

## Contentious history in 'Egyptian' television: The case of *Malek Farouq*

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*Abstract:* This article asks what happens when the construction of national identity escapes national boundaries. Using an example from an Egyptian-Arabic televisual production, *Malek Farouq*, a biopic soap opera that narrates the life of the much reviled last king of Egypt, this article argues that changes in the production, distribution and consumption of media in the Arabic-speaking Middle East are contributing to a restructuring of various forms of cultural identity. The move from a nationally-centred regime of broadcasting, with its official regimes of truth, to a regional and transnational flow of television in multiple languages from multiple subjectivities is transforming ideas of communal identity. The principal argument of this article is that economic and technological changes in Arabic media production are inseparable from and have led to and stemmed from significant political and social transformations in contemporary Arab life.

In the second episode of the Arabic language serial *Malek Farouq* (Ali, 2007) the title character, Prince Farouq of Egypt, cries himself to sleep. The sobbing ten-year old finds himself trapped and friendless within the lavishly appointed confines of his 1930s palace bedroom, after his father, the authoritarian King Fuad, becomes enraged with him for consorting with the commoners of the palace staff. As the screen fades to black, it is the first time since 1952 in Egyptian-oriented popular media that the historical Farouq (1920-1965) has been depicted in anything other than a profoundly negative light.

This article seeks to relate the serial, a material claim on 'true' Egyptian history with its attendant articulations of national and political identity, to the ontological historical transformations in the Egyptian nation, particularly in the area of broadcasting. In this sympathetic portrayal of the most reviled Egyptian leader in the twentieth century, we see a wildly popular televisual articulation of the Egyptian nation that was created outside the ideologically contained boundaries of Egyptian national broadcasting, and explicitly focuses on the political antithesis of the then current military and political regime. What I hope to show here is that contemporary global communications evaporate the easy

linkages between nation state and national identity. As national narratives slip out of the once-sure hands of national states, long-deflected questions of political, national and cultural identity re-enter the cultural sphere. But just as *Malek Farouq*, in its production and narrative, is an indeterminate blend of nationalist, modernist, post-modernist and globalist ideas, so too is there no guarantee of fixed social meaning in the new regime of contemporary Arab broadcasting. With over four hundred satellite channels aimed at Arabs from multiple national and global production companies, with the rise of social media and information distribution over the internet and telephony, with the cacophony of nationalist, Islamist and ‘foreign’ claims to ontological reality, the only abiding feature of contemporary electronic communication in the Arab world is dissonance.

In order to draw out *Malek Farouq*’s relevance to contemporary transformations and its subtle restatement of modern Egyptian history, we must highlight the political, economic and cultural structures within which it was able to make meaning. It is in the contemporary transformation of Egyptian and Arab politics, the regional and global media economy and the cultural codes that provide individuals with clues to shared meaning that this programme takes on resonance as an indication and material example of structural changes that are affecting the entire globe.

After describing the series, this article will use *Malek Farouq* to trace the important transformations in contemporary Arab social life with a particular focus on the relationship between Egyptian/Arab media structures and regional/global economics.

### ***Malek Farouq*, the series**

*Malek Farouq* was produced in 2007 for broadcast during the Ramadan season, the prime timeframe for televisual serials, which in that year fell between September 13 and October 12. It starred the Syrian actor Tayyim Hassan in the lead role. It also featured the Egyptian A-list actors Salah Abdallah, Ezzat Abu Aouf, Nabil Al Khalfawi, and Wafaa Amer. The entire cast, including extras, ran into the hundreds. The 32-episode show was written by Dr Lamis Gaaber, a female Egyptian pediatrician and wife of the A-list Egyptian actor Yahia Fakhraani. It was directed by the successful Syrian television director Haatim Ali. The show is listed as a production of Al Sadaf Productions from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. It was also partially financed and distributed by the Middle East Broadcast Center, a Dubai-based satellite broadcaster led by chairman and CEO Sheikh Waleed Bin Ibrahim Al Brahim, himself a member of the Saudi royal family.

The images of the opening credits presage the story, offering chronological scenes from the series including Farouq as a boy and various dramatic and conflictual moments of his life as prince and king of Egypt. These opening credits emphasize the quality, and thus perhaps the authority of the show in multiple

ways: the lavish locations, lighting and costumes; the sweeping, martial music; the fame and skill of the actors; and the depth and breadth of the Egyptian history about to be offered.

The series entered a contentious discursive environment before it was broadcast due to the controversial nature of the historical figure it depicts, the source of its funding from Saudi Arabia as well as the participation of Syrians at the highest levels of production. In addition to the nationalist implications of Syrian participation in Egyptian cultural production, Syrian involvement may have caused anxiety in the Egyptian television market due to the perceived quality of Syrian-branded productions. Prior to the civil war, Syrian historical dramas, including those directed by Hatim Ali such as *Saladin* (Ali 2001) enjoyed regional success and were marked by high production values and quality scripts. As a result, Ali and other Syrian directors are perceived as having changed the standards of Arabic serials. For example, Wafaa Amer, one of the stars of *Malek Farouq*, contentiously told a newspaper that Egyptian productions had a lot to learn from Syrian productions in terms of attention to detail on the set, make-up and costumes (Amer 2007).

With an estimated budget of LE20 million Egyptian pounds (approximately \$4 million) (*Farouk of Egypt*) *Malek Farouq* had markedly high production values in comparison to many low-budget Egyptian serials which are often filmed with budgets of under \$500k. In terms of acting, sound design, lighting, costumes, set design, location choices and music the show could be compared favorably with equivalent international productions.

These high production values were met with critical acclaim as the show went on to sweep the Cairo Arab Media Festival in 2007 in the category of Ramadan series. Farouq actor Tayyim Hassan won best actor, Lamis Gaaber won best screenplay, Haatim Ali won best director, Salah Abdallah won best supporting actor, Shirin won best emerging actress, Ahmed Ibrahim Ahmed won best lighting, and Tarik Nasser won for best music (Al Arabiyya 2007)

But the most surprising element of the series was its subject. In the iconography of post 1952 revolutionary Egyptian nationalism, the historical Farouq had become a symbol for the excesses of the previous political era. The image and name of Farouq came to stand for the corruption and self-interest of the old capitalist and colonialist order to oust which Gamal Abdel Nasser and the free officers initiated their 1952 revolution. Farouq was often portrayed as a corpulent glutton, an alcoholic, and a licentious pursuer of young women, and books were written on his life with titles such as *His Last Days: The Story of the King who Sold himself to Satan* (Sallam 1972) and *Farouq the First: The King Who Betrayed Everyone* (Thabit 1989).

In contrast, *Malek Farouq* was broadcast on the Middle East Broadcast Center (MBC) satellite channel for thirty-one consecutive days in 2007 during the

Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the high season of Arabic television broadcasting. It contextualized a nuanced character who, while flawed, seemed to have the best interests of his country at heart. In the episodes, his corpulence, long a consciously unflattering aspect of his depiction, was subtly attributed not to the debased gluttony of his 'true' character but to the anxieties of emotional bereavement and the intense pressures of national responsibility. The series depicted the trials and tribulations, the successes and failures of a figure caught in a political struggle between British colonial power-brokers, the nationalist politicians who controlled the Egyptian parliament and the newly-formed Muslim Brotherhood. The series psychologized a leader who loved and felt unloved, who struggled with his mother for affection and political power, and who cowered under the stern gaze of his father the king.

The series is most striking and controversial in its rendering of the national history of Egypt. In a didactic lesson intended to inform the viewers as much as the character of Farouq, the young prince is shown receiving a long Egyptian history lesson. The tutor goes through the history of Egyptian rulers since Muhammed Ali (1769-1849), the first of the contemporary royal dynasty. As the melodramatic music surges Farouq is told:

Muhammed Ali created a modern Egypt. In his reign, Egypt benefited in everything. In production, agriculture, in business, army, navy, higher and primary education. But the problem is what happened to us forty years after his death with the occupation by the English. Definitely the country underwent a renaissance, but not the people. How? Because Muhammed Ali ruled the country with a closed kind of rule. Meaning he was the only one who took decisions and the people never were allowed to have an opinion. They were expected only to listen to his words. The result was that agriculture progressed very much, but the farmer himself was in the dirt. Production increased, but the workers were forced to work. They wanted to flee from the factories. It was a powerful rule, but the Egyptian people have never loved military rule. Education went forward, but the students and their parents were afraid because the soldiers would fall upon them and force them to go to the schools. Because of this, the English entered the country with ease. The army was weak, and their hold over the people was weaker. (Ali 2007) <sup>1</sup>

It is through multiple scenes like this that the nation is consciously articulated in this series. But what kind of nation is being articulated here? Not the nation contemporary to when the production was broadcast on Arab satellite television in 2007, nor the nation that Farouq himself would come to rule in the 1940s, nor the nation extant at the time of the didactic soliloquy, the 1930s. Instead, it is that ideal nation of hopeful nationalists, the kind that lives in the breast but has yet to materialize in history. In some ways this articulation of the nation could be seen to presage the kind of nation that Gamal Abdel Nasser would come to articulate with his 1952 'Arab Socialist revolution'. Nasser opened education to

the Egyptians, ideologically raised the social status of the farmers, and strengthened the army. However, Nasser also 'ruled the country with a closed kind of rule', and took his decisions in the people's name but without the explicit, democratic approval of the people.

This articulation of the nation, being produced outside the nation, is profoundly ambivalent. It can be read by traditional Egyptian nationalists, those educated and brought to consciousness in the wake of the Nasserist transformation of Egypt, as an anti-royalist statement. It could be read by those frustrated with contemporary Egyptian politics and nostalgic for the *ayam zamaan* (good old days) of the king as a representation of what the nation *could have been* without the intervention of 60 years of military rule. In short, this kind of articulation could offend no one and stands a good chance of pleasing most Egyptians.

Homi Bhabha describes this kind of nation when he says it is 'an idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force' (Bhabha 1990, 1). While on the surface the 'text' of *Malek Farouq* presents an inclusive unity of the nation, unifying precisely because it is just and fair to all its citizens, the ambivalence within *Malek Farouq* throws up another kind of nation. It contains discontinuities in which the elite speak in the name of the common people, in which the conflicts that threaten to tear the nation apart (as represented by the violent confrontations between the nationalists, the British and the Muslim Brotherhood) are never fully resolved, and in which the ontological history that lives outside the series proves to us that democracy lost.

*Malek Farouq* thus represents a significant articulation of the Egyptian nation, Egyptian national identity and Egyptian shared moral values, where the production of those ideas is happening in, around and outside of the nation state. In their enjoyment of a retelling of their 'own' national story, Egyptians discovered that Syrians, Saudis, and other Arabs, either through financial investment or direct participation in producing the series, were telling their story to them.

### **Arab media structures and economies: The unintended march towards globalization**

The principal argument of this article is that economic and technological changes in Arabic media production are inseparable from and have led to and stemmed from significant political and social transformations in contemporary Arab life. We can see, in the shift from a singular, state-centred broadcasting regime of truth to a geographically diffused sphere of competing truths on transnational satellites, clues to the transformation of cultural and political subjectivity in the Arabic-speaking world. Benedict Anderson famously proposed that the nation is an imagined community (1991). If what distinguishes the nation, an object of affection or derision, from the state is a *narrative* arc, this widely-

valorized teleology explains, justifies and/or apologizes for the communal *now* in the face of the wild contingency of the random unfolding of time: the nation *is* history. To imagine the nation is to tell its story. To tell the story is to bring the nation into being. To dominate the story is to dominate the nation.

For the second half of the twentieth century, the Egyptian state presented itself as coterminous with the Egyptian nation. Through public education, religious education, through state-sponsored art, film and television and through control over the various mouth-pieces available to it, the Egyptian state *told* the history of the nation, and in the process articulated itself as nation. Much of the valorization of this nation-state was done by making heroes of its political founders, twentieth-century Egyptian nationalists and the military leaders who revolted against the monarchy, and by denigrating its enemies, the former monarchy, the colonial powers and Islamicist rebels.

Given Egyptian television's historic imbrication with the authoritarian Egyptian state, and the fact that the then current regime of Hosni Mubarak traced its political legitimacy directly back to the coup which overthrew Farouq, what had changed to allow a series that poked gaping holes in the official version of history to appear on Egyptian television? How, in other words, did this humanizing portrayal of an officially reviled figure appear on Egyptian screens in the context of a state that is known for being hyper-sensitive to criticism and overly concerned with defining Egyptian history?

The short answer is that serial was not an Egyptian production, at least not in a straightforward sense. While *Malek Farouq* was ultimately broadcast on Egyptian state television, using the Egyptian dialect of Arabic, and with pointedly Egyptian interests at its narrative heart, the show was, like most large-budget contemporary Arab language televisual and filmic output, a transnational production. Written by an Egyptian woman, Lamis Gaber, *Malek Farouq* was directed by a Syrian, the lead role was acted by another Syrian, the production was partially financed by the Middle East Broadcast Center, a pan-Arab satellite broadcaster based in Dubai but with ties to the Saudi ruling family, and was ultimately broadcast on multiple satellite and terrestrial stations throughout the Arabic Middle East and, in fact, the entire world.

Although high quality politically serious drama had been produced for and broadcast on state-controlled Egyptian television before, no programme had ever questioned the received wisdom of state-centered nationalism before. Previous quality programmes, such as *Leyaali al Hilmiyya* (1987-1995) (Abdel Hafez 1987), had tackled contentious subjects in Egyptian history but always from a foundational state-nationalist perspective. Before the satellite era, the only producers with access to the Egyptian market were those legitimated and funded by the Egyptian state. By 2007 the Egyptian state's grip over Egyptian audiences had been loosened.

### Historical transformations in Egyptian broadcasting

The contemporary regime of transnational satellite broadcasting in the Arab world supersedes (though does not entirely eliminate) the state-controlled model of pedagogical broadcasting that dominated Arab broadcasting prior to the mid 1990s. It is important to get a sense of this previous era of broadcasting, especially as regards the use that Gamal Abdel Nasser (and later state regimes) made of state media in inculcating a state-oriented sense of Egyptian nationalism amongst Egyptian viewers and an Egyptian-centered notion of pan-Arabism amongst Arab radio and television audiences. A brief discussion of the history of Egyptian media and its use in creating the discursive conditions of nation, nationality and nationalism, can provide some insight into the trans-national, post-state regime of cultural representation and distribution embodied by contemporary satellite broadcasting and other forms of cultural production and distribution. Although these new media regimes are profoundly different technologically and in their potential transnational reach, they are built on the objective (studios, established flows of financing, narrative strategies) and subjective (talent, ideology) foundations of what came before.

The historically utilitarian use of Egyptian broadcasting shows that, contrary to hyperbolic statements about the transformative novelty of satellite broadcasting, transnational tendencies and regional wills to power being part of the Arab media since its earliest days. Egyptian broadcasting, traced historically, reminds us to be aware of context. Regional expansion, in broadcasting, the economy, or military presence, is not merely a function of technology, but of political will. The players and even the ideology might have changed, but the impulse to construct a pan-Arab audience has its historical antecedents.

With the 1952 Free Officers Revolution Egyptian broadcasting abruptly changed hands from the regime of King Farouq to the revolutionary forces. Although the Egyptian press would not be nationalized until 1960, Egyptian radio was already a state monopoly and was thus property of the revolutionary government from the beginning of the revolution (Boyd 1975, 645). The radio broadcasting headquarters was among the first physical targets of the revolution. Radio became a tool used to interpellate a revolutionary identity among the populations of the Nile Valley. Radio was used to invigorate a sense of nation with many programmes for the first time targeting the *sha'ab* or 'common people' in ways that newspapers, who targeted a literate, cultured elite, never could (Boyd 1975, 647). Nationalist euphoria was then marshalled to create support for controversial government 'reforms' including the nationalization of private land, businesses and the Suez Canal project (Jankowski 2001, 8).

After spending the 1950s consolidating power at home, Nasser turned his ambitions outward and began using broadcasting to diffuse his message of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism to the world at large (Boyd 1975, 648). By 1962, Egyptian radio was broadcasting 140 hours a day of programming on

short- and medium-wave in thirty languages (American University Washington, 1964). Nasser authorized broadcasts to various audiences in line with his philosophy of Egypt being at the heart of the Arab, Muslim, and African ‘circles of influence’ (Nasser et al 1959, 69). He opened Cairo’s radio facilities to (friendly) political opposition figures from within these spheres.

What leaders of target nations would call meddling, Nasser called Egypt’s new vital sphere of influence. In describing this sphere, Nasser used rhetoric that would not seem out of place in contemporary discussions about the internet and satellite television.

The era of isolation is now gone. Gone also are the days when barbed wire marked the frontiers separating and isolating countries. Every country must now look beyond its frontiers to find out from where the currents that affect it spring, how it should live with others. It has become imperative that every country should look around to find out its position and its environment and decide what it can do, what its vital sphere is, where is the scene of its activity and what its positive role can be in this troubled world. (Nasser et al 1959, 53)

Chief among Nasser’s ideological targets were what he called ‘the Arab common people’ (*al sha’ab al ‘arab*), which included the whole Arabic-speaking region. Nasser pursued this audience with the *Sawt al Arab* or ‘Voice of the Arabs’ broadcasts which began service in 1953, shortly after the Egyptian revolution (Boyd 1975, 645). *Sawt al Arab* was broadcast directly to Arabic-speaking nations through massive, capital-intensive transponders. Anticipating satellite broadcasting fifty years later, this was the first time that Arabs were postulated as a cohesive, single audience by electronic broadcasting. However, while many contemporary satellite broadcasters see pan-Arab audiences as a linguistically-bound group of consumers, Nasser’s ‘Voice of the Arabs’ saw them as citizens of an imagined Arab state, individual units of a greater potential political rather than economic power. It was this ideological belief in the greater ‘Arab nation’ that allowed Nasser to declare himself the sole ‘voice of the Arabs.’

In the 1960s the appeal, and unifying power, of *Sawt al Arab* began to wane as other countries in the region began instituting their own broadcasting services and, according to Boyd, audiences began to become more sophisticated about media messages (Boyd 1975, 651). The Egyptian state turned to the new electronic medium of television to spread its messages.

Like radio, it was taken for granted that television was to broadcast and serve a national vision. The discursive environment that surrounded the new medium gave it meaning as a key site in the production of the proper Egyptian public. ‘One of the goals of television is to create public opinion’, says Abdel Monieum Al Hefni, an early Egyptian writer on the medium. ‘If there were a way to distinguish the Arab nation these days that way would be to name it (the age of)



the rapid development in the mechanisms of public opinion [...] and perhaps the most important of factors that have influenced this [...] are the press, broadcasting and cinema' (Al Hefni 1962, 1).

Public opinion, properly constituted, supported the government's ambition of producing, out of the raw materials of its people, a distinctly *modern* nation. 'If we look at Arab television, local television, we find that it is a program of modern development' (Umar 1964, 3). In this way, television was no different than radio, newspapers, literature or any form of official public culture that came before it. Egypt, since the 1850s, had been transfixed by questions of modernity and progress (see Armbrust 1996).

### The Satellite Era

If we argue that contemporary Arabic broadcasting was transforming other aspects of Arab social life, the first difficulty is to define Arab broadcasting. As the prolific writer on Arabic television Naomi Sakr points out, 'For a phenomenon characterized by ever increasing diversity and contradiction the epithet "Arab television" may imply an undue sense of coherence' (Sakr 2007, 1). In other words, in seeking to discuss contemporary Arab satellite broadcasting we are presuming that such an object exists outside of our naming it.

The reality is that the experience of watching satellite television in the southern Mediterranean can be a frustrating exercise in incoherence. With access to well over 300 separate television channels being broadcast from three main satellite systems and at least six streams, including NileSat 101 and 102, ArabSat 1 and 2, and Hotbird 1 and 2, dissonance is standard. The languages of the broadcasts on NileSat and ArabSat, the two systems aimed specifically at the Middle East, is mostly Arabic but also includes Farsi, Kurdish, Turkish, Imazigh (Berber), English, French, German, Italian and others. Hotbird's broadcast languages include Arabic, English, French, German, Russian, Slovak, Czech, Polish and Armenian. Neither linguistic nor geographical parameters, in terms of production, distribution and consumption, help us to identify an essential Arab satellite television. Arabic-language television is produced and broadcast not just in the Middle East but also in Europe, Asia and the Americas. Much of the programming on 'Arabic' television was produced in the West and in Latin America and only later transcribed, if at all, into Arabic. Perhaps the larger point here is that definitions that seek some sort of essence of Arab satellite broadcasting, just as those that seek an essential 'Arab' or an essential 'Egyptian Nation' might have worked in the era of state-centred 'imagined communities' but are no longer satisfying, even as provisional definitions. These essentializing definitions are unsatisfying because they seek to describe something that is not there. Either the concept of Arab television is too small to incorporate the global flow of cultural production that uses satellite broadcasting to distribute programmes consumed by any audience that considers itself Arabic, or it is too

large to describe a cultural product that is produced and largely consumed in a particular country, even though it is distributed to a far wider audience.

What is clear about Arab satellite broadcasting is, like radio and television before it, it was constructed with political and social goals of social unity in mind. Already posited as an *Arab* project by virtue of having arisen from an Arab League mandate, early discussion on the technology centred around its potential to unify Arabs. According to Ali Al Mashtat, the director general of Arabsat in 1985, the satellite would enhance ‘... rapid economic growth, increasing cultural exchanges and the awareness of the Arab people of [...] their role on the international scene (Durra and Christie 1985). Latif Jassim, the Iraqi Minister of Information (whose government was involved in a war with the non-Arab Iranians at the time) spelled out the discursive conditions the new satellite would be subject to: ‘This is a national strategic project which realizes the national ambitions of the Arab people ...’ (Durra and Christie 1985). And yet the way in which concerns over the cultural potential of the new satellite were handled speak more to a reality of splintered Arab states than a single Arab nation. Although the initial satellite created the space on its C-band for direct broadcasting of a ‘community’ television channel to the entire Arab world these broadcasts did not take place. Arab ministers of information could not agree on the educational and entertainment content to appear on the community channel and thus blocked its broadcast (Kavanaugh 1998, 92).

In 1989 the long-serving Egyptian Information Minister Safwat Sharif envisioned the specific goal for Egyptian satellite broadcasting as dealing with ‘Arab’ problems (as opposed to simply Egyptian ones) and should not be ‘limited to the restricted national context’ (Sakr 2001, 32). Later Sharif charged Egyptian satellite television with ‘safeguarding Arab and Egyptian national security’ (Sakr 2001, 33) in the face of oppositional extremist Muslim organizations arrayed against the state.

### ***Malek Farouq* and the discursive nation**

*Malek Farouq* thus enters an imperfect Arabic-language and Egyptian public sphere at the fulcrum of technological, political and narrative transformations. Nationalists have been conditioned to recognize the pedagogical power of television, but now the pedagogical masters are not Egyptian. *Malek Farouq* comes to prominence during the turbulent endgame of the Hosni Mubarak regime, four years before he was overthrown by a seemingly popular movement. Its arrival in public discourse in the Arabic-speaking world is matched by a deep conceptual ambivalence about the present and future ideological security of not just Egypt, but any nation that has relied on control of narratives to maintain control of ideology and politics. The series arrives at precisely the moment in which Twitter, Facebook and other forms of social media as well as satellite television,

cinema and literature materially demonstrate that smooth control over the proper narratives of social life is a thing of the past.

What can we find in the public reaction to the series that helps us to analyze the narrative and political tensions of its contemporary moment? The critical reaction to the popular series can be divided into three main topics: nostalgia for the material past, nostalgia for the political past and fear about 'foreign' intrusion into 'Egyptian' history. Each of these topics relate both to the ontological history of Egyptian broadcasting and the epistemological history presented in *Malek Farouq*. In other words, ontological history provides us with a description of the increasing political fragmentation of the Egyptian nation in the latter part of the twentieth century. The epistemological representation in *Malek Farouq* plays upon the anxiety caused by the political fragmentation and offers an appealing remedy in a representation and retelling of that fractious past.

Public discourse about Arabic serials serves a vital role in garnering viewers and measuring the success of a particular show. With upwards of seventy Arabic serials released during the single month of Ramadan each year, the ability of particular shows to attract attention makes the difference between success and failure, especially for profit-generating ancillary markets such as reruns, foreign rebroadcast, and even DVD sales. This public discourse can take the form of conversation between viewers, which is difficult to measure, newspapers, magazines, television talk shows, online newspapers, magazines, and blogs. Even in a situation where programming is presold for immediate broadcast as well as for later redistribution, the 'buzz' generated by a particular show has ramifications for the sale of the next year's productions. Having a hit series that generates public discussion can make it easier for a star to secure a bigger salary in the next round of Ramadan serials, it can make it easier for a director to presell their next show, and it can make gathering initial financing easier.

*Malek Farouq* served as the focus for public political discussion as to the historical merits of their main characters and the era in which they lived. It generated a significant number of newspaper articles *before* it was broadcast, centering on the contentious effort to produce, sell, and broadcast the series in spite of its controversial nature. In addition to this, a number of public discussions focused on the problematic nature of 'foreign' participation in Egyptian stories.

Much of the discourse centred around the perceived quality of the series, especially on how the era of the 1930s and 1940s was visually reproduced. A common lament was that Egypt was much less populated, cleaner, and supposedly much more prosperous in those decades. Adel Darwish's comments, writing in the international Arab daily *Al Sharq Al Awasat* are an example. 'As the director told me in person, despite his best efforts he was unable to obtain permission to film on the historical sites of Ras al-teen and Abdeen palaces, so he had to build his own sets and décor. Building sets from scratch avoids the visual errors that may be encountered by the camera in (contemporary iterations of)

architecture. In the days of King Farouq, the streets of Egypt were part of the beautiful environment of comprehensive architectural and technical and cultural achievement' (Darwish 2007).

In other words, much of the runaway success of this production lay in its ability to mimic nostalgic visual representations of a lost past to an audience that seemed to be decidedly unhappy with the material realities of 2007. It took a transnational conglomeration of workers and money, working under the global political and structural conditions of 2007 to tell a story about the simplicity and seeming national social cohesion of a past cultural iteration that no longer exists precisely because of the globalizing technological and political changes that have allowed this programme to be produced and distributed.

A number of critics praised the show for simply *raising* the topic of the political past in the contemporary moment. This perspective tended to emphasize the positive pedagogical elements of unlocking a forbidden past. One article says the *Farouq* series 'left behind a severe case of political and social controversy in the Egyptian street, in the press, and in articles by leading writers and researchers, after the personal and human dimensions of the king, which were unknown to current generations, became known' (Madkour 2008). Another writer recognizes that the programme sparked an important nostalgia amongst Egyptian viewers for a 'better time'. 'Despite the mistakes, I am thankful to [broadcasters] MBC for reminding Egyptians [of their past], including those counterfeiters who have tried to obscure history. It appears that people yearn to know the facts and details of the era of good times of the modern Egyptian nation' (Darwish 2007).

A common refrain of critics was that the show took the *true*, i.e. ontological, history of the nation out of the hands of the state, which had been interestedly manipulating the epistemological history, and put it back in the hands of the nation itself. As one newspaper article put it, 'It raised issues of contemporary Egyptian history in the street after [these issues] had been [locked] inside the halls of universities and partisan newspapers with limited circulation. [This is important because] most young people including university graduates do not know much about the history of contemporary Egypt. He that does not know of his past, lives a confused present and has no future' (Farid 2007).

Another author concurs that *Farouq* the series has stirred and muddied the pool of Egyptian history. 'Perhaps the high viewership of the series can be explained by a desire among Egyptians to see that entire era of history which has been excluded from the consciousness of more than half a century, a history full of cover-ups and an abrogation of all that preceded it. It has been as if the history of Egypt did not begin until after [the revolution of 1952.] Just as the pharaohs erased their predecessors from the obelisks so too did these victors tarnish the image of King Farouk in black and white movies that were produced before the

revolution. So the form of this series shocked the mind of the younger generations that found a king different the one in textbooks' (Muharram 2007).

Television writer, historian and social critic Mahmoud Sabit argues that the show succeeded because it brought up issues of democracy in a country sorely lacking it.

What caught the [public] imagination, is that they realized that the monarchy was a constitutional monarchy, that [Farouq] was the head of state and not the head of government. The head of government was a prime minister who was brought in through a democratic process, that Egypt had had 25 years of a representational system. When you take that and compare it to 50 years of benign military dictatorship, people are surprised. There is a whole generation of Egyptians who are getting a rapid education through the internet and that's telling them different things than Nasser told them as far as history and the background of Egypt is concerned. There is a search for the truth that compromises Nasserist revisionism. If you've always been told that you're not sufficiently educated to participate in a democratic process, but now [using the show] you can point to a democratic process that existed [...] that changes things. (M. Sabit, personal communication, 21 December 2008)

### **Nationalism and *Malek Farouq***

The most marked criticism of the series came from those diametrically opposed to a reconsideration of the Egyptian twentieth century, the nationalists. Many of those critics who opposed the missteps and corruption of the current regime found it difficult to stomach the notion that foreigners were being allowed to manipulate the pedagogical element of television to tell forbidden stories. For example, while lightly criticizing the programme for its historical lapses one writer makes a case for Egyptian specificity when it comes to discussions of the nation. 'The director, despite his diligent efforts and talent, is a foreigner to Egypt, being a Syrian. He and the writer acted as if they had no doubt as to the interactions between the people and the royal palace. What they should have done is hire a team of historians and specialists to review the script as well as the costumes and period' (Darwish 2007). By emphasizing (dubiously) that in BBC productions, for example, a team of experts is brought on to review every detail of the show, Darwish is also lamenting the quality of Arab cultural output generally, a common theme in Arab self-criticism.

Among Darwish's complaints about the errors in the serial were the use of the wrong wrist-watches and costumes for the time period. However, a more serious error occurred in the anachronistic use of political terminology. 'The term "Arab nation" has not appeared yet in the lexicon of journalism or political expression. It was not (unlike in the series) yet used by any Egyptian politician in the parliament or in public speeches. It only came about after years of the

expression appearing in the literature of Michel Aflaq and the Baathists in Syria, and the countries of the Fertile Crescent. Egypt was outside this area geographically and ideologically [...] The trend of cooperation between the Arabic-speaking countries did not materialize until the war in Palestine, years after (the time the series took place)' (Darwish 2007).

The theme of undue influence by Syrians was a common one in the discourse on *Malek Farouq* as it has been in discourse on contemporary 'Egyptian' television generally. In a *Masri Al Youm (Egypt Today)* article written before the series' debut, this theme was made explicit. In an article entitled 'Differences, Beatings and Insults on the Set of King Farouq', the article highlights the difficulties of Syrian involvement in Egyptian television. 'It all seems calm and harmonious on the set of *King Farouq*, but when we talked to Egyptian technicians involved in the production we discovered sharp differences between them and the Syrian director, Hatem Ali, as well as his assistants. In a previous interview, cinematographer Muhammed Suleiman [...] told us that the most difficult thing about working with Syrians was that they were overly excitable (rageful) in their dealings, and this was confirmed by Egyptians working on the set of King Farouq' (Salama 2007).

The article goes on to detail a series of petty accusations against the Syrian director, focusing on his lack of desire or ability to communicate with the Egyptians on the set. 'After four months of filming, there have still been no friendships developed between the Egyptians and the Syrians' (Salama 2007). The article describes how a Syrian assistant director 'beat up' an assistant make-up technician for getting in shot. It concludes with the frustrated director, Hatim Ali, denying all the accusations and asking, 'Why do all Egyptians keep assuming these bad things about me?' (Salama 2007). While the article is poorly written and seems purposefully inflammatory against the Syrians, it is indicative of the tension that lies beneath the surface of transnational Arabic television and the anxiety that Egyptians face in the contemporary space of regional cultural production.

Most of the discourse around *Malek Farouq*, however, did not focus on the Syrian participation as much on how Farouq impacted on accepted perceptions of history. One article, entitled 'King Farouq: The beginning of a New Phase in Television' comments on the sheer amount of attention given to the show. 'Never before has any television program in the Arab world seen the publication of this quantity of articles and commentaries, special issues, and expanded coverage in newspapers and magazines' (Farid, 2007). The author laments the fact that such an important serial with its unparalleled commercial and critical success 'was the production of a Saudi company, not Egyptian. It is truly regrettable that the initial broadcast was not on an Egyptian [terrestrial] television station' (Farid, 2007).

For committed nationalists, the most persistent problem of *Malek Farouq* was that it presented history incorrectly. This particularly matters given the historic view of televisual audiences as in desperate need of, and thus of course susceptible to, pedagogical training. When that training comes at the hands of foreigners with conflicting ideologies the nation is under duress.

For example, Osama Anwar Okasha, the most famous Egyptian television writer and a staunch intellectual of a nationalist bent, accused the show of slavishly promoting monarchy at the behest of the Saudi financiers of the show (Amer 2007). In an article entitled 'Historians: Desperation Makes Egyptians Sing the Praises of the Monarchy' Ibrahim Moawad claims that the serial has transformed Egyptian public opinion in favor of the monarchy. The article quotes a professor of modern history from one of Egypt's leading universities arguing that combining Saudi Arabian financing (a society that supports kingship) with the underlying anxiety in contemporary Egyptian society, results in the series serving as 'propaganda for a monarchical system' (Moawad 2007).

The article quotes another Egyptian historian, Asim Desouki, as criticizing the monarchy as 'a corrupt authoritarian regime, an Albanian family that sapped the Egyptian people of their strength through poverty and hunger before being shot down by the Free Officers' Revolution' (Moawad 2007). Also accusing the series author Lamis Al Gaber of being a lackey of the Saudis, he attributes *Malek Farouq's* popularity to dissatisfaction with the contemporary Republican regime and contemporary economic malaise much in the same way that poor people are drawn to the nostalgic myth of a perfect Islamic past. But this nostalgia for the past 'is felt by people who have never experienced this period. The average worker would refuse to return to this capitalist system that had no social security and did not preserve the dignity of the worker' (Moawad 2007).

Regardless of the conclusions drawn by individual viewers, the fact remains that *Malek Farouq* stirred up nostalgia for and questions about the Egyptian past. One letter to the editor, entitled 'Farouq was Neither an angel nor a demon', notes that the show served as the catalyst for important discussions about the monarchy. 'People are asking: is this the real Farouq? The real Nahass Pascha? And if this was really them, how have we been so deceived these past 50 years? The revolution has distorted everything that came before it and tainted the ex-king with accusations of corruption and licentious behavior' (Okasha 2007). The writer, a retired air force general, concludes that history is more complicated than commonly presented. 'It took more than 50 years for people to discover the lies promoted by the media about the monarchy and his men. We'll spend another 50 discovering the facts of the 1952 revolution. What we hope is to wake up from a coma in which we can open the pages of history and put events and people in proper balance' (Okasha 2007).

### Conclusion

Among the widely held tenets of different iterations of globalization theory is that the nation-state (in general concept and specific practice) is steadily losing power in the face of such varied opponents as transnational capital, transnational non-governmental organizations (either in favor or against transnational capital), and anti-national religious ideology and organizations. And yet what *Malek Farouq* and other transnationally produced series suggest is that while the locus of nationalist ideological production might have shifted, along with wider shifts in the communications infrastructure, away from the nation-state, the production of the *ideological* nation has in no way ceased or even appeared to slow. This disjuncture between the nation and the state, between official and private construction of the ideal nation (and the ideal state) is fertile territory in which to explore contemporary articulations of communal identity.

Without committing the teleological fallacy of suggesting that the 2011 upheavals in Egypt and the Arab world were the direct results of shifts in the production, distribution and consumption of information and entertainment media, what can *Malek Farouq* tell us about new forms of subjective reality in the Arabic speaking Middle East?

In *Malek Farouq* we are presented with the seemingly holistic and natural vision of a just Egyptian nation fighting for its democratic independence and by extension the independence of its citizens and *all* Arabs. When studied as a specific narrative, put into the context of the world in 2007, the ambivalent tensions and absences of the narrative become much clearer. These underlying tensions include the dearth of a true participatory political structure for Egyptian (or any Arab) citizens and the pronounced absence of any acknowledgement of the power of Islamicist discourse in contemporary Egyptian society. Analytically, then, the ephemeral greatness and dignity of the timeless Egyptian nation articulated in the shows can be seen to stand not just for its historical self but also for its opposite: the nation's failure and the failures of the contemporary state to achieve true independence, dignity, and democracy. And if the political upheavals that came a few years later can be said to mean anything, they certainly indicated anxiety about the political future and past.

In other words, if contemporary transnational narratives of the nation seem to gloss over the ambivalences inherent in expressions of nationalism, they also succeed in articulating them. Narrative, as Alan Nadel suggests, addresses the incommensurability between the ontological excess of reality and the uses of epistemological history. Narratives act as the source and the 'condition of possibility' for facts (Nadel 1995, 3). Narratives don't simply condition a wider culture meaning but individuals, too, construct a 'self' out of disparate activity made important by narratives which in turn create out of that disparate activity 'acts of meaning' (Nadel 1995, 3). Narrating history, then, is inextricably bound



with creating identities, on personal, national and wider levels and it is an inherently political act (Dirlik 2006).

How does history change when it has been loosed from the bonds of the nation? History is presented as a *personal* narrative platform and not solely a *national* or communal one. Part of the process that decouples national histories from the nations that embody them is an increasing privatization of thought, a personalization of the national. In the contemporary transnational mediated environment of Facebook and Twitter, the individual self becomes the carefully curated centre of history. Unlike academic history, which in its traditional forms at least outwardly aspires to an impersonal description of 'the facts,' historical drama works precisely by making the past personal and invoking the ephemeral concept of identity. By aesthetically rendering the past in the present and by psychologizing mythical figures, contemporary historical drama creates the aesthetic and affective conditions for wider historical narratives, national or otherwise, to be grafted onto personal narratives.

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- 1 All translations from Arabic to English are by the author.