

How a Soap Opera Explains Egyptian-Israeli Relations

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Jun 29, 2017

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Anti-Semitic themes appear in a program that nonetheless portrays Mossad officials as serious and smart people.

Egyptian-Israeli relations have been steadily improving in the past few years, with the two countries facing the same threat from ISIS on the Sinai border. Coupled with Egypt's current economic hardships, increased cooperation between the two sides beyond security matters might become a possibility. Moreover, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and his top officials have been very keen on meeting key American Jewish organizations in order to stress the importance of Israeli-Egyptian relations in such a critical time. This was seen during Sisi's visit to Washington in April, where he met with some American Jewish groups and bragged about his relationship with the Jewish state.

However, this warmth was not shared by the Egyptian media industry, which is heavily censored by the government. This past Ramadan, when TV viewing was at its yearly peak, Jews and Israelis continued to be portrayed very negatively -- as spies, thieves, killers and socially immoral individuals, which is against the essence of this Islamic holy month, when Muslims are supposed to be tolerant and accepting of others.

Every year during the holy month of Ramadan, different Egyptian TV series compete to gain the attention of the public in Egypt and across the Arab world. This year one of the major soap operas was *Alzyb'a*, or "Mercury." According to the show's introduction, it is a true story depicting a heroic action by the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate (GID) against the Mossad, Israel's intelligence agency. According to an interview with one of the actors, who had previously appeared in a successful anti-Israel spy movie, the show came about after he approached the GID and asked to adapt a recent, true event from the agency's files. The GID offered three stories to choose from, and *Alzyb'a* was chosen because it offered the most suspense.

The main character is a struggling lower-middle class Egyptian technician who installs cameras for a security

company before Egyptian intelligence recruits him to be sent to Greece to deceive the Israelis and take money from them. The show was widely popular in Egypt (viewership on YouTube ranged between 500,000 and 1,000,000 per episode), which motivated the producers to begin filming a second season in preparation for next year's Ramadan.

The show is significant for being the first time that an Egyptian spy drama portrays operations against Israel after the signing of the 1979 peace treaty between the two countries. Previously, most spy dramas supported by the GID were centered on stories set in the 1960s and 70s. This one is set from 1998 to the early 2000s.

To the credit of the show's producers, this is the best depiction of the Mossad ever to appear on Egyptian TV. They show the Israeli spy agency to be comprised of very serious and smart people who make sensible decisions, unlike the naive image the Mossad was given in previous shows.

However, anti-Semitism was still present. This began with the continuous Egyptian drama trope of fetishizing Jewish women by depicting them as irresistibly attractive and whose only job is to entrap Arab men into deceiving their countries. Several storylines played into classic anti-Semitic stereotypes by depicting Jews as very wealthy and controlling the world. And some scenes contained a shop named after Adolf Hitler, perhaps in order to celebrate what he did.

The broadcast of this series during Ramadan is a continuation of the double standard the Egyptian government holds toward the Jewish state and American Jewry. On the one hand, the government utilizes its improved relationship with Israel to gain access to American Jewish organizations, which Egyptian officials think **control America** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-future-of-egyptian-israeli-relations-cairo-more-committed-to-peace-than>). On the other hand, the government keeps fueling anti-Semitic beliefs among the Egyptian public to justify the two countries' lack of full normalization.

Two things explain this: First, Egyptian officials see Israel as a gateway to American policymakers whom they need to draw close at a time when the country is struggling economically and politically and the Trump administration is considering cutting foreign and military aid. And second, they believe that one key way to stabilize the regime internally is to keep building the public's fear of Israel as a tool to maintain its internal control.

Haisam Hassanein is a Glazer Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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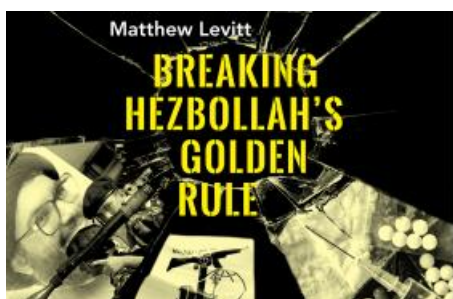
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