Int. J. Middle East Stud. **40** (2008), 369–371. *Printed in the United States of America*

QUICK STUDIES



AS YOU READ IT

Star Academy as Arab Political Satire

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doi:10.1017/S0020743808080938

> The Arab viewer needs only to zap between official Arab television channels to discover that his leaders' actions, speeches, statements, reforms, and unconditional love for their people cater to television's lights and cameras and not to their peoples' interests and aspirations. The leaders' highest interest is to improve their image with America (first, second, and third) in reality and with their peoples (finally!) only on the screen. . . .
>
> Since ours is a tailor-made-for-television situation of the reality TV type like *Star Academy*, the Arab viewer follows [Arab politics] with the interest of those reality TV viewers, rather than with the interest warranted by existential . . . reality. And since Arab leaders' view of their television performance is similar to the viewers' vision of it (notice here the exceptional confluence of Arab peoples and leaders), these leaders present their positions, statements, and actions as artistic performances, not as political stands. As a result, each one of them (his majesty, his excellence, or his highness) chooses a role through which he will present himself to America . . . the enthusiastic rebel role . . . the clownish comedic role . . . the wise elder role . . . the silent sidekick role. . . .
>
> Their common objective is to please the American producer of this political *Star Academy*, so that they can go on playing acts for their peoples—of course they do not mind some popular applause. The television camera today is the most important and effective Arab parliament, and the image today is the most transparent political analyst. . . .
>
> They try to hide the backstage from the camera and from Arab viewers, so that on the *Star Academy* of Arab leaders only the "prime" evening can be seen. . . . But Arab viewers know by now that their leaders are being rebuked backstage for their *Star Academy* performance, and they know who is doing the rebuking. . . .[1]

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743808080938 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The previous excerpt is taken from a column by Syrian journalist Hakam al-Baba, published in the London-based Pan-Arab newspaper *al-Quds al-ʿArabi*. Al-Baba, a middle-aged Syrian journalist known for his biting sarcasm, has written some of the most perceptive critiques of Syrian and Arab media, including a famous 2005 article in the Syrian daily *Tishreen*, in which he relates his experience of harassment by the *mukhābarāt*. In the excerpted column, al-Baba uses the raging Pan-Arab controversies over reality TV for a critique of Arab political dependence on the United States.

This is one of dozens of columns, talk show transcripts, and *Star Academy* episodes I am analyzing in the context of my ongoing book project on reality TV and Arab public life. [2] Reality TV refers to programs that are ostensibly unscripted, feature amateurs, and are usually adapted from "formats" developed in Europe and sold worldwide. The first season of *Star Academy*, shown by the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, was highly controversial, triggering heated polemics about gender relations, political participation, and Western influence. *Star Academy* was heavily politicized because of its plebiscitary practices, titillating displays of bodies in motion, and the self-made claim that reality TV represents reality. This triggered fatwas in Saudi Arabia, parliamentary debate in Kuwait and Algeria, media skirmishes between Lebanon and Syria, and numerous newspaper columns that used *Star Academy* to comment on Arab politics.

In this column, al-Baba appropriates *Star Academy* as a tool of political satire, using it to scorn the subservience of Arab monarchs and autocrats to the United States. Al-Baba demonstrates intimate familiarity with *Star Academy*'s logistics: sixteen youths live together under the camera's gaze for four months, with weekly Monday nominations and Friday "primes," at the end of which one or more contestants are "voted off the island." Arab leaders stand for *Star Academy* contestants, who enact various performances to please their American master. Al-Baba also underscores how reality TV helps us understand new kinds of visibility in Arab public life when he describes the ways in which a show like *Star Academy* makes visible the liminal space between backstage and front stage, between the private and the public. Arab media proliferation, in al-Baba's understanding, makes Arab politics more transparent by exposing power, in sharp contrast to its exaltation by state television before the commercial satellite era.

Reality TV polemics constitute a high point in the convergence of popular culture and politics in the Arab world. This phenomenon's most enduring legacy is not its plebiscitary nature, which some analysts predicted will promote democratization. Rather, as the Arab satellite-television era nears its twentieth anniversary, the Arab reality TV controversies have publicized the fragility of television's claim to represent reality while highlighting the medium's role in constructing social and political reality.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743808080938 Published online by Cambridge University Press

NOTES

[1]Hakam al-Baba, "The Camera Rules the World: A *Star Academy* for Arab Leaders," *al-Quds al-ʿArabi*, 6 April 2005 (in Arabic).

[2]See Marwan M. Kraidy, "Governance and Hypermedia in Saudi Arabia," *First Monday* 11 (September 2006), http://firstmonday.org/issues/special11_9/kraidy/index.html (accessed 1 March 2008), and Marwan M. Kraidy, "Reality Television and Politics in the Arab World: Preliminary Observations," *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* 15 (Fall/Winter 2006), www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=37 (accessed 1 March 2008).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743808080938 Published online by Cambridge University Press