

Strategic Sectors | **Culture & Society**

# Arab Series: Between the Globality of Netflix and Local Specificity

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The phenomenon of global series as we know them today is unprecedented in recent times... in the West. In the Arab world, *musalsalat ramadaniya*, the television series produced for the month of fasting, have been bringing families together around the television screen for decades, especially since the advent of satellite dishes in the 1990s. Culture, confession, civilization... These series inject entertainment, current events, controversy into the religious framework of Ramadan, when the bulk of Arab series are produced. Premieres are anticipated across generations, their viewing shared like any other ritual. As a family, with friends, whether traditional, trendy or new... all have their place in this month, and the social expectation they generate, in particular, is outstanding.

Beyond this sense of co-existence and religious seclusion, the *musalsalat* have also become a huge business, burgeoning from a handful of series to the 172 Arab productions released in Ramadan 2022, led by the Egyptians, with 36 series. The problem goes beyond the eternal debate over what to watch in the traditional television session after *iftar*, the breaking of the fast, as one would need 86 hours a day to watch all the episodes. First satellite channels and now online pay TV platforms have made it possible for the productions to reach many more homes, causing advertising and

subscription businesses to proliferate. Of course, critical voices have been raised, as they have with other religious celebrations, such as Christmas, in which a religious holiday has been transformed into a consumerist free-for-all. The advertising spots shot and interspersed throughout the series during the month are basically for three types of products: food, as, it is worth recalling, Ramadan is one of the culinary highlights of the year; consumer goods, such as cars or homes, often luxury ones, which, in turn, has spawned an array of memes and parodies on social media; and religious and charitable causes seeking to convince viewers to fulfil their obligation to pay zakat with them, although some question this strategy given the high cost of these slots. According to a report by the magazine *Al Mal*, in Egypt, for example, one minute of advertising time costs between 25,000 and 62,000 euros, depending on the series or programme in which it is aired. The actors' salaries are also high, ranging from the 45 million Egyptian pounds (2.3 million euros) earned by Mohamed Ramadan or the 27 million (1.3 million euros) commanded by the indefatigable actress Yousra to the 20 million taken home by the stars of *Al Ikhtiyar* (راييت خيال). The stratospheric figures for the Egyptian series, which have an enormous Arab market, stand in sharp contrast with local productions, such as the season's breakout success in Morocco, *L'Maktoub* (ليوتكفملا), whose total budget amounted to one million euros.

## Controversy Compounded by the Boundlessness of Social Media

In the past, it was the censorship of the iron-fisted Arab regimes that forced screenwriters to use eu-

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phemisms and metaphors to talk about certain topics. Today, in addition to these institutions, the public at large and powerful opinion-shaping groups can push censorship bodies to redouble their zeal to avoid not only political but social controversies. Hence the return to the concept of *al-sinima al-na-zifa* (نفيظنلا امنيسلا), or “clean cinema,” which triumphed in the 1980s and 1990s and consists of not filming any scene featuring contact or kissing between men and women. Interestingly, these decisions are made in response to the demands not of the script but of A-list actors, such as Ahmed Zaher or Ahmed Helmy, who explained he would no longer shoot such scenes so as not to make viewers uncomfortable and so his series could be watched by the whole family together. On screen, this results in contrived moments in which not even married couples touch or kiss each other. This puritanical trend runs counter to the massive access the Arab population has to all kinds of international audiovisual content with explicit sex scenes.

Transcending the fluctuations of these trends, the controversy seems to be stoked each season, especially as both healthy debate and noise are infinitely amplified in the digital ecosystem. Anything can become the focus of debate, including how history is told, as happened this year with the series *Fath al-Andalus* (سلا دنال احاتف), about the conquest of Al-Andalus. This series perfectly exemplifies the Arab globalization of such projects, with Syrian screenwriters, a Kuwaiti director, Middle Eastern leads, and a viewership that stretches across the Arab world. The dispute reached the Moroccan courts, where it was claimed that the series offers a distorted and negative image of the Amazighs’ role in the conquest compared to the leading role played by the Arabs, with detractors noting that Tareq Ibn Ziyad’s Amazigh origins were ignored. However, there is also an ongoing debate surrounding the attempts to rewrite more recent history, such as the Egyptian intelligence services’ project, via their audiovisual company Synergy, the series *Al Ikhtiyar*. Whilst the last two seasons in a certain sense sought to whitewash the human rights violations committed by the security forces during the years of the Egyptian Revolution (2011-2013), the third season, which premiered in Ramadan 2022, can easily be interpreted as propagandistic praise of the current Egyptian President and the process that culminated in his

2013 coup, which, as is well known, has kept him in power ever since.

This controversy also extends to social issues, as with the 2021 Tunisian hit *Harga* (فقرح), which offers a view of illegal immigration from the South. Other topics that have been subject to heated debate this Ramadan include polygamy and sexual relations in Tunisia, as a result of *Baraa* (فءارب), or, in Egypt, the relationships between teenagers and their parents in *Meen qal* (لاق نيم). The Moroccan public channel 2M’s success with *L’Maktoub* (with an average daily viewership of 7 million, plus 5 million more on *You-Tube*), about a *sheikha* (folk singers and dancers who perform at parties and weddings) likewise came under fire on social media, with some questioning whether it was appropriate fare for the holy month. In another country, Algeria, the provocative sexual content of *Hab Mlouk* (كلملما بح) was deemed inappropriate for this time of purification. About women and religion, the Egyptian show *Faten Amal Harby* (ناتاف\_فءالاولا#), which trended on social media (يبرح لماري), also sparked controversy due to its indictment, in which it included Al Azhar, the highest religious institution, of the legal hurdles faced by divorced women as a result of an unfair family law, especially when it comes to obtaining custody of children.

## Powerful opinion-shaping groups can push censorship bodies to redouble their zeal to avoid not only political but social controversies

### Enter the Platforms

Just as it seemed like the offer of hundreds of Arab satellite channels had exceeded the ceiling of the Arab market, Netflix appeared with a new business and production model to incorporate even more diversity into the Arab series market. The forecasts ran the full gamut, from those who predicted the end of Arab channels in the face of the American platform’s Westernized globalizing offer to those who augured its utter failure, assuring that it lacked both the room and enduring products to cater to the idiosyncrasies of the Arab market. Ultimately, neither was true. To-

day, Arab series produced for the Arab world co-exist alongside series created by Netflix from the Arab world for its globalized market.

Although the Arab market of subscription platforms is still a small minority, with just 10 million subscribers, it is expected to reach 30 million by 2026, according to estimates by the consulting firm Dataxis,<sup>2</sup> in keeping with the 30% growth registered between 2020 and 2021.

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The two subscription platforms competing for most of the market are Netflix and the Saudi Shahid VIP, which has more than two million subscribers. The impact of the entry in the Arab world of Disney+, which made its debut there on 8 June 2022, has yet to be quantified. The aforementioned Saudi platform belongs to the MBC media holding group, which first began to explore this line of business in 2010 but found that neither the technology nor the market was mature enough. It was not until its remodelling in 2020 that it was able to compete with the international platforms, swiftly emerging as the favourite for *musalsalat*. Other important regional candidates, albeit with less reach, are the Emirati-American Starz Play and, recently, the Bahraini OSN, which has launched a paid online version called OSN Streaming. These internationally oriented brands are joined by other subscription platforms more focused on local productions, such as the Egyptian WATCH IT! or the Tunisian Artify.

What seems clear is that, with this new profit model, these platforms have an audience with a specific profile. As the critic Aml Megdy explained, writing in *Raseef 22*: “The Saudi platform’s managers understand

that the audience for this type of service is different from that for traditional television. The content shown to each audience is thus different, too, at both the screenwriting and production level. These managers tend to push beyond the boundaries imposed by social censorship or the competent authorities.”<sup>3</sup>

And it is this specificity that has made room for groundbreaking series that have sparked debate, clearly depicting at least two conflicting realities in the Arab world: on the one hand, the old conservative patriarchal structure, fuelled by authoritarian regimes backed by the West and the religious establishments most opposed to change, and on the other, the emergence of an eminently young society, open to change and connected to the globalized world, that actively participates in the interconnected online arena. The commitment by a company such as Shahid, with Saudi capital and, on the face of it, considered conservative on issues such as women’s emancipation or sexual relations, to producing certain series is especially striking. Examples include *Nimratitnin* (نيرتيتن), which deals with subjects such as homosexuality or romantic relationships between people of different religions, or, more recently, the Saudi series *Jameel Jedan* (أدمج), which, with a meticulously kitsch production and cinematography, offers an unflattering view of all participating men via caustically humorous criticism of gender violence and women’s lack of economic independence, whilst at the same time showing the new paths that young Saudi women are exploring in a society full of contradictions. Nor have the two seasons of the Egyptian series *Leh Laa?!* (اللاه) been exempt from controversy. In the first season, Amina Khalil, currently one of the most sought-after women actors, takes us to Cairo to explore, in a kind but critical way, thorny and highly topical dilemmas, such as women’s emancipation without the need to go through the vicarage or, in the second season, the adoption of children by single mothers. The Saudi platform has also embraced independent productions, such as the Emmy-nominated miniseries *Beirut 6:07* (6:07 توريب), with its stand-alone

<sup>2</sup> NÉBIÉ, Sa Eva “Can newcomers topple Shahid VIP, Netflix and Starz Play in MEAN?” Dataxis, 2 March 2022. <https://dataxis.com/researches-highlights/536173/can-newcomers-topple-shahid-vip-netflix-and-starz-play-in-mena/>

<sup>3</sup> “بيدجيم لم أ...؟ برعلل ل لضفالا اماردلا رفوي نم... نيرخال فنالك دمدهت “بي نزيدي” 2022. 8 وينوي 22. <https://raseef22.net/article/108799>

<sup>4</sup> MUJTAR, Wiam “Leh la’, el drama de irse de casa.” Fundación Al Fanar, 9 March 2022. [www.fundacionalfanar.org/leh-la-el-drama-de-irse-de-casa/](http://www.fundacionalfanar.org/leh-la-el-drama-de-irse-de-casa/)

ten-minute episodes about the explosion that rocked the Lebanese capital's port on 4 August 2020.

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The entry, in 2016, of Netflix MEAN (Middle East and North Africa) mainly brought its vast international catalogue; it was not until 2018 that it truly began to create its own content. Its first steps included a stand-up comedy show by the Lebanese actor Adel Karam, who would return in other in-house productions, such as *Dollar* or the platform's first Arab film *Perfect Strangers*. In 2019, the platform produced its first in-house Arab series *Jinn*, with a teenaged theme and atmosphere. The show immerses viewers in a well-woven adventure plot with a touch of fantasy and a hint of romance and relationships between the young people that gave rise to a series of controversies that have, for now, made a second season impossible. Naturally, not all Netflix productions have been controversial. In addition to the aforementioned *Dollar*, the Egyptian *Paranormal* or the Saudi *Whispers* have streamed on the Arab version of the platform without raising the hackles of those who accuse it of seeking to impose Western values and evade the traditions of Arab societies. Notwithstanding these

accusations, it is clear that the two platforms' idiosyncrasy gives them a number of specificities or advantages vis-à-vis their rivals. Although Netflix does not capture the dimension of Arab historical and cultural heritage reflected in local productions, it has nevertheless achieved a balance between Arab specificity and the international dimension through the work of brilliant directors such as Tima Shomali in *AlRawabi School for Girls* or Hend Sabry in *Finding Ola*, whose series, in addition to topping the charts in many Arab countries, have been dubbed into more than 30 languages to be offered on Netflix's local platforms in more than 190 countries. As the critic Joseph Fahim has pointed out, one of the keys may be that, by steering clear of the battle over the Ramadan series, they have also freed themselves of the constraints imposed by the format. According to Fahim, "The 30-episode format – one for each day of Ramadan – remains a major hindrance for those forced to write, shoot and edit the equivalent of two American seasons in less than a year. As a result, shows suffer from fluctuating tempos, lop-sided writing, and discernible clumsiness."<sup>5</sup>

For audiovisual fiction, and art in general, gives rise to universal human thoughts and feelings. Thus, when they are artistically transformed with local means, with original stories and home-grown fictional realities, they elicit a response of, on the one hand, curiosity regarding what is different and, on the other, the empathy of identification, of feeling seen. Every space (and every time) has a story to tell as well, to break paradigms and cross red lines, often based on comedy, and thus generating smiles, closeness and complicity. A path that, despite the controversies and media noise, is expanding horizons one season at a time. Linking entertainment such as *musalsalat* with the month of fasting and reflection in Islam is an updating of customs that clearly results in one of the essential values: sharing.

<sup>5</sup> FAHIM, Joseph. "Six things we learned from Arab TV shows this Ramadan." *Middle East Eye*, 6 May 2022. [www.middleeasteye.net/discover/ramadan-arab-tv-shows-six-things-learned](http://www.middleeasteye.net/discover/ramadan-arab-tv-shows-six-things-learned)