Storytime
Arab Entertainment as a Catalyst for Social Change
Liberals in Arab entertainment media want to spread universalist principles to a mass audience — and look to Hollywood as their natural partner.
THE CENTER FOR PEACE COMMUNICATIONS
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Executive Summary

Some Arab liberals, striving to catalyze social change through entertainment media, have shown its potential to spread universal values and norms to a mass audience through storytelling on stage and screen. In Saudi Arabia, the television and radio juggernaut MBC has enabled reform-minded writers and actors to stigmatize extremism through comedy and drama. In Egypt, new TV miniseries serve to resurrect memories of the country's departed Jewish community, take aim at government corruption and malfeasance, and erode support for Islamist groups. Whereas these two countries' entertainment industries reach audiences region-wide, their equivalents in other Arab countries reach primarily domestic audiences. With respect to social messaging, this narrower purview has enabled local media to engage the specific ills of those societies more intimately. Thus a celebrated Bahraini remake of *Romeo and Juliet* featured Sunni and Shi'ite star-crossed lovers, reflecting the screenwriter's yearning to reconcile the two denominations within the country. In Algeria, liberal filmmakers seek to enrich historical memory about the country's liberation war and subsequent civil war, to foster introspection and a mindset of reconciliation — between Algeria and its former French occupiers, and among feuding factions within the country.

A rising school of thought in the United States calls for supporting and expanding such initiatives through American-Arab media partnerships. The theory holds that American assistance to indigenous, purpose-driven media offers a more cost-effective and sustainable path to engage Arab public discussions than the long-reigning alternative: U.S.-funded Arabic broadcasting. America Abroad Media in Washington, a leading proponent of the "partnership approach," has co-produced programming on some of the largest Arab networks and connected seasoned Hollywood talent to aspiring Arab writers and producers through mentorship programs. Through a nascent investment arm, the organization's principals have begun to invest in Arab feature films. Despite its successes,

however, the partnership approach wins only a fraction of the U.S. government's allocations for "public diplomacy" in the Arab world. The field of engagement for these Americans, moreover, remains limited to the region's more open, globalized societies.

To overcome these constraints, American proponents of the partnership approach will need to lobby Congress to allocate more of its existing public diplomacy expenditures to such ventures. They will need to grow their professional network of Arab liberal entertainment talent, deepening their relationship with the region's entertainment capitals and widening their reach into countries with more niche audiences. In most Arab countries, restrictions on foreign partnership with local media and bureaucratic hassles for film production remain a hindrance. The U.S. government can lobby its Arab counterparts to ameliorate these problems.

Beginning five decades ago, a belief in the power of entertainment to improve the world inspired a number of idealists in North and South America to weave social messages into TV comedies and dramas. These actors eventually discovered one another, came together, and expanded their work into other parts of their world.

One of them, Methodist minister David Poindexter, championed the use of TV entertainment to advance the principles of environmental conservation, gender equality, and family planning. In the early 1970s, he convened the CEOs of America's three television networks and urged them to encourage screenwriters and producers to lace these values into their plot lines. He also incentivized such efforts, by convening awards ceremonies to celebrate the Hollywood talent that heeded his call. Among the outcomes, TV star Mary

Tyler Moore used her immensely popular sitcom to help stigmatize sexism. In another success, the heroine of the sitcom *Maude* had a midlife abortion.[1]

A like-minded voice in Mexico, playwright and TV producer Miguel Sabido, was meanwhile experimenting with similar techniques to serve some of the same objectives. Over the 1970s and early '80s, he created six "telenovelas" which modeled family planning for Mexican audiences. He appears to have succeeded: not only did the period in which they aired see the country's birth rate decline faster than the equivalent anywhere in the developing world; when the same programs re-aired in other Spanish-speaking countries, fertility rates fell as well.[2]

After Poindexter and Sabido learned of each other's work, they forged a plan to jointly test their approach in other societies. They began in India with a pair of soap operas that sought to elevate women's status, discourage child marriage, promote equal educational opportunity for both genders, and enshrine a woman's right to decide whom to marry. For these productions, they also secured Rockefeller Foundation funding to conduct follow-on survey research that attempted to quantify the programs' impact on social behavior. The favorable conclusion — that their approach had succeeded in diverse cultural environments — helped develop their instinctual approach into a professional discipline, now known as "entertainment education."[3] Poindexter proceeded to found a nonprofit institution, Population Communications International, to apply the same methodology on radio and television worldwide. By 2020, 22 years after its founding, the organization, now known as the Population Media Center, had deployed to 54 countries on four continents.[4]

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[1] "In Memoriam: David Poindexter". *Population Media Center*. Accessed November 3, 2020. https://www.populationmedia.org/2018/02/10/david-poindexter/

[2] Ibid.

[3] *Entertainment-Education and Social Change* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Eribaum Associates, Publishers, 2004). See pp. 5-6, "What is E-E and What Can It Do?"

[4] "Projects", *Population Media Center.* Accessed November 3, 2020. https://www.populationmedia.org/issues/

Amid this remarkable run of programming, however, two limitations emerged with particular relevance to Arab environments. First, among the organization's 54 projects, only one of them involved an Arab country: a radio play in Sudan.[5] Second, even as the activity expanded across the globe, the themes and values it instilled remained limited to the same small number of important yet relatively noncontroversial themes: public health, birth control, women's rights, and environmental protection.[6] The Arab region, too, faces the gender and environmental challenges which the Population Media Center seeks to address — thus the Center's striking absence from the region raises the question as to why. Meanwhile, the region's manifold socio-cultural challenges which the Center has *not* addressed — corruption, extremism, internecine strife, and so on — speak to the limits of the Center's potential to positively influence Arab societies even if it managed to enter the field.

The challenge of applying entertainment education to address these problems in Arab countries calls for some historical context. In the Middle East and North Africa, the use of storytelling to influence behavior — and for that matter, the suppression of storytelling for the same reason — dates back millennia. Though one may trace the phenomenon to ancient times, the early decades of the Abbasid empire, which ruled from Baghdad beginning in 750 CE, provide a relevant point of departure. The most widespread form of entertainment then — a band of storytellers known as "qussas" — reached thousands through Friday sermons in the city's mosques and public squares. They went beyond the explication of Qur'an and prophetic tradition to recount the travails of caliphs, as well as the underground movements that had brought them to power. In doing so, they also competed with one another to advocate rival political and ideological factions.[7]

Scholars of early Islamic history believe that rulers and dissidents alike paid the storytellers to slant the narration in their favor. In this respect, the content of the stories reflected an

[5] Ibid.

[6] "Issues" page, *Population Media Center.* Accessed November 3, 2020. https://www.populationmedia.org/issues/

[7] C. Pellat, "Kass," in Encyclopedia of Islam, vol. 4, electronic edition (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 733b.

effort to influence society — not to adopt a value per se, but to inspire loyalty to a particular leader or movement. In a sense, this influence endures: the texts available to modern historians of the Abbasid period, all of which were compiled several generations after the events they describe, stem from an oral tradition that grew in part out of the storytellers' Friday sketches.

Some powerful figures of the early Islamic period naturally sought to streamline the heterodox tales emerging out of mosques. Ali bin Abi Talib, the prophet's son-in-law, evicted the storytellers of Basra from the city's mosques and replaced them with new preachers who agreed to limit their sermons to the articulation of Islamic doctrine — itself a subject of contest, to be sure. Similar crackdowns occurred over the decades that followed, amid a larger process of de facto separation between the lay, political authority of rulers on the one hand and the social influence of clerics ('ulama) on the other.[8]

The relationship between storytelling and politics is intrinsic, as well as universal — as much a fixture of present-day democratic systems as authoritarian ones. But in the Arab region, centuries of political revolution and evolution culminated, over the modern period, in authoritarian systems that impose their ideas more methodically and pervasively than their predecessors. These governments engage in a continuous struggle for narrative dominance through all forms of media, including and especially entertainment. In recent decades, autocrats faced new challenges to this dominance, as new media technologies threatened their control over the information and media content their societies consumed. But amid the post-Arab Spring retrenchment of authoritarianism, rulers found ways to reassert control. Given Arab autocracies' relentless, ongoing effort to dominate the entertainment landscape, it is easy to see why an idealistic American NGO — bearing even a modest social agenda — would find it considerably more difficult to engage Arab entertainment media than its equivalents in India, sub-Saharan Africa, or South America.

[8] This statement represents a summation of the hypothesis put forth by Jacob Lassner in his book, *Islamic Revolution and Historical Memory: An Inquiry into the Art of 'Abbasid Apologetics* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1986). See pp. 10-13, "From Propaganda to History: A Hypothesis."

Nonetheless, new trends in the region present an opportunity for Americans to play a constructive, collaborative role in bringing stories to light that advance positive values and ideals. Against tough odds, some Americans have begun to do so — at that, transcending the narrow purview of the Population Media Center to broach controversial themes with bearing on regional politics. Their work proves that such activity is feasible, and suggests that more is possible.

The following exploration of the region's entertainment industry helps demarcate the opportunity. It is followed by an overview of the role some Americans have played within it, and an assessment of how they might advance further.

Egyptian Entertainment as a Soft Power Export

The story begins in Egypt, the longstanding capital of Arab entertainment, where over the past 80 years, storytellers transformed cultural and political sensibilities within the country and across the region. This influence may be parsed in terms of four stages. The first occurred over the period of Egypt's monarchy, in the early twentieth century, which featured lax government authority over entertainment. Free of state impositions, film studies turned out movies primarily for profit's sake. From the early 1930s into the early '50s, the country prolifically exported musicals, comedies, and dramas to every Arab country — at one point ranking third in the world in the number of films it produced, after the United States and India. These films channeled the cosmopolitan ethos of modern Cairo, by then a hybrid of Arabic and Islamic tradition on the one hand and Western norms on the other. Due to the movies' popularity, Egypt's light and peppery dialect of Arabic came to be understood throughout North Africa and the Middle East, and the ideas it carried began to impact cultural sensibilities.[9]

The second stage came with the advent of republican rule in 1952 and the gradual nationalization of entertainment, under the oversight of President Gamal Abdel Nasser's Ministry of Information and Culture. This shift meant neither that the charm of Egyptian media was wrecked by bureaucrats, nor that its creators and performers were coerced into their new roles. To the contrary, Nasser's Egypt began as a vibrant cultural capital in which government won over many artists. Even as the country's television network broadcast Nazi-inspired antisemitic films, the President also commissioned the translation and performance of plays by Bertolt Brecht, and brought the Bolshoi Ballet to Cairo.[10] Some of the country's greatest composers and vocalists embraced Nasser's pan-Arabist project.

[9] Mustafa Darwish. *Dream Makers on the Nile: A Portrait of Egyptian Cinema* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998).
[10] Amina Shafiq (noted Egyptian feminist) in discussion with the author in Cairo, July 6, 2014.

Breathing life into the strident radio broadcast *Sawt al-Arab* ("Voice of the Arabs"), they wrote and performed songs to stir public emotion in favor of toppling Nasser's enemies — Arab kingdoms and Western colonies — from Baghdad to Algiers.[11] While this popular entertianment reached millions, Egyptian intellectuals expounded on the same messages to a smaller number of influential elites, both within and beyond their borders. According to a popular expression of the time, "Books are written in Cairo, printed in Lebanon, and read in Baghdad."[12]

A third stage was characterized by decline. Beginning in the late 1970s, President Anwar El-Sadat turned against Egypt's leftist strand — widespread in entertainment media — while opening a space for the Muslim Brotherhood to publish and broadcast its values. The mass promulgation of Egyptian Islamist literature stoked sectarian chauvinism and turned a large swath of the population against the secular tendencies of Egyptian television and movies. Amid ensuing rise in factionalism and division within Egypt — a trend that only grew under the rule of Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak — Egyptian media began to turn inward. Its supremacy in the pan-Arab entertainment market meanwhile faced new challenges. Assad-ruled Damascus, claiming the torch of pan-Arabism, produced and exported dramatic productions in the Nasserist tradition.[13] Saudi- and other Gulf-owned media invested in their own entertainment products.[14] Egyptian productions declined in quality and number.

Beginning in 2013, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi began to initiate what he hoped would develop into a new, fourth phase of Egyptian media. His counter-revolutionary government shut down the Muslim Brotherhood's television and print outlets and jailed Islamist

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[11] Lamya' Muhammad Sayyid Khudayr. *Ta'thir al-'Alaqat al-Siyasiya al-Arabiya 'Ala al-Madmun al-Ikhbari li-Idha'at Sawt al-Arab* [The Influence of Arab Political Relations on the News Content of the Voice of the Arabs Broadcast] (Cairo: Kulliyat al-Tarbiya al-Musiqiya, 1992).
[12] "Baghdad 'Asimat al-Thaqafa bi Da'm min Ma'had Goethe [Baghdad: a Cultural Capital with Support from the Goethe Institute]". *Goethe Institute Arabic-language Web site*, March 2013, accessed online: http://bit.ly/1QrYQGA.
[13] Bilal Fadhl (Egyptian screenplay writer) in discussion with the author in Cairo, July 6, 2014.
[14] Bilal Fadhl (Egyptian screenplay writer) in discussion with the author in Cairo, July 6, 2014.

journalists. Sisi proceeded to convey the aspiration to bring together Egyptian news and entertainment media in an agenda for cultural reform.

On September 3, as a presidential candidate, he convened a gathering of 70 of the country's best-loved entertainers, live on national television. They included the legendary Faten Hamama, star of stage and screen, who had made her film debut in 1939. The crowd applauded as Sisi interrupted his own remarks and left the podium to embrace the 83-year-old actress and escort her to her chair. He went on to charge the crowd with a mission: "I've gathered you all here because when we talk about media, we're talking about the capacity to instill a conscience," he explained. Then he outlined his vision to revive the entertainment industry as both a lucrative business and a tool of Egyptian soft power.[15] A week later, in a separate televised discussion, he spoke about the role of media in his proposed domestic agenda. "In my view," he said, "the consciousness of Egyptians is formed in their family, their houses of worship, their schools, and in media. And among them today, the media is more important than any other." He called on media professionals to "bring back the relations between Muslims and Christians to where they used to be, but better." Adding that "the loss of communication between state institutions and media is a problem," he asked them to uphold "the principle that disagreements on television should not exceed the principle of citizenship."[16] It was understood to be an allusion to Islamists, long a fixture on the region's TV talk shows, that rejected the idea of the nation-state.[17]

Such top-down projects to streamline a country's media are of course anathema to principles of free expression which international media advocacy and human rights groups

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[15] Sada ElBalad. "Liqa' al-Mushir 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi ma'a 'l-Fannanin al-Misriyin [General 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's Meeting with Egyptian Artists]." YouTube video, 1:12:40. May 21, 2014, accessed online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPiiwT0UAhE.

[16] Sada ElBalad. "Liqa' al-Mushir 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi ma'a I'lamiyi Misr [General 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's Meeting with Egyptian Media]." YouTube video, 1:34:07. May 4, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFdWGrGgNqM.

[17] Izzat Ibrahim (Executive Managing Editor, *Al-Ahram* daily newspaper) in discussion with the author in Cairo, July 7, 2014.

champion.[18] But in Egypt, most media companies and workers shared the government's outlook on Islamism, and chose to eschew a confrontational approach to the government in favor of a partnership to advance an anti-Islamist, though not altogether liberal, agenda.[19]

As noted earlier, while Egypt's entertainment industry remains prominent in the Middle East, it has shrunk since its mid-twentieth century heyday. The field is dominated by five companies — two of which date back to the golden age of film in the 1930s, and all of which currently produce more television serials than films. Even as a boutique industry in a country of heavy-handed professional syndicates and red tape, these survivors have been turning a profit since the Arab spring — thanks to a vast population primed for escapism; a region in tears, hungry for relief; and the fact that the rival Syrian entertainment industry has been weakened by civil war and pan-Arab anti-Assad sentiments. The Egyptian scene is also larger than it looks, in that native talent finds its way into wealthy Gulf states with movie and TV aspirations of their own.[20]

In terms of the social and political impact of the range of content, it emerges out of a subtle relationship between the industry, its censors, and the policies of the Egyptian government, as well as ideological divisions among the investors.[21] It also reflects the worldview of the producers and writers themselves: in some cases, the legacy of ideological chauvinism they imbued; in others, the vision of a future cured of it. Outsiders who scrutinize the content and learn about the players have found opportunities to assist the ones who want to support positive social and political reform.

A survey of the story lines of a given Ramadan season provides a snapshot of the state of the art. In 2013, the holy month began on July 8, ten days after the military operation to

[18] "Egypt" page, *Freedom House.* Accessed online: https://freedomhouse.org/country/egypt#.VfI5bbxVikq.
[19] Albert Shafik, interview.
[20] Bilal Fadhl, interview.
[21] Bilal Fadhl, interview.

restore army rule — which means that most of the writing and production happened under the Muslim Brotherhood. The productions bespoke an arts community in open revolt against Islamist authorities. "Al-Da'iya" (The Preacher) features a cleric in love with a violinist. As their relationship deepens, he confronts extremism and hypocrisy among his colleagues. "Ism Mu'aqqat" (Temporary Name) casts Brotherhood candidates in Egypt's then-recent parliamentary elections as cheats. Secularist ideologue Ilham Shaheen scripted the slapstick comedy "Nazariyat al-Gawafa" (The Guava Theory), which mercilessly spoofs the Brotherhood. Among the two major TV series created by Egyptians outside the country, the more successful was the Saudi-backed “Al-Arraf" (The Fortuneteller), a comedy starring beloved Egyptian comic actor Adel Imam. It reflected the Saudi kingdom’s commitment to build public opposition to Brotherhood rule. Imam plays a con artist who makes millions, lands in prison, escapes amid the chaos of the 2011 revolution, and goes on to win political power in the new Egypt. Numerous TV critics and the public generally interpreted the story as a dig at President Mohammed Morsi, who was jailed along with other Muslim Brotherhood activists during the January 2011 revolution.[22] Coverage of the production interpreted the con as a metaphor for Islamists' use of religion to gain power.[23]

By contrast, a historical epic, scripted by Cairo’s Yusri al-Jundi and funded and filmed in Qatar, fit more into the anti-Semitic tradition of earlier productions like *Horseman without a Horse.* (That 30-part pseudo-historical epic, premised on the belief that the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion,* detailing a Jewish plot to enslave the world, was truly authored by a Jewish cabal, as opposed to the Russian secret police.) Recounting the circumstances under which a Jewish tribe in seventh-century Arabia was slaughtered by Muslims — the carnage recreated in great details toward the end — it builds the case that the Jews deserved it. "The series shows how the Jews' . . . nature endures,” Jundi told a journalist. “Despite the fact that hundreds of years have passed, they still spread corruption wherever they live.” But perhaps in a sign that the tastes of Arab audiences were beginning to shift away from

[22] Independent content analysis of *Al-Da’iya, Ism Mu’aqqat, Nazariyat al-Gawafa, and Al-Arraf.*
[23] “Shirin: ‘Adil Imam Kana Yaqsud al-Ikhwan bi Shakhsiyat al-‘Arraf [Shirin: By the Character of ‘the Fortuneteller,’ Adel Imam Meant the Brotherhood].” *Idha’at*, August 24, 2013.

the focus on an external enemy and toward intra-Arab issues, it was Imam's *Fortuneteller* that drew the larger crowd. *Khaybar* turned out to be a flop.

Two seasons later, among the crop of shows that had been produced in Egypt under the rule of Sisi, the biggest local and regional hit turned out to be *Harat al-Yahud* [The Jewish Quarter] — the first Egyptian program to star sympathetic Jewish characters in 70 years. Telling the story of a fictional Egyptian Jewish family in the aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, it depicts them as attractive, loving, and fond of their Muslim and Christian neighbors. The program demystifies Jewish rituals, and features a love affair between a Muslim army colonel and a young Jewish woman. It also portrays Israelis in a hostile light, and Egypt prior to the establishment of Israel as a land entirely free of religious chauvinism.[24] But in the eyes of one of the show's creators, Sharif Zalat, the overall purpose of the production was to combat the demonization of Jews in a manner palatable to Egyptian audiences. "We spent a fortune on producing the show. But our goal wasn't just to make money. We wanted to send a message."[25] Broadcast throughout the region during the holy month, it was portrayed disparagingly in some Arabic media as an exercise in "normalization."[26]

The last production of its kind had been a feature film produced in 1946 called *Hasan, Marcos, and Cohen* — about a friendship between a Muslim, a Christian, and a Jew. But one fan of both, Hani al-Muhanna, a former deputy minister in Egypt's Ministry of Social Solidarity, notes an essential difference between the two: "*Hasan, Marcos, and Cohen* was more a case of art reflecting reality back then," he observed. "*The Jewish Quarter* is more

[24] Independent content analysis of *Harat al-Yahud* [The Jewish Quarter].
[25] William Booth and Sufian Taha. "Egyptian Show That's Flattering to Jews a Surprise Hit Among Palestinians." *The Washington Post*, July 17, 2015.
[26] Ramadhan 'Abd Allah. "Harat al-Yahud Yu'id Tariq al-Tatbi' Bayna Washinton wa Tel Abib." *Al-Jazeera*, June 22, 2015. Accessed July 1, 2015, accessed online: http://bit.ly/1LauXu2.

aspirational, in that it seems to reflect a desire on the part of its creators to begin to restore that reality."[27]

What are the circumstances under which an Egyptian screenwriter breaks with tradition, braving a predictable backlash by a large segment of society, to take such an initiative? Many Egyptians — including prominent journalist Bashir Abd al-Fattah, a Brotherhood supporter who decries the program — picture a dynamic of strict command and control, whereby the president dictates themes to the writers and the censor enforces his will. "Sisi wants normalization, and the TV shows are a component of his policies," Abd al-Fattah claims.[28] But screenwriters like Bilal Fadhl see a more complex dynamic, stemming from three considerations on the artists' part. The first is self-censorship: In an environment in which the president has effectively teamed up with the Israeli leadership in a crackdown on the Brotherhood and Hamas, the likes of Yusri al-Jundi would not risk the time it takes to produce a show like *Khaybar,* likely to be rejected by the censors, unless the entire process takes place outside Egypt. The second consideration, as in any commercial industry, is the profit motive. This impels an effort to find common ground between the artists' own values and convictions on the one hand and an investor's agenda on the other. The profit motive also impels an attempt to gauge the public's mood and evolving tastes. With respect to the latter, in turn, widespread anger at the Brotherhood prompted a new public openness to making common cause with the Jewish state. Some writers decided to play to it. The third consideration is of course the agenda of the state. As noted earlier, it is indeed the case that Sisi meets with media and encourages them to lace specific messages into their programming. These are not directives per se — but they are cues which artists supportive of the government are disposed to follow.[29] A writer like Jundi, who does not care for the Sisi agenda, simply takes his business elsewhere.

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[27] Hani al-Muhanna (Deputy Minister, Ministry of Social Solidarity) in discussion with the author in Cairo, July 6, 2014.
[28] Bashir Abd al-Fattah (independent journalist) in discussion with the author in Cairo, July 4, 2014.
[29] Bilal Fadhl, interview.

The interplay among Egyptian entertainers, their convictions, the need for a backer, and the agenda of the state invites questions as to how investors and creative partners from outside the region might serve to encourage and build on the more positive trends. While some liberal values, such as fostering a culture of tolerance, have found local advocates, what other aspects of liberalism remain largely absent from the scene, and appear less likely to manifest spontaneously? Who are the writers and producers most open to advancing them? What are the red lines currently imposed on creative expression, whether by the state or the society, that would stand to limit the unbridled expression of something new? Finally, what forms of support are needed to advance these themes, and where might the support be found?

One example of an underemphasized liberal value is the principle of the rule of law — that is, a system whereby state and society alike embrace and abide by the law, the population has the right to amend it, and all are equally accountable to it. In championing the Egyptian security sector's crackdown on the Brotherhood, most TV programs made light of their many excesses. Meanwhile, comedy and drama alike have not done enough to spotlight the damage wrought by the culture of bribery and corruption so widespread in Egypt. Yet beyond the realm of big-budget entertainment, the rule of law is a theme which liberal activists in the country have begun to introduce in some political platforms, online video shorts, and television appearances. Their efforts would enjoy a boost if entertainment media sought to amplify them.

Leaving aside for the moment the factors of self-censorship, audience tastes, and cues from on high, Egyptian entertainment media are also limited in what they can express by the limited pool of foreign investors who have been actively supporting them. The country's talent garners considerably less support from the United States or Europe than smaller Arab countries, notably Lebanon and Morocco, each of which benefits immeasurably from French — and increasingly American — funds.[30] Jordan provides a third example of a

[30] Ibid.

cash-strapped Arab country that has worked hard to lure Western investors for local films, as well as attract Western filmmakers to produce their own there. Egyptian entertainers would like to win Western backing — but the days when Gamal Abdel Nasser persuaded Cecil B. Demill to film *The Ten Commandments* on location are long past: compared with Lebanon, Morocco, Jordan, and oil-rich Gulf states like the UAE, Cairo presents few incentives, as well as daunting bureaucratic and union hassles.[31]

In light of Egypt's poor reputation as a destination of foreign capital for entertainment, film executives in Hollywood might be surprised to know that of the 19 television serials produced in Cairo in 2014, 17 made a profit for their local or regional backers. So while the government has not made it easy for investors in entertainment, those who know the territory well enough have been rewarded for their gumption. The risk is low by American commercial standards: most films cost between $150,000 and 300,000 to produce. These are also modest sums from the standpoint of American film philanthropy, which have provided grants and matching funds to projects elsewhere in the developing world but barely to Egyptians.

To be sure, it is difficult to navigate the myriad conditions that see an idea for a program germinate, bloom, and find their way to a mass audience — in particular, when it carries a controversial social message. But producers in the country share the view that those who try would have the wind at their backs: as indicated previously, the country's leadership wants outside investors and has signaled a desire to restore Egyptian productions to their historically dominant status in the region. The example of *The Jewish Quarter* demonstrates that there is support for the use of entertainment media as a tool of soft power influence as well as profit. These factors make it possible to envision a process whereby outside investors conceive of a project in cooperation with local talent and build Egyptian establishment consensus for its message.

[31] Ibid.

Entertainment for Domestic Audiences Only: a Niche Opportunity

By contrast to Egyptian entertainment productions, those of most other Arab countries receive little attention beyond their borders. This does not mean that they are less important as a potential focus of American engagement. To the contrary, collaboration in more localized entertainment projects presents the opportunity to address domestic issues with greater precision. In ventures that aim to move beyond the Population Media Center's less controversial themes and address complicated sociopolitical issues, such precision becomes especially important.

Algeria, long one of the region's more closed societies, provides a case in point. It is a country in which widespread feelings of despair lie beneath a thin veneer of patriotism. The national mood is painfully captured in Merzak Allouache's film *Harragas* [Illegal Immigrants], which was banned by the state but viewed via the Internet in living rooms across the country.[32] It tells the story of four young men who risk their lives to smuggle themselves into Europe. The film opens with a suicide by one of their friends. He has left a note explaining that although he can no longer bear to live in the country, he does not wish to die by drowning on a broken boat to France. The movie ends with the death of most of his friends, as he had predicted. All the film's protagonists repeatedly convey the feeling that they are helpless in the face of dark forces that control their country — in their view, a regime beyond repair.[33]

Harraga's storyline reflects a tragic trend: In 2015, 1,273 Algerians sought to enter Europe illegally and 250 died along the way — a number roughly on par with the number of

[32] Fayiza Suisa (Algerian sociologist) in correspondence with the author, February 2014-August 2014.
[33] Donda Hart Were. "Harragas De Merzak Allouache Le Film Complét." YouTube video, 53:10. January 5, 2015, accessed online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cz5hXVssV0

Algerians who joined ISIS the same year. As in Egypt, drug addiction has become a national pandemic and incidents of murder and rape have spiked. Political participation is largely the province of elites: Though there are 156 parties in the country, most have fewer than 2,000 members. As to how young people understand these trends, the distrust in state institutions depicted in the film is borne out by numbers: According to the global index of corruption, which rates countries on the basis of how corrupt their populations *think* their government is, Algeria ranks the tenth worst in the world.

Local television networks do produce a variety of sitcoms and dramas, on budgets that are exceptionally low by regional standards. The country's distinctive Arabic vernacular is not easily understood by Arabs in Egypt, the Levant, or the Gulf. In neighboring Morocco, where the dialect is similar, the intense animosity between the two states renders Algerian content unappealing, whatever its quality. Meanwhile, Algerian channels import the programs that enjoy the most popularity in all Arab countries, particularly those created by the Saudi-owned juggernaut MBC, together with Egyptian and Syrian productions.[34]

As to the domestic programs, they face far greater restrictions on the subject matter they are free to cover. Depictions of Islamist extremists only rarely pass through government censors. Corruption and oligarchy are also red lines. Social problems such as drug addiction, and cultural problems such as intolerance of the other — both of which have become acceptable fare for Egyptian plot lines — are explored by inference and innuendo.[35] What remains to present is a combination of slapstick and shallow plot-lines. The 2012 season of *Djemai Family*, a long-running serial dramedy, centers around a college graduate's chronic unemployment, a problem attributed to his laziness as opposed to the weak state of the Algerian economy.[36] In an episode of the drama *Asrar al-Madhi* [Secrets of the Past], a twenty-something down on his luck secretly enters his brother's apartment,

[34] Fatma Zohre Zammoom (Algerian filmmaker) in discussion with the author in Paris, July 13, 2014.
[35] Afaf Belhouchet, interview.
[36] DZAIR TV. "Djemai Family 2 - Episode 1." YouTube video, 26:13. July 25, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANlmOhzMXBY.

unearths a loaded pistol from his drawer, and struggles over whether to steal and sell it. Why does his brother own the gun? Has he joined a jihadist group? Is he a member of a crime gang? Presumably the screenwriter wished to raise such questions, but he either hesitated to answer them or lost the scenes that did on the cutting room floor.[37]

A partial exception to these stringent limits is the latitude enjoyed by the producers of *Qahwat al-Gusto*, a half-hour weekly political satire featuring impersonations of the country's leaders — even the president himself. But the nature of the spoof rarely goes beyond their idiosyncratic mannerisms, as opposed to their policies or personal vices.[38] Slightly more daring are comedy shorts produced online by young people. "DZ Joker," for example, created a video about the presidential elections, in which people of all ages, watching a public service announcement about the importance of voting, laugh uncontrollably.[39] These two exceptions — one, a satire without substance; the other, a timid online dig at the system unsanctioned by censors — amount to exceptions that prove the rule.[40]

This is the climate in which the movie *Harraga*, telling the story of four young Algerian men who risk their lives to smuggle themselves into Europe, was rejected by censors but spread virally through bootleg copies on DVD. Even that film shied away from exploring the political circumstances that feed into the desperation the men in the story experienced. But in breaking the taboo on the phenomenon of illegal emigration, the movie tapped into enormous pent-up demand.

The one form of entertainment produced on a consistently high budget is the genre of historical dramas about Algerian history — in particular, the war to end French occupation,

[37] Fayiza Suisa, correspondence.
[38] Jamal al-Din Talib, interview.
[39] Dzjoker Chemsou. "DZjoker : Le VOTE en Algerie." YouTube video, 7:57. February 28, 2014, accessed online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OsIQtZ0x_w.
[40] Fayiza Suisa, correspondence.

led by the FLN (Front Liberacion Nacional), which has ruled the country ever since. The "Ministry of Mujahideen" — the term for holy warrior, which Algerians use to refer to veterans of the independence war — was established for the expressed purpose of funding such films. In 2011, the government passed a law effectively restricting Algerians from making any movie about Algerian history without formal state approval.[41] The films which the government does approve and fund predictably glorify the FLN and vilify the French, with a particular focus on those French soldiers who went on to emerge as political leaders in their country. Witness the 2013 Oscar-nominated drama *Zabana!*, backed by the Mujahideen ministry, which tells the story of a resistance fighter who was executed by French soldiers during the war. In a dramatic scene featured in the movie's trailer, a committee of French colonels votes on whether to end the policy of executing Algerian resistance fighters. The camera zooms in on a young Francois Mitterand — a future prime minister — as he pointedly votes "no."[42]

Such movies, which serve to reinforce the prestige of the ruling party by "waving the bloody shirt," enjoy a large audience in France, where the plot lines advance the society's ongoing effort to grapple with its collective guilt as a former occupying power.[43] But they make no effort to foster equivalent introspection in Algeria about the excesses of the country's resistance, such as the targeting of French children in terrorist attacks or the mass slaughter of rival Algerian factions, not to mention noncombatant Algerian loyalists to the French. In an essay on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Algerian independence in 2012, Bernard-Henri Lévy recounts a conversation with an FLN leadership figure, Zohra Drif, who as a teenager during the war participated in the infamous "Milk Bar Incident," in which French children were killed. Drif justified her actions by insisting that the children were "'party' to a 'system' of global exploitation." Lévy argues that in light of the decades of

[41] Said Khatibi. "Algerian Filmmaker Merzak Allouache Struggles with Censorship After Long Career." *Al-Akhbar English*, November 23, 2011, accessed online: http://bit.ly/1McX9hB.
[42] TIFF. "ZABANA! Trailer | Festival 2012." YouTube video, 2:40. August 14, 2012, accessed online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNxhJz035-8.
[43] Iman al-Humud (Broadcaster, Radio Monte Carlo) in discussion with the author in Paris, June 13, 2014.

bloody repression that followed independence, it is in the interest of Algeria, too, to come to terms with its history. The country is ruled, he says, by a "dictatorship linked to the falsification of history whose dark side has been whitewashed … [and which] strangles liberty," using "the crimes of colonialism [as] the eternal excuse." He concludes, "Democracy in Algeria … must begin with memory."[44]

Judging from the popularity of *Harragas*, an Algerian movie about the war that indeed fosters introspection would generate intense interest in the country. But whereas in Egypt, investing in an entertainment production can be justified on the basis of profit alone, Algerian censors virtually ensure that no provocative film or program can be legally marketed in the country. Thus philanthropic funding would be necessary to enable such a production. But for any filmmaker who would dare produce it, non-profit support is barely available: By contrast to Morocco — in which, as noted previously, the film industry receives considerable grant aid from France — Algeria is "perhaps the least funded film industry in the Arab world," says local filmmaker Fatima Zohra Zamoum.[45] So while demand is strong in Algeria for entertainment productions with a fresh set of social messages, the opportunity cannot be seized without new sources of support.

Another example of a relatively insular Arab entertainment industry is that of the tiny Gulf kingdom of Bahrain. A Shi'ite-majority country ruled by a Sunni royal elite, it has at times witnessed sectarian strife, exacerbated by Iranian-backed proxies aiming to sow division on the one hand, and royalist conservatives adopting an outlook of Sunni supremacism on the other. Yet since the country's independence in 1971, Bahraini royals have also welcomed into their court a small community of Sunni liberals. They promoted the view that on the one hand, if Bahrain developed a culture conducive to the pursuit of egalitarian policies, it could provide a model for larger Arab countries with their own, similar problems — but if

[44] Bernard-Henri Lévy. "When Algeria, Like France, Looks Its Past in the Face." *Huffington Post*, June 4, 2012. http://huff.to/1IZ5CNB.
[45] Fatma Zohre Zammoom (Algerian filmmaker) in discussion with the author in Paris, July 13, 2014.

on the other hand it failed to do so, the monarchy would devolve into a state of sectarian apartheid.[46]

One Bahraini elite who shared this concern was movie director Ahmad al-Ajami. His 1972 film *Ghadan Alqak* ("I'll Meet You Tomororrow") adapts *Romeo and Juliet* in Bahraini dialect, with Shi'ite Capulets and Sunni Montagues. The film inspired a meaningful discussion, expressed publicly in the country's public affairs programming, over what political, cultural, and economic measures could be taken to help address the social problems for which the star-crossed lovers served as a metaphor.[47]

The idealistic tradition of Bahraini filmmaker Ahmad al-'Ajami continued to find expression through a later period of sectarian conflict, between 1994 and 1999. In the Ramadan season of 1998, Bahraini television aired a 30-part drama by screenwriter Jassim Jaseem, *Sa'dun.* Set in the early 1960s under British rule, it tells the story of a poor Shi'ite boy who runs away from home, fleeing the dysfunction of his family, and seeks the kindness of strangers. He falls in with a mixed ethnic group of boys — one, from his looks, the descendant of East African slaves; another from the community of Sunnis who also live on the margins of society. A Sunni schoolteacher befriends Sa'dun, helps him learn to read, and teaches him to become a Bahraini nationalist — in the sense of setting his eyes on a future free of the British. A Christian mother of three shows him how love and forgiveness can bring a broken family back together. Sa'dun repairs his own life and returns to his parents with the wisdom of Bahrain's diverse society. He becomes a pillar of strength for them, and a symbol of national unity.[48] The series is commonly regarded in Bahrain as the country's seminal narration of identity. Airing shortly before Prince Hamad's coronation as

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[46] Abdullah al-Madani (Professor of Asian studies, advisor to Bahraini king Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa) in a series of discussions with the author in Manama and Dubai, between January 2006 and January 2013.
[47] Muhammad Matar (broadcaster, Lu'Lu'a channel) in discussion with the author in London, June 29, 2014.
[48] MrSafwaTV. "Sa'dun al-Halaqa 1 [Sa'dun episode 1]." YouTube video, 29:28. April 28, 2013, accessed online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cL0_LqwVCrw.

King in early 1999, it helped acculturate many Sunnis to the principle of noblesse oblige as the leadership called for a new, brighter chapter in domestic affairs.[49]

Shi'ite critics of Bahraini drama have much to say about the vision of Bahraini unity which the program apparently wishes to instill. Their grievances begin with the fact that the program locates the problems of Bahraini society as originating in the Shi'ite community: the weakness of its family structure, its detachment from Arab nationalism. Elites come across as guardian angels, each embodying a universal message, and only Sa'dun and his family are placed under the microscope.[50] Never mind the historical revisionism that grants the Sunnis of Bahrain, who parted amicably with the British on the basis of a "treaty of friendship," a place in the annals of post-colonial resistance. It is inherently problematic, moreover, to use a foreign adversary as the basis for constructing a national identity.[51] Yet 15 years after its debut, in rerunning the program amid the acrid polarization of post-Arab Spring Bahrain, the government accessed the longing of elites, as well as some members of the underclass, for a restoration of civil peace.[52] A February 2014 article by columnist Abd al-Aziz al-Khudair in the daily newspaper *Al-Watan* asked, "Shall the days of Sa'dun return? … Bahrain has been a symbol and a model of love and mutual understanding for the region, thanks to the honest, decency, and forbearance of its people. But in recent years, with the rupture in our social fabric, we have lost our most precious asset."[53]

Subsequent entertainment productions indeed attempted to reflect the spirit of unity Khudair called for, broadening it to the vision of a unity that spans the Gulf. But it was again the unity of resistance to a common enemy. Witness the children's cartoon, *Heroes of the Gulf* ("Abtal al-Khalij") — a Bahraini adaptation of Marvel Comics' *The Avengers*, starring a

[49] Mansoor al-Jamri, interview.
[50] Muhammad Matar (broadcaster, Lu'Lu'a channel) in discussion with the author in London, June 29, 2014. Yasir al-Sayigh (CEO, Lu'Lu'a channel) in discussion with the author in London, June 29, 2014.
[51] Adil Marzuq, interview.
[52] Iman al-Humud (Broadcaster, Radio Monte Carlo) in discussion with the author in Paris, June 13, 2014.
[53] 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Khudhayr. "Hal Ya'awd Zaman Sa'dun? [Will the Time of Sa'dun Return?]" *Al-Watan*, February 13, 2014.

team of six, each with a flag, a costume, and a superpower, under the banner of “Unity in Strength.” They eviscerate monsters that have breached their borders, and poisonous snakes lurking within their own desert sands. They also team up and converge on Arab lands more distant — blocking a missile headed for the pyramids of Egypt, for example.[54]

In sum, both the Algerian and Bahraini examples reflect the presence of liberal television and film producers who have sought to influence the public discussion in constructive ways. At the same time, they speak to the limitations of such efforts. In the Algerian case, an extreme form of state control over entertainment makes it necessary for divergent voices to make their movies and distribute them for home screening only. In the Bahraini example, no such phenomenon of emigre entertainment exists, while the domestic productions have been rare and problematic. Yet in both cases, there is something to build on: talented artists and a motivation to stir positive change.

[54] Phoenizmpa. “Muqaddimat Musalsal al-Mughamarat al-Kartuni Abtal al-Khalij: Fi ‘l-Ittihad Quwwa [Opening to the Cartoon Adventure Series ‘Heroes of the Gulf’: In Unity Is Strength].” YouTube video, 1:01. June 30, 2013, accessed online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8qTX9uYbMQ.

Hollywood-Arab Partnerships, Forged by Social Entrepreneurship

By contrast to the Population Media Center, a small number of other American NGOs have managed to enter Arab entertainment markets bearing bold social agendas. Their efforts stem from a school of thought about American-Arab media engagement dating back to policy debates following the September 11, 2001 tragedies. As the introductory chapter noted, these attacks spawned a substantial investment in waging public diplomacy by means of a U.S.-operated pan-Arab television channel. But the same drive to counter the region's toxic media messaging that spawned the channel also inspired an alternative American approach to strategic communications in the region, sometimes referred to as the "partnership approach." It argued that for a fraction of the cost of maintaining a regional satellite channel, the U.S. could reach a larger Arab audience by collaborating with indigenous media outlets. That is, where local broadcasters wanted to make common cause in spreading a positive social message, Americans could help them by imparting expertise, co-producing shows, and otherwise investing in local liberal media capacities.[55] Such work would differ from the assistance which groups like the National Endowment for Democracy gave to nascent democratic media ventures: in order to reach the largest possible audience, it would be necessary to engage outlets owned or dominated by authoritarian elites. Doing so became feasible after Arab states set out to enact positive cultural reforms for the sake of their own stability. As noted earlier, in the wake of Al-Qaeda attacks in Arab countries between 2002 and 2005, autocrats allied with the U.S. began to introduce the ideals of tolerance, civil society, and a more constructive form of nationalism via media, schools, and mosques. A decade later, in the age of ISIS, they intensified such efforts. So from an American standpoint, there appeared to be enough overlap between

[55] Edward P. Djerejian, Changing Minds, Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World, U.S. Department of State, 2003, 32, https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/24882.pdf (accessed 11/18/18).

the autocrats' drive for change and the principles Americans championed to justify cooperation.

A leader in this approach with regard to broadcasting, Washington-based America Abroad Media, aimed to "empower and support local voices that convey universal values through creative content and media programming." With support from the U.S. Government and private donors, the group co-produced "town hall" programs, documentaries, and reportage with outlets in several Arab and Muslim countries. Airing on indigenous radio and television, some served to demystify the United States, while others broached local issues including corruption, the subjugation of women, and the need for a culture of tolerance. Some content helped foster a more honest discussion of Jews or Israel. For example, a 2008 episode of the Al-Arabiya talk show *Panorama*, produced with assistance from AAM in Washington, hosted Ziad Asali, President of the American Task Force on Palestine, and Israeli diplomat Jeremy Issacharoff, then Deputy Chief of Mission at the Israeli embassy in Washington, for a friendly discussion about the status of peace efforts. A 2012 town hall in Tunisia, co-produced by AAM and the local TV channel Al-Tunisia, enabled Jacob Lellouche, a member of the country's small Jewish community, to join representatives from each of Tunisia's ethnic and religious denominations for a discussion about minority rights.[56] As with the finer examples of TV productions in the prior segment on "bottom-up" efforts, these programs worked within the constraints laid down by the ownership of a given outlet to nudge the conversation forward.

AAM later sought to adapt its approach for entertainment programming. In 2017, the organization's president, Aaron Lobel, joined Paula Dobriansky, a former undersecretary of state, in calling on the U.S. Government to "provide catalytic funding to help compensate for the limitations of the Middle East television market … [by assisting] visionaries who understand that the best response to extremism is programming that inspires and

[56] Aaron Lobel, President, America Abroad Media, in conversation with the author in Washington, DC, August 28, 2018.

empowers their predominantly young audiences."[57] The case for doing so at the time stemmed from a desire in Washington to see Arab allies use their media to more forcefully denigrate and marginalize ISIS. Lobel convened a series of educational workshops in Arab countries in which seasoned Hollywood screenwriters and producers provided mentorship to their Arab counterparts. He built a substantial network of entertainment industry movers spanning Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, North Africa, and the Levant.[58]

Powerful Arab media outlets responded favorably to the kind of outreach Lobel advocated — including those with a history of producing antisemitic content. For example, one of the networks that welcomed partnership with Hollywood to counter ISIS was Saudi-owned MBC. In March 2017, Ali Jaber, the network's director of programming, came to the U.S. State Department to deliver the keynote address at the Ministerial Plenary for the Global Coalition Working to Defeat ISIS. "We look at ISIS as an idea, a narrative — a dangerous one. We believe that the only way to beat that idea is to create another one that is better, more appealing, and progressive." Jaber said he welcomed investment and assistance from the United States, but also conveyed a reservation: "What we look to Hollywood for is to teach us the craft of storytelling, not to produce for us ideas of their own."[59]

Between 2017 and 2020, while honing its approach to Arab entertainment media as a nonprofit organization, AAM also launched a for-profit spinoff, Black Birch Entertainment — a "Hollywood production company … [dedicated to] purpose-driven stories for, about, and from the Middle East and Muslim communities around the world."[60] Its initial projects included a co-production with award-winning Egyptian director Marwan Hamed — a historical drama about the leader of the violent twelfth-century Islamic splinter cult known

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[57] Paula J. Dobriansky and Aaron Lobel, "How TV Can Help Fight ISIS," Politico, March 21, 2017, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/tv-islamic-state-isis-214933 (accessed 11/18/18).
[58] Aaron Lobel, President, America Abroad Media, in conversation with the author in Washington, DC, August 28, 2018.
[59] Cynthia P. Schneider, "Can Good Television Beat the Islamic State?" Foreign Policy, April 7, 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/07/can-good-television-beat-the-islamic-state-mbc/ (accessed 11/18/18).
[60] https://www.blackbirchentertainment.com/

as the Assassins (Hashshashiyin). Chronicling “the earliest example of and inspiration for terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS,” the project promised to chip away at the terrorists’ case for followers by exposing the bankruptcy of their ancient roots.[61]

The promise of AAM and Black Birch reflects the fact that in Cairo, as elsewhere in the region, some writers and producers are both favorably disposed and politically enabled to partner with Americans in promoting a salubrious social message. The leadership of the country, for its part, welcomes foreign partnerships that may help restore the Egyptian film industry to the size and prowess of its golden age. Americans have only scratched the surface of this opportunity. Nor have they connected with the likes of Algerian creative talent, who have found enormous pent-up demand for productions such as *Harragas* which start a conversation about problems long swept under the carpet. Bernard-Henri Lévy rightly calls for greater honesty in Algerian discourse, whereby the “crimes of colonialism” cease to be “the external excuse” for an oligarchy “whose dark side has been whitewashed.”[62] Supporting efforts to do so through the media can serve to help pry open an important, closed society.

In sum, Americans have an opportunity to participate in “entertainment education” projects reaching a a pan-Arab audience through the entertainment capitals of Cairo and the Gulf, as well as access more intimate audiences through local partnerships from Algeria to Bahrain. Arab production studios are a vital field of engagement for American expeditionary diplomacy.

[61] https://www.blackbirchentertainment.com/our-work
[62] Bernard-Henri Lévy. “When Algeria, Like France, Looks Its Past in the Face.” *Huffington Post*, June 4, 2012, accessed online: http://huff.to/1IZ5CNB.