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Local Contexts of Islamism in Popular Media

LILA ABU-LUGHOD

A good deal of literature, before and since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and then *Covering Islam*, has taught us the myriad ways in which Islam has been represented negatively in the West. But long before the spectacular and specular violence of the exploding World Trade Center in New York City, many countries in the Arab Middle East had within their midst Islamist political groups that were oppositional to the regimes in power. In Egypt during the 1980s and 90s, for example, there was a sharp sense in elite circles and a widespread discourse disseminated through popular media that the nation was in danger of being torn apart from within. The state was portrayed as facing a political-cultural crisis, one that it dealt with mostly by force—through arrests, executions, and the arbitrary powers of a continually renewed state of emergency. The problem was represented publicly as religious extremism. The villains were the members of Islamic groups.

In the early 1990s I embarked on an ethnographic project to understand television's place in the Egyptian national imagination and in the everyday lives of people who are somewhat marginal to the nation—people who are neither middle class nor urban. I focused on the most popular genre of television programming, one for which Egypt is justly famous across the Arab world: the dramatic serial. Unlike soap operas, Egyptian serials are finite, consisting of 15 or 30 episodes, shown on consecutive evenings. And, because until well into the 1990s there were only a few television channels and first-run serials aired on only two of them, they were watched by a majority of the population and were often the subject of discussion in homes, and in the public sphere—in newspapers, magazines, and elsewhere. I was intrigued to find that television serials were often the vehicles for national debate. One of the big debates that television became part of in the mid-1990s was about what was called "extremism" or even "terrorism."

Television drama in Egypt in the 1990s reflected, if unevenly and with certain lags, concerns about the place of religion in society and nation. In keeping with its self-consciously pedagogical mission, it condemned, preached, and offered alternative models for the future. Accordingly, this research raised questions such as: Were television serials effective in their missions of smoothing over the divisions that, in the name of religion, threatened the Egyptian national body? Did media management of religion help create national community? Did mass media participate in the configuration and reconfiguration of "religion" and "nation" in Egypt? How did media representations of Islamic groups and "terrorists" operate in a Muslim majority context where, unlike in the West, the civilizational discourse of West and East could not be mobilized, Islamists or terrorists could only partially be represented as an outside enemy, and Islam could never be the alien other?

Good and bad Islam

Beginning in the late 1970s the rising visibility on the streets of Cairo and provincial cities and towns of a self-conscious Islamic identity represented a phenomenon that was noticeable to everyone and troubling to some. The movement ranged from increased piety among educated youth to some more sensational acts of violence committed by militant Islamic groups. The broad piety movement and the wide-

Professor Lila Abu-Lughod delivered the ISIM Annual Lecture on 17 December 2004 at the Spiegelzaal, Utrecht University. She analyzed media portrayals of Islamism and religious extremism in popular Egyptian television dramatic serials and suggested that new media representations of Islamists, and the debates they sparked nationally, have contributed to reconfigurations of current notions of "religion" and "nation." Below is an abridged version of her lecture.¹

spread feeling against cordoning off religion as a private matter of faith led television to capitulate to the desire for more religious programming and to try to appropriate for itself the role of supporter of a legitimate Islam.

In 1994, just after a new policy of confronting terrorism with media was announced, the serial *The Family* (*al-A'ila*), was produced to great fanfare, and some controversy. Written by Wahid Hamid, it showed, in its assess-

ment by critics, how educated youth from disadvantaged backgrounds were drawn into terrorism, and how corruption was rife in these groups. Public opposition to the serial, not surprisingly, came from well-established moderate Islamist thinkers. In their jockeying in the press, both the moderate Islamist thinkers and government and television officials tried to align themselves with the religious authorities of al-Azhar. The Islamists stressed the number of letters and phone calls al-Azhar had received, urging them to take action to get the serial off the air. Controversy over a scene in which the enlightened modernist protagonist challenged the extremist on the doctrinal basis of certain beliefs had led to calls to halt broadcast of the serial. The Mufti, the leading government religious authority, used the press to clarify doctrine and offer a set of phone numbers for the public to use if they had questions about religious matters. The Minister of Information, however, speaking about a television broadcast that followed the serial (a documentary in which Islamist prisoners spoke about the error of their ways), responded with a statement that points to the heart of the official construction of religion. He said, "[T]here are repenters who speak with remorse and ... discuss how it was that they came to ... lose their faith in those erroneous ideas that led them to commit deviant terrorist activities..." Serials like *The Family* contrast the good, correct, and reasonable Islam of the people, the cultured and educated, al-Azhar, the state, and television with that of the bad, violent, misinformed, and twisted Islam of the extremists.

Many television writers claim to be secularists—that is, to believe in a separation between personal piety and the state, a legacy of their intellectual and political formation in the Nasserist period of the 1950s and 1960s that pushed secular ideals. Yet, despite the objections of such prominent television personnel and their own relative silence on religion in their serials, Egyptian television continued to increase religious programming in the 1990s, adding to the popular shows featuring Quranic exegeses by religious authorities big budget serials about the history of the Arab-Islamic world. These were broadcast alongside many more serials with plots or subplots about violent militants and serials explicitly about terrorism. There was good Islam and bad Islam and these judgments were made, ultimately, on the basis of how Islam related to the nation and social responsibility. They were not, as they might have been in the past, part of the struggle among religious authorities.

Restoring the honour of Upper Egypt

For more than half a century, revenge killing, or the vendetta, has been in the national imagination the cultural trait most associated with Upper Egypt. The obsession of northern, urban, educated people with the horrors of honour feuds and their condemnation of Upper Egypt-

tians as backward and unenlightened can be found everywhere, from film to social science. Without denying the existence or importance of this practice to communities in the region, one must still be suspicious whenever a cultural trait is singled out and made to stand for a whole region or community and one must be even more suspicious when such a region is mapped as a place of new forms of violence: in the 1980s and 1990s Upper Egypt was linked to religious extremism.

However, a major shift occurred in the second half of the 1990s in television representations of Upper Egypt. The most popular of the serials to represent Upper Egypt balanced the theme of revenge with that of authentic values such as honour and integrity. The recent spate of serials set in Upper Egypt that depict positive qualities of the region are mostly the work of one writer, himself originally from Upper Egypt. Although based in Alexandria, Muhammad Safa' Amir makes much of the fact that he was born in an Upper Egyptian town not far from Luxor. Even those from the south single out

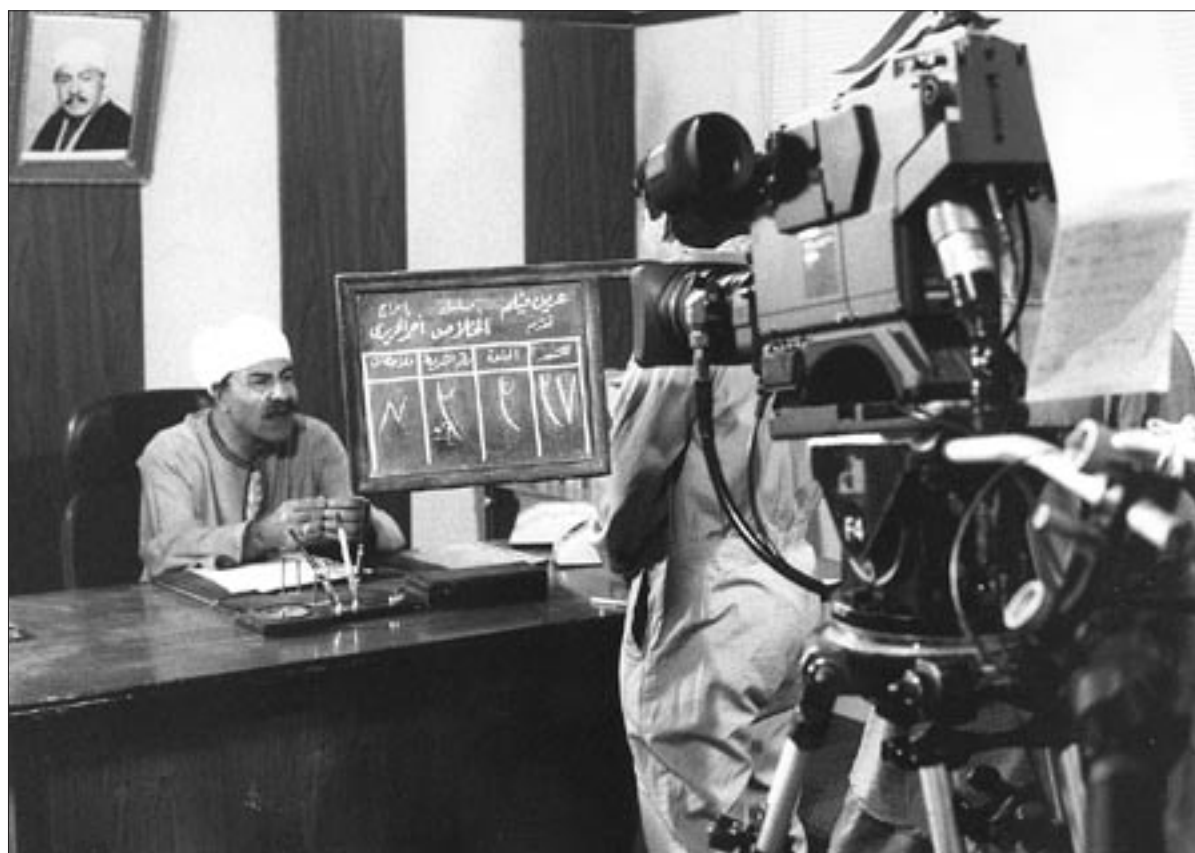
his work as not stereotyping them negatively, describing his serials as realistic because they focus on their "true" characteristics: generosity, courage, honesty, and valour. What these serials suggest is that Upper Egyptians are part of the nation; they do not live in a closed society and do not constitute a backward or frightening "other." The most important message is that they are by no means all religious extremists. Upper Egyptians, on the other hand, are being told through the serials that they have within their own traditions important values worth preserving and nurturing, values that are social, cultural, and regional, not particularly tied to religion. In other words, their true identities are not as Islamists but rather as people with an indigenous regional nobility and code of honour.

The attempts of the media to promote a culture stripped of religion may be even less healing of the torn civic body than its attempts to turn religion into a cultural system linked to the nation. This is because it bears little resemblance to local experiences. But insofar as regional values are offered as cultural ideals, the serials invoke a national frame, since regions are primarily defined by national territory. Upper Egypt only has meaning as a distinct region if understood as part of a larger Egyptian nation. And so again, the serials offer support for a united nation and a placing of religion within that nation.

Religion in a national public sphere

Recent work on Islamism and the history of Muslim reform in Egypt reminds us that mass media, from the press that flourished in the late nineteenth century to the television of the late twentieth century, is part of a distinct public sphere in which public intellectuals could debate and discuss norms, policies, and the future of the community and civilization. Scholars have been concerned about what the outlines of this public sphere are and how the changing terms of debate and discussion are set.

The Egyptian intelligentsia who produce television, film, theatre, and literature must be understood as having a certain independence from the state and labouring to a large extent in their own cultural fields. Yet there are significant points of collaboration and convergence between intellectuals and the state today. Nasserism had contributed to the doctrine of a demarcation of separate spheres of religion and state, even if Islamic ideals were never completely purged from morality, pious practices continued in all classes, and various accommodations were forged between state and religious institutions. What seems to be one of the outcomes of the debates in which television programs of the 1990s participated, is that religion has become once more an ideological hub of the public sphere, but now with a certain form of the modern nation-state so entrenched and established that



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"the nation," and what is good for the nation, forms the only legitimate ground for debates about religion. This is even so when viewers explicitly disagree with or criticize the representations of Islamists, or religiosity, that they watch.

The airing of these serials ends up, in a variety of ways, revealing and exacerbating social cleavages, perhaps undermining the government's and some secular intellectuals' intentions of creating national community by trying to discredit Islamists. This is mostly because television's enthusiasm for circumscribing religious sensibilities in its serials rubs up against widespread convictions. However, one should not infer from these failures that television does not foster national community through its treatments of religious extremism. It does so indirectly, though, by appropriating for itself the role of a charged and popular arena for public discussion of and debate about Islam. The arena is national and in this way contributes to an ongoing sense of the nation as the critical frame for all aspects of life, including the religious.

Even Egyptian television's negative stereotyping of Islamists, however accepted or refused by the public, operates within and reinforces the frame of the nation. It never places the Muslim outside the frame; instead it makes and sustains distinctions between good and bad Muslims. It also reflects on what place religious identity and observance should have in daily life and asks what role Islam should have in society at large. Even though some of the negative imagery used to represent Islamists in Egyptian television may be eerily similar to that which is becoming numbingly familiar in the West, the contexts of reception and the import of this imagery give it a fundamentally different meaning.

Filming of Egyptian TV serial, *Al-Khalas*

Note

1. The lecture by Lila Abu-Lughod was derived largely from Chapter 7 of her most recent book, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (University of Chicago Press, 2005). The full text of the lecture will also be available as an ISIM Paper.

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