for Palestinian youth to vent their frustrations. Rappers like Mohammed F and Mahmood Shalabi recognize the choice they make everyday between life and violence and choose rap as an alternative to violent outbursts [Newman]. The

three main rap groups in the Gaza Strip: P.R. (Palestinian Rappers), RFM, and Gazistas, each came to their decision to choose art over violence independently, but all the decisions had to do with a realization that violence against a larger force (Israel) begets more violence (usually against their families), and putting energy into the development of a characteristically Palestinian music form instead would empower themselves and the community [Schäfer]. Jackie Salloum recognized this situation and decided to create SlingShot Hip Hop, a documentary about underrepresented Palestinian youth in Gaza and the West Bank more interested in speaking than throwing rocks [Newman]—initial press response confirms that even when unintended, the P.R. etc. decision to leave violence and embrace art will have a large-scale, positive benefit for the struggle for peace and justice.

Despite all of the positive tools hip-hop is providing to the desperately underprivileged Palestinian youth, many of the powerful factions within the divided Palestinian society oppose the movement. In September 2005, a group of Hamas supporters fired guns at a P.R. concert, and more recently, a grenade landed in a venue in Gaza [Freemuse]. Although nobody was hurt in either instance, the refusal of hardline Palestinian factions to embrace peaceful means of protest and rebellion further fractures the community and weakens their position.

### **Hip-Hop Collaborations & Confrontations**

Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop can be most effective at achieving peace in the Middle East when artists from all backgrounds communicate together. The Hip Hop Sulha, introduced earlier, is one of the most successful examples of this type of event. The most recent incarnation, in September 2006, featured Shaanan Streett of Hadag Nachash, Israeli Palestinian rapper SAZ, and Sagol 59 [Korat]. Streett, SAZ, and Sagol

all have been at the forefront of cross-cultural hip-hop, often times unsuccessfully, as politics and violence interrupts the musical events [Breitman]. Omar from N.O.M.A.D.S. and Ragtop from The Philistines were two Arab-American rappers who performed at the event. Although sometimes charged with being anti-Israeli, their attendance at the Sulha shows their dedication to peace, “the world community,” and the “universal language [of music]” [Korat].

Y-Love, an African-American Orthodox Jewish rapper also appeared. Despite, or maybe due to, his unique background, Y-Love expresses the pragmatic optimism that keeps events like the Sulha going: “Any interpersonal dialogue between Jews with a connection to Israel, and Muslims with a connection to Palestine, is a positive thing. If a mind can be changed, a life can be saved,” [Gelfand]. The lesser-known artists like Yuri Lane, who mixes acting, praying, rapping, DJing, harmonica, beatboxing, and performance art into a powerful interpretation of the stressful life in Israel and Palestine [Breitman] [Korat], and Invincilana, an MC from Detroit who called on Jews to fight for justice as well as a peace, had no less of an effect on the crowd than did the bigger names [Korat].

In Israel, events like the Hip Hop Sulha also occur. Co-organizer of the Sulha, Mobius, runs a monthly event through his hip-hop collective Corner Prophets called the Old Jeruz Cipher that attracts rappers from many backgrounds, most notably Jewish and Arab [Sieradski]. Mobius has become the hip-hop ambassador of the Middle East, using hip-hop to bring together angry youth from disparate backgrounds and putting his stake in hip-hop when political and military solutions failed to achieve peace. He accurately



identifies hip-hop as not just music, but “a reflection of the social circumstances from which [the music] emanates,” [Sieradski]. He states:

“So far we've enjoyed a great amount of success. We've brought together European Hareidim with Israeli Arabs, Modern Orthodox women with secular Russian men, African-American olim with lower-class kids from Ofakim, Tel Aviv punks with Jerusalem yeshiva students, and all sorts of folks from around the country. They come together to share a unique experience and explore this new art form which is attracting an ever-growing audience of teens and young adults from across religious, political and ethnic lines.” [Sieradski].

The Corner Prophets, along with Mobius and Sagol 59, achieved a major milestone with a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic performance at C-Sides, an Israeli music festival [Fiske].

Although cooperation and coexistence in hip-hop can and often does lead to positive results, sometimes the negativity of the violent conflict sours the artistic relationship, which then can again exacerbate the issues. An important example of this phenomenon is documented in the film *Channels of Rage*, which tells the story of Subliminal and Tamer Nafar, two rappers seminal in the Israeli and Palestinian rap scenes. Nafar was a protégé of Subliminal—he was very talented, and while he presented a worldview very different from that of nationalistic Subliminal, they bonded through their shared passion for hip-hop. After Nafar expressed understanding, yet not approval for a suicide bombing that killed 14, and Subliminal began stirring up anti-Arab sentiments at his live shows, their relationship broke down [Tabeling]. Both artists still hold onto a conception of peace as their driving focus, but it is not the same peace that they had when rapping together. Professional respect still exists, but extremism from the violent conflict eroded away the positivity of their cooperative dream.

Finally, the lens of this investigation moves back to the origin of hip-hop: New York City. The Wu Tang Clan, a hip-hop collective based in Staten Island, is known for an odd mix of violent, hardcore gangsta' rap and socially conscious commentary as well as sponsoring promising MCs of many backgrounds. Two of Wu-Tang's protégés,

Remedy & Cilvaringz, a New York Jew and Dutch Muslim respectively, put out a song called “A Muslim and a Jew,” in which the two rappers sing verses explaining the Israeli and Palestinian sides of the conflict with surprising civility. Wu-Tang founder RZA closes the track with a plea for peace and acknowledgement that education and communication are the primary tools by which peace will be achieved [A Muslim and a Jew lyrics]. This example of cross-cultural cooperation and communication by two influential artists who are only indirectly connected to the Middle East situation shows the great potential of Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop collaboration.

### **The Future**

Nobody expects hip-hop to be the solution. Evidence has shown that through the creation of a unique cultural hip-hop identity, it is easier for an artist to give into the radical, nationalistic call than to put faith in hip-hop and help youth come together. Nevertheless, most of the prominent Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop artists have chosen the latter path, indicating that despite the attempts by the conglomerate news media to portray the two sides at times as either innocent victims or heartless victimizers, moderates on both sides can ascribe to DAM’s rhymes [Thomas]: “Our eyes watch as our children seeking [sic]/ A future that has in it, 'the sky's the limit':/ A slogan that's been covered with the ruins' dust/ But the light hasn't been turned off yet.” In addition to DAM’s statement of hope, RZA from the Wu-Tang Clan offers this recipe for peace in the song *A Muslim and a Jew*: “Combine the Torah, Qu'ran, with the Gospel/ With your mind open and eyes shut/ You can't tell the difference of who's who and what's what/ Please educate Allah's children everyday/ A lesson a day keeps the devil away” [A Muslim and Jew lyrics].

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