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Maher Zain's Hip but Pious Soundtrack to the Arab Spring

By Sean Foley

The superstar uses pop music to praise Islam and advocate for political change in the Middle East



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Ramadan 2011 coincides with two significant events for the people of the Middle East. The first—Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s appearance in a Cairo courtroom—has received plenty of coverage and was seen as emblematic of a new Egypt in which even the highest officials are accountable to the law. The second event will get less attention in the West, but also comes out of the political movements that have transformed the Arab World in the last seven months: Lebanese superstar singer Maher Zain is set to release his new music video, “[Ya Nabi Salam Alayka](#)” (“Oh Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon You”).

Washington analysts have overlooked the political significance of the pop singer, who—like the Bob Dylan of the ’60s—represents a new generation of Arabs: Young people who want a new society and a new *nizam* (political system) in which Arabs no longer have to choose between modernity and Islam, and where neither Islam nor the West can be used to justify autocracy. The importance of a change of *nizam* can be seen in the chief demand of demonstrators from North Africa to the Persian Gulf: “*al-sha'b yuridu isqat al-nizam*,” which means, “The people want to overthrow the system.”

Few artists understand the yearning for change in the Arab World better than Maher Zain. Born in Lebanon but raised in Sweden, Zain studied aeronautical engineering and partnered with an Arab singer/songwriter who had also migrated to Sweden, Nadir Khayat (known as “RedOne”). The two men traveled to New York, where they worked in the city’s music industry with some of its brightest young stars. Khayat played a key role in the rapid emergence of Lady Gaga and went on to become one of America’s top music producers, working with Akon, Lionel Richie and Michael Jackson.

On the album's cover, Zain is dressed as if for an R&B concert—but is seated in quiet Islamic prayer

Zain’s New York period and his work with Khayat served him well when he produced his debut album, *Thank You Allah*. Released in November 2009 (little more than a year before the start of the Arab Spring) and featuring a good many songs sung in Zain’s excellent English, it was a surprise commercial success. In a musical competition organized in January 2010 by Cairo’s Nogoom FM (the most-popular radio station in Egypt), the album’s second track, “Ya Nabi Salam Alayka,” was voted as the best religious song for 2009, beating out work by more-established singers. Zain’s March 2010 concert in Cairo drew fans from Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and the United Kingdom. Many leading personalities in the Egyptian music industry also attended the concert.

Thank You Allah went on to sell well throughout the Muslim world, from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, in 2010 and 2011. In Malaysia, the album earned eight platinum awards from Warner Music Malaysia in 2010 and was declared the top selling album in the country for the decade. (Approximately 120,000 albums were sold in a country of approximately 27 million people.) That same year, Zain was the most googled personality in Malaysia. In 2011, *Thank You Allah* earned a double platinum award from Sony Music Indonesia. By May 2010, the record had earned the top position on Amazon.com’s digital charts in the world music category.

On the album’s cover, Zain wears jeans, a black jacket, and a dapper cap—all items appropriate to a rhythm and blues concert—but is seated in quiet Islamic prayer. That combination is emblematic of the theme of the album that faith in Islam, God (Allah), and personal dignity are the answer to the systematic challenges facing modern Muslims. But the moral message of his music is clothed in a pop idiom immediately recognizable to the young. While Zain sings in Arabic and has released songs in French, Malay and other languages, most of his work is in English. These songs are integral to a global marketing campaign that seeks to reach fans via social networking sites, YouTube, and other internet media platforms. In a July 2011 interview in the British lifestyle magazine *Emel*, Zain noted that the internet was both “revolutionary” and the “biggest blessing” for Muslim artists, since they face considerable obstacles in getting Islamic-themed music on radio and television. The internet allowed him to bypass traditional media and publicize his work directly to people around the world.

Deftly taking advantage of opportunities offered by the internet, Zain was the first Muslim artist to reach a million fans on Facebook; today, he boasts 2.5 million fans. Collectively, his YouTube videos have received more than 50 million hits. Released in 2010, “[In Shah Allah](#)” (“God Willing”) has been downloaded more than 11 million times on YouTube. Two other videos—“[The Chosen One](#)” (2010) and “[Palestine Will Be Free](#)” (2009)—have been downloaded more than 4 million and 2.5 million times, respectively. He harnessed this popularity offline with an ambitious touring schedule in 2010 and 2011, that has seen him regularly performing to sold-out concert venues throughout Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and, interestingly, North America.

In his videos and songs, Zain eschews the traditional, glamorized image of pop stars, instead presenting himself as an ordinary person standing out from the crowd only because of his musical talent—given to him by Allah. He also specifically calls on Muslims to avoid blaming all of their

problems on the West and to realize their own role in shaping their situation. Indeed, as he very clearly realizes, his music has deep roots in the West.

One of his most striking songs is “Palestine Will Be Free.” The video uses animation to depict an apocalyptic urban landscape torn apart by Arab-Israeli violence, with live-action Zain singing amid the carnage. In the penultimate scene of the video, we see a young school girl holding a stone in front of an Israeli tank. The image is meant to invoke a clash between David and Goliath or might versus right. But it also has specific meaning for many Arabs: It is a reminder of the famous picture from the First Palestinian Intifada of a Palestinian child holding a rock above his head to throw at a nearby Israeli tank. But in Zain’s video, the girl drops the rock, stands defenseless in front of the Israeli tank, and implicitly puts her faith in Allah that her personal will is stronger than the mighty Israeli tank. Her faith is rewarded. As she moves forward, the tank withdraws.

Within months of the release of *Thank You Allah* and Zain’s concert in Cairo, revolts began throughout the Arab world. These revolts employed strategies akin to those laid out in *Thank You Allah*. Through the sheer size of their demonstrations, protestors challenged governments in Tahrir Square and elsewhere, and forced police to withdraw in a manner recalling the way the little girl forced the withdrawal of the Israeli tank in “Palestine Will Be Free.” Nor did the protestors insist on blaming the West. Their message was not the message of Osama bin Laden. They also used Facebook, other social media, and YouTube to “market” their message (and circumvent mainstream media) in a manner reminiscent of the campaign Zain used to market his songs. On February 12, democracy protestors achieved their goal in Egypt when Hosni Mubarak had to leave office—an event that signaled the birth of a new *nizam*, one in which even powerful politicians may be brought into an Egyptian court of law to defend their official actions.

None of this is to suggest that Maher Zain’s work *caused* demonstrations or the trials of former Egyptian officials, but Zain’s songs clearly reflected a widespread feeling of discontent and a desire for a different future. His awareness of that discontent and of the need for hope is an element of his popularity—epitomized by an Egyptian fan at his Cairo concert in March 2010 [who was quoted saying](#) that she loved the “revolutionary feel” of his music.

Zain tapped into this same feeling of discontent and the need for hope in the first song he released after the start of the Arab Spring, “Freedom.” He premiered the song in Malaysia in March 2011 and dedicated it to peoples fighting for freedom in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and all other countries. Sung in English, the song thanks God for giving friends and neighbors—young, old, women, and men—strength to hold hands and demand an end to oppression. The song enunciates a dream for a new Muslim society, in which people will no longer be prisoners in their homes or be afraid to voice their opinions in public. While Zain acknowledges that the dream of a new society has yet to be fulfilled, he promises his listeners that they are on the verge of achieving it, that God is with them, and that He will not let them fail. Throughout the video of the song, we see images of Arab flags and protestors peacefully challenging their governments in the Arab World.

Significantly, Zain’s call for reform extends to the United States. In “The Chosen One” we see Zain singing about the Prophet Muhammad while walking through Bakersfield, California. According to the website of Zain’s record label, Awakening Records, the video is intended to educate the world about the Prophet Muhammad and to respond to attacks on him through cartoons and on Facebook. In a striking

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scene, we see a young boy with a baseball cap and glove race across a living room and catch a baseball thrown to him by his veiled mother. The city is filled with social problems: homelessness, alcohol and drug addiction, impoverished elderly, abandoned animals, and ethnic tensions. (In the opening scene, Zain's neighbor, a blonde white woman, dumps garbage on his front porch.) Yet, up until the concluding scene, it is not Zain who addresses these problems: others do. Finally, however, Zain notices that his unfriendly neighbor is sick. He makes vegetable soup for her. Zain is of course displaying his compassion and humanity here, but he is also invoking a well-known story about the Prophet Muhammad. For years a woman dumped garbage on his home until one day it stopped. Rather than rejoicing, the Prophet sought to see what had happened to the woman and offered to help her when he realized that she was sick.

The Prophet Muhammad and the hope he offers the world are central to Zain's second video shot in the United States, "Ya Nabi Salam Alayka," which is set for its official premiere this week. In it we see Zain sporting his trademark dapper hat and hip-hop clothes while walking through the major streets and railroad tracks of one of America's premier cities, the hometown of President Barack Obama: Chicago, Illinois. He is flanked by the city's famous skyline and he sings a salutation in Arabic to the Prophet Muhammad—a salutation widely known as *salawat*. By choosing a city that is in many ways at the center of the nation's geography and *nizam*, Zain is implying that Muslims and their faith have something tangible to contribute to the world's lone superpower—despite the ongoing presence of Islamophobia in American life.

As analysts and scholars seek to better understand the Arab World in the twenty-first century, they would be well advised to pay close attention to the lyrics of Zain and other artists whose words embody the aspirations of millions of Muslims in the Middle East and the wider world. If in a sense what the media has dubbed "The Arab Spring" is a replay of the West's 1960s, Maher Zain is the Bob Dylan of this new situation. Zain understands that Western music has entered the consciousness of all the world's young, and he realizes further that Western "love songs" can easily be transformed into sacred music—just as, once long ago, the deeply erotic "Song of Songs" was transformed into a poem about the soul and its longing for God. For Zain, the road to "revolution"—to a new *nizam*—is not to be found in politics or in angry rhetoric. Rather, surprisingly, it is deeply embedded in the themes, structures and chordal sounds of the West—so long as the listener understands that this music has undergone, via Zain's lyrics and Muslim identity, a profound change of subject.

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