



**Between rap and mahraganat,**

**hostility towards contemporary music in Egypt**

# **Between rap and mahraganat, hostility towards contemporary music in Egypt**

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## Methodology

This paper analyzes Law No. 35 of 1978 regulating the work of artistic unions in Egypt, and the internal regulations of the Syndicate of Musical Professions, according to the latest amendment ratified by the Syndicate's council in 2007, in addition to AFTE's previous publications on mahraganat music. Mahraganat, which in Arabic means festival, is a popular genre of street music that emerged in Egypt in 2008.

The paper relied on a research paper on the situation of online content producers, especially musical and creative content, in addition to official statements issued by the Syndicate of Musical Professions, and related media reports.

## Introduction

The song "Shik Shak Shok"<sup>1</sup> emerged in the 1970s, and became one of the main pieces of music used in the teaching and practice of belly dancing. The lyrics of the song call for leaving Western music and returning to our national music paired with baladi dance (a style of Egyptian folk dance). In its early version, the song described the rock music as a prominent genre of mainstream Western music, while the later popular version<sup>2</sup>, which emerged in the early 1990s, added another genre, rap. "O my love, leave rap and rock," the lyrics said. This indicates the rise, impact, and spread of this genre of music, which emerged two or three decades after the rock and roll, in the Arab region.

There are some paradoxes regarding this song, as it does not seek to reject "rap and rock" on the grounds that they lack artistic aesthetics, but it simply calls for rehabilitating the oriental dance music. Contemporary music in Egypt, even after the emergence of styles very specific to Egyptian culture such as folk rap and mahraganat, is still subjected to restrictions and disapproval, instead of approval and positive criticism. These arbitrary practices against contemporary music originate from those who call for adherence to the Egyptian cultural heritage and the preservation of the Egyptian identity.

Another paradox is that the song was composed by Hassan Abu al-Saud, who worked with Ahmed Adawiya, a renowned folk singer who faced major difficulties throughout his career. Abu al-Saud described what Adawiya offered in his early days as kitsch and officially dismissed it. However, when Adawiya became so popular, his position changed and became highly appreciated on both critical and institutional levels<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, Abu al-Saud headed the Syndicate of Musical Professions, which is now hostile to contemporary music.

1 Various – Shik Shak Shok : Lebanon 1972-85 Psychedelic Music For Belly Dance Folk World Music Compilation, sunnyboy66, <https://bit.ly/3AAsMQS>

2 Hassan Abu al-Saud – Shik Shak Shok song, YouTube, Accordion Magician album, Freedom Music, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D\\_SwbBc3VF0&ab\\_channel=MSoundEgypt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_SwbBc3VF0&ab_channel=MSoundEgypt)

3 Radio program "Witness to the age", Naguib Mahfouz episode, YouTube, last visited in May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3nMr5YT>

The Syndicate of Musical Professions continues its attack on the mahraganat and rap music. The Egyptian rap, which has been spreading since 2018, confused the Syndicate as an authority that oversees the practice of singing in Egypt. On the one hand, rap put the Syndicate in front of a renewed struggle against new and youthful genres of music, prompting it to attempt to control and domesticate these new forms of music. Also, this music succeeded and spread locally without being approved by the Syndicate. It also spread away from official production channels. On the other hand, this type of music became popular and was widely accepted, prompting the Syndicate to take an official stance on it<sup>4</sup>, like its previous stance towards the mahraganat music.

The way the Syndicate handles the music scene is characterized by randomness, confusion and restriction. The Syndicate issued a number of decisions and statements that indicated a lack of understanding of the music forms it regulates. For instance, it banned singers from singing on playback music during concerts, and obliged them to use a band of no less than eight musicians.

Although the Syndicate excluded some genres from its decision, such as rap and foreign bands, these ill-considered decisions confuse the work of musicians and impose guardianship over the method and quality of their work. The Syndicate has already punished some singers for breaching the ban on singing on playback music, and for singing without a band.

Today, the Syndicate faces a prolific youthful musical scene that it cannot control. In light of the development of digital production techniques, it becomes more difficult for the Syndicate to control the situation. Bans and restrictions have become incompatible with the current official discourse, whether with regard to rights and freedoms, or with regard to the economic policies aiming to achieve a recovery after the impact caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The government monitors the online content and imposes taxes on it.

This paper reviews the Egyptian rap scene and its development, as part of the contemporary music scene in the country, especially in light of the opportunities it created for itself. The paper also flags up the crisis of the existence of a syndicate that controls the profession, and the censorship restrictions it imposes whether on artistic content or on the artists themselves, their lives and their personal choices. This crisis harms and disrupts the development of modern and youthful musical forms and experiences. The paper also addresses the crisis of bans and restrictions from an economic perspective, which negatively affects the musicians and the Syndicate as well.

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4 Wedad Khamis, Basma Wahba accuses Hani Shaker of being double-standard: "Rap music is more dangerous than mahraganat," Al-Watan, published on 19 November 2021, last visited in May 2022

## First: Rap, historical background



The rap music emerged in Egypt in the late 1990s, influenced by its rise in the United States in the 1970s, as part of the hip hop, a genre of popular music developed by African Americans in the Bronx borough of New York City. The rap music was associated with the hard conditions the African Americans lived. It emerged as a marginal culture and struggled in many cases against violent lifestyles, poverty and police violence towards blacks. It reached its culmination during the turmoil and violent events that occurred in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, following the civil rights movement against white racism that declined by the end of the 1960s, marking the rise of more radical movements, such as the Black Panther Party.

At a time when the rap music developed and thrived in the United States in what was known as the golden age of hip hop, it began to reach Egypt where it was first experienced by young bands, such as the Nile band, known as “Y-Crew”, MTM, MC Amin, and others who contributed to the transmission of this culture.

The rap production in Egypt was limited during that period. It was mostly an emulation of this new art, which spread rapidly in the Arab world, specifically in Morocco and Palestine. The internet contributed to its spread in Egypt. Song producers used to share this genre of music through various forums and websites, before the spread of social media, but it did not spread widely nor did it receive sufficient approval or official recognition from the Syndicate of Musical Professions as an independent art.

The 25 January 2011 revolution and the social, political and cultural change it

brought about gave an impetus to the rap music, by creating spaces that allowed the practice of various forms of arts, particularly the non-dominant youthful (underground) ones. This, along with the development of technology, contributed to the spread of the rap, mahraganat, and other forms of music. This open atmosphere allowed the creation of artistic duets that accelerated the spread, such as trap music, which was the impact the Egyptian culture had on rap, by introducing oriental tunes to the Western singing technique. This experience received a different echo among the audience in terms of spread. The development of technology, which improved production conditions and quality, played a key role in the process, as it developed the music video as a visual artwork, sometimes separate from the song.

In general, the open public sphere contributes to the development, renewal and integration of different forms of art, creating a space for the presence and spread of some genres, especially the youthful and non-dominant ones. Following the cultural and artistic opening that Egypt witnessed in the wake of the 25 January revolution, the Syndicate of Musical Professions tried to control the scene again, thus creating an atmosphere hostile to all forms of artistic innovation and creativity. This disrupts and limits new potentials and spaces in art and culture in general, and violates Article 67 of the Egyptian constitution, which guaranteed freedom of literary and artistic creativity.

## Second: The Syndicate of Musical Professions and rap, clampdown or potential breakthrough



The lyrics of rap included political, economic and cultural criticism, as well as terms and expressions free from social and moral restrictions, due to the association of rap with street culture. This prompted the Egyptian authorities to clamp down on rap. The Syndicate of Musical Professions did not officially recognize the existence of rap until recently, almost before Hani Shaker assumed<sup>5</sup> the position of head of the Syndicate.

Rappers in Egypt used to practice the profession through a temporary work permit - a one-day permit - granted by the Syndicate of Musical Professions. Rappers and mahraganat singers used to be granted the status of a monologist or DJ, because there was no rap or mahraganat department within the Syndicate.

The Syndicate established a special department for rap between 2013 and 2016. It is not clear when exactly the Syndicate's council approved the establishment of the department. The council members give conflicting statements, with some saying it does not exist<sup>6</sup>, while others argue that it was established before Hani Shaker headed the Syndicate. These conflicting statements indicate that rappers are not interested in joining a syndicate, and the Syndicate, on the other hand, is not interested in attracting more members, or paying attention to new

5 Abdel Fattah Al-Agmi, Hani Shaker's response to the possibility of establishing a mahraganat department within the Syndicate of Musical Professions, Masrawy, published in November 2021, last visited in May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3AzhmfV>

6 Ahmed Abdel Rahman, "The Syndicate of Musical Professions: There is no department for rappers in the syndicate.. They work with a one-day permit," Al-Watan, published in September 2021, last visited in May 2022, <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/5707894>

types of music and supporting their development.

Apparently, the Syndicate's official recognition of rap came late, although the executive regulations, approved in 2007, stipulate that the Syndicate shall include new types of music. The second article of the regulations states that "the Syndicate may include in its membership music critics as well as users of current modern devices that are developed and used in musical and lyrical play according to the conditions and criteria that must be met for the membership of the Syndicate".

The Syndicate obliges the rappers and mahraganat singers to sign a written pledge to respect public morals and to abide by the Syndicate's decisions<sup>7</sup>, whether through performance on stage, clothing or the content of the lyrics. This violates Law No. 35 of 1978 on the establishment of the Syndicate and also indicates discrimination against these types of music in favour of others, the practice of which does not require the signing of written undertakings.

The clampdown practiced by the Syndicate contributed to the failure of some rap experiences. It can be said that the restrictions imposed by the Syndicate under Hani Shaker was the widest and most severe ever. These restrictions led the "Y-Crew" band to stop working after it encountered production difficulties due to censorship and restrictions from the Syndicate and the Central Authority for the Censorship of Works of Art (CACWA) on the content of their songs.<sup>8</sup>

These restrictions increased when rap witnessed a wave of spread in late 2018. At the time, traditional production platforms began to turn to rap after it had a wider audience, especially among the youths. This moral campaign led by the Syndicate of Musical Professions against rap can be described as an extension of its ongoing war against mahraganat. This war can be understood as a struggle against a youthful culture characterized by innovation and experimentation. It is also an extension of the long battles the Syndicate waged against new types of music. The Syndicate has previously fought against popular singing and criticized some pop songs as a form of debasement, and also against metal music for religious, moral, and social considerations.

The Syndicate of Musical Professions practiced several restrictions on rappers, despite the emergence of some bands that found their way to traditional and official production channels in the early 2000s. These include the MTM band, which released its first album in 2003, and Ahmed Mekki, who helped introduce rap to the cinema in 2008, then to television through the films that he starred.

Fear from the Syndicate's sanctions prompted some rappers to delete part of their old content, especially after rap became more popular. Media figures

7 Mai Gouda, "The rap audience criticizes Hani Shaker after the suspension of Marwan Moussa and Afroto... A lawyer comments: The decision to ban singing on playback music is illegal," Fil Fan, published in September 2021, last visited in May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3alfVY6>

8 Atef Ali Saleh, Y-CREW: Egypt's first rap band banned from holding concerts, Monte Carlo International, published in December 2016, last visited in May 2022, <https://bit.ly/30Q8C9v>

launched a campaign<sup>9</sup> against rappers, during which they rebroadcast old songs, calling on the Syndicate to strictly ban rap as it did before with mahraganat.

In early October 2021, the Syndicate stopped dealing with Egyptian rapper Marwan Pablo for “underestimating a religious invocation that carries spiritual meanings and noble values”<sup>10</sup>, during his first concert after his return from a retirement that lasted several months in 2020.

Pablo held a joint concert with Uday Abbas (known as Shabjdeed) at Al-Manara Center in New Cairo on 1 October 2021, saying the concert was held under a permit from the Syndicate. During the concert, Shabjdeed greeted Pablo before the latter stepped to the stage by tweaking the lyrics of a famous religious invocation, which the Syndicate considered “a disrespect for the supplication that emptied it of its moral content”. The Syndicate further said that the video of the concert contained “words that deviated from all morals and good traditions, which disappointed the Egyptians”. In its decision issued a day after the concert, the Syndicate warned the authorities, bodies and contractors not to deal with Pablo because he is not a member of the Syndicate. So, the rapper had to obtain a one-day permit to hold his concerts.

The ban did not last long, as The Planner company advertised a concert for Pablo in March, which was later postponed to May 2022 due to bad weather, according to the company. The Syndicate did not reveal the circumstances of Pablo's return, especially since its legal advisor had repeatedly emphasized that there was no intention to reconcile with the rapper, and that the Syndicate would not back down from its position.<sup>11</sup>

Such decisions reveal a crisis in the Syndicate's vision of its own roles. Instead of defending the interests of its members and providing an atmosphere that supports and develops creativity in accordance with the law regulating its work, the Syndicate imposes additional restrictions on those working in the field of singing. So, it scrutinizes their actions, with regard to the content of their songs, their appearance, performance, and even their stage names.<sup>12</sup>

Before the decision to suspend Pablo, the Syndicate suspended five rappers<sup>13</sup>, including Marwan Moussa and Afroto, for breaching the ban on singing on play-back music. But the Syndicate reversed the suspension later.

It is not clear why the Syndicate reversed its punitive decisions against rappers,

9 Basma al-Latif, Basma Wahba: I was shocked when I heard Wegz's song “the asphalt goblins”, Cairo 24, published in September 2021, last visited in May 2022, <https://www.cairo24.com/1428728>

10 Mohamed Taha, “For singing with swear words, the Syndicate of Musical Professions suspends Marwan Pablo,” Akhbar el-Yom, published in October 2021, last visited in May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3nJL7TZ>

11 Saeed Khaled, “The offense is greater than the apology.. The first response from the Syndicate of Musical Professions after Marwan Pablo's apology,” Al-Masry Al-Youm, published in October 2021, last visited in May 2022, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2430589>

12 Sarah Ramadan, Legalizing Mahraganat: Recognition vs. Identity Erasure, published in June 2020, last visited in May 2022, <https://afteegypt.org/research/research-papers/2020/06/20/19227-afteegypt.html>

13 Ahmed Abdel Rahman, “The Syndicate of Musical Professions: There is no department for rappers in the syndicate.. They work with a one-day permit,” Al-Watan, published in September 2021, last visited in May 2022, <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/5707894>

but it can be said that their growing popularity prompted the Syndicate to re-evaluate the ban. Regarding its previous attempts to ban non-members from singing outside Egypt and ask platforms to delete their online content, the Syndicate changed its position, as Hani Shaker admitted in press statements that he was unable to use the ban mechanism, especially in the presence of the internet.

At a time when the Syndicate of Musical Professions voices reservations about rap, Al-Manara Center, which is affiliated with the armed forces, organized more than a concert for rappers<sup>14</sup>. These concerts were attended by more than 10,000 people. It seems that the Syndicate has become more strict than the ruling political regime with regard to music, as it is still trying to tighten its grip on the music scene in Egypt.

### Third: Regulation of contemporary music production



Freedom of expression and creativity on the one hand, and the artistic recognition and serious treatment on the other hand are not the only issues at stake due to the Syndicate's ongoing campaign. In April 2022, mahraganat singer Hammo Beka appeared on Al-Qahera Wal Nas TV complaining in tears about the living and psychological difficulties he suffered due to the Syndicate's intransigence<sup>15</sup>. Beka admitted that he made profits from YouTube, but he said the media highly exaggerated the issue, something which served the campaign against him and other singers who release their works on YouTube or other digital platforms.

Beka's complaint takes two dimensions, one of which has to do with freedom of

14 Wegz and Afroto's concert at Al-Manara Center full house, Fil Fan, published in September 2021, last visited in 2022, <https://www.filfan.com/galleries/25808>

15 Asmaa Ibrahim, Hammo Beka collapses in tears: I got tired and complained to our Lord; I performed Umrah twice and prayed against them.. Stop harming us, Al-Qahera Wal Nas YouTube channel, published in 2022, last visited in May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3ysmf7W>

expression, specifically freedom of creativity which is guaranteed by Article 67 of the Egyptian constitution. The other dimension has to do with economic rights represented in the right to work and labor rights. A recent report<sup>16</sup> highlighted the continued bad economic conditions of digital creators around the world after nearly a quarter of a century, which can be considered the age of digital artistic production. This comes despite the reverse image of the spread and success of this type of production and its creators in light of the spread of high-speed internet and the multiplicity of competing platforms. Since 2018<sup>17</sup>, one of the largest of these platforms, Spotify, has been actively spreading and succeeding in the Middle East and North Africa. According to the report, artists struggle to make ends meet, as they “face uncertain incomes and working conditions”. The owners of these platforms are not innocent, as they - in today’s ultra-digitalized media world - are “constantly contending with the domination of technology companies in the creative space”. Thus, we are in front of a global paradox, for example:

“Today, in the UK, on-demand streaming provides the main source of revenue for recorded music and represented 58% of recorded music revenue in 2020. This is despite the fact that most music creators have seen their incomes worsen since music became digitalized: 49% of musicians have said their incomes have declined or significantly declined since 2015. Most artists express concern about the ambiguity and changing nature of the agreements signed with companies like Spotify and Apple music, which uses algorithms based on the number of plays to determine revenue sharing.”

Apart from the rights of the artists themselves, the Syndicate appears to follow the government’s tax policy, by imposing rules and levying revenues for its benefit as well as the benefit of the state treasury. However, the consequences of the Syndicate’s policies may indicate otherwise. It seems that the conflicting decisions regarding the ban on singing on playback music and the requirement to have a band of at least eight musicians at public concerts were meant to ensure the employment of musicians, specifically those who are members of the Syndicate. Nevertheless, the Syndicate does not pay attention to the development of those members, as a guarantee for employment and keeping pace with the development of music. It also neglects the gains it can obtain by attracting new members, which would increase its financial and human resources.

The Syndicate’s unfair and unreasonable campaign against contemporary music in Egypt is still ongoing. The complex and worrying economic and social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the Russia-Ukraine war are also still ongoing. Yasmine Nazmy<sup>18</sup> notes that “the independent art and culture

16 Drew Gardiner, Digital Labor in the Cultural Industry: Expression vs. Exploitation, published on 16 June 2022, last visited in June 2022, <https://aps.aucegypt.edu/ar/articles/793/digital-labor-in-the-cultural-industry-expression-vs-exploitation>

17 Spotify launches in the Middle East and North Africa, Arab News, published in November 2018, last visited in June 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1404641/amp>

18 Yasmine Nazmy, Culture in the time of Covid-19.. How the Covid-19 virus represented a challenge and inspiration for the cultural sector, Jacaranda, published in 2022, last visited in June 2022, <https://jacarandaculture.com/ar/articles/culture-in-corona/>

sector may have been one of the sectors most affected by the Covid-19 lockdown”.

But the need to lift the bureaucratic and censorship grip off music in Egypt has become urgent to avoid a more complex and even broader crisis. There is a need to look at the crisis of mahraganat, rap, and trap from its economic aspect, not just the creativity aspect.

Ziad Bahaa El-Din said in a recent article that the situation “needs real mobilization of all state agencies to achieve one goal, which is to stand by everyone who seeks to work, produce, manufacture, export and operate, because whoever maintains - and even increases - the labor force deserves to be treated as a hero. We need to close pending and physically and psychologically crippling files of incomplete investigations, worthless claims, and useless prosecutions. We also need to open the doors to licenses... loosen the grip of bureaucracy, and protect junior and senior producers from the fear and anxiety that hinders initiatives and investments”.

It is necessary to consider the clampdown on musicians in Egypt as one of the files that must be closed in favor of freedom of work. Those besieged musicians are just idle producers, and unleashing their productive and creative capacities would contribute to the initiative and investment that Bahaa El-Din advocates, in line with the liberal spirit of the free-market policy, which is supposed to be adopted by Egypt. Instead of continuing its campaign, the Syndicate of Musical Professions should rather think how creativity can contribute to production, without restrictions that will not succeed in stopping the wheel of time by any means.

## Conclusion

Music and its technologies have evolved, along with the development of publishing and its tools. The music and creative production available on the internet has become greater than ever, to the point where the use of censorship and restrictions becomes absurd. In light of the demand for and spread of Egyptian music locally and globally<sup>19</sup>, the Syndicate of Musical Professions should open up more towards freedom of creativity and abide by the constitution. It should stop the media and punitive campaigns it launches from time to time against contemporary and popular music. It should also adhere to the goals of its work in terms of looking after the interests of its members, developing them and supporting their creativity, as a basic guarantee to be an attractive entity.

Yet, the legal and regulatory restrictions, represented in bans, continued threats, and the requirement to obtain the Syndicate's membership in order to practice music, continue at a time when this besieged music becomes more popular and spreads more widely. The Syndicate should open the space for musicians, especially the beginners and young people who are more vulnerable to corporate exploitation. Then, it is possible to move to a wider space to receive this music in an atmosphere of exchange, evaluation, acceptance and rejection without interferences from the authorities.<sup>20</sup>

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19 Dana Khammash, List of Egyptian songs used in Marvel's 'Moon Knight' Season 1, <https://adigitalboom.com/list-of-egyptian-songs-used-in-marvels-moon-knight-season-1/>

20 Menna Taher, Youth revolt in Microphone, Ahrām online, published in December 2010, last visited in May 2022, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/32/1671/Arts--Culture/Film/Youth-revolt-in-Microphone.aspx>