



NAJI ATTALLAH'S CREW: STEREOTYPES OF JEWS, ARABS, AND AMERICANS IN EGYPT'S MOST-WATCHED RAMADAN 2012 SOAP OPERA

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Abstract

In addition to its strict fasting regimens, observed by practicing Muslims, the month of Ramadan has become known for its high viewership of serialized television programs throughout the Arabic-speaking world. During Ramadan—a month during which millions partake of festive fast-breaking (Iftaar) gatherings after sundown—competition among television networks is at its highest, and television stations pull all the stops to attract the largest audiences possible, often by offering compelling seasonal soap operas featuring major local and pan-Arab actors.

INTRODUCTION

The month of Ramadan has become known in the Arab World for high viewership of serialized television programs as well as for fasting by observant Muslims. It is during Ramadan—a month when millions enjoy festive and social evenings together—that competition among TV channels is strongest and stations offer new serialized dramas designed to attract audiences by featuring major stars and compelling stories.

Perhaps the most popular soap opera in Egypt during Ramadan 2012 was "*Firqat Naji Atallah*," or *Naji Attallah's Crew*, starring the famous Egyptian actor and comedian Adel Imam. According to a BBC article published in August 2012, *Naji Attallah's Crew* received "the highest number of viewers this year, according to a report from the Egyptian information ministry's audience rating committee."¹ Director Rami Imam, Adel Imam's son, also directed his father and Omar Sharif in 2008 in *Hassan and Marcus*, a cinematic feature film which promoted peaceful Christian-Muslim co-existence in Egypt. Adel Imam stated in an interview about *Hassan and Marcus* that "I have declared war using art against the extremists, against those who foment differences between us."²

The serialized Ramadan 2012 story revolves around Naji Attallah (Adel Iman), an Egyptian diplomat and retired military officer who viewers first encounter as an

¹ "Ramadan soap opera boom for Egypt," BBC.com, August 17, 2012.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19296520>

² Yolande Knell, "[Egyptian film laughs at prejudice](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19296520)," BBC.com, July 26, 2008,

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7525277.stm



administrative attaché at the Egyptian embassy in Tel Aviv, Israel. After being sent back to Egypt and having his bank account in Tel Aviv frozen, Naji Attallah decides to rob the Israeli bank that froze his account with the help of six others. Naji Attallah's project takes him and his crew from Egypt to Israel through the Gaza Strip and, after robbing the Israeli bank, onward to Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Somalia, always pursued by Mossad agents. During his long journey, Naji Attallah meets and interacts with various characters who play important social and political roles in the countries he visits, such as militants from Hamas, Fatah, and Hezbollah, and corrupt Iraqis enriched by the American "occupation."

This paper analyzes the depiction of specific characters in *Naji Attallah's Crew*, drawing out the stereotypes they portray. It will first focus on the portrayal of Israeli characters, based on the modern forms of anti-Semitism. The paper will then study the non-Egyptian Arab characters, focusing mainly on the representatives of *al-muqawama* or "resistance." *Al-muqawama*, an Arabic-language reference to anti-Israel activism, is a positive concept in *Naji Attallah's Crew*, and serves as the dramatic counterpoint to the negative representation of American and Israeli elements.

The paper will also illustrate how the show employs stereotyping as a tool of influence when depicting characters to manipulate the audience to lead it towards a specific standpoint. *Naji Attallah's Crew* draws a very sharp line between a good side and a bad side, and all the elements in the soap opera work together to make the audience judge characters in that moral bifurcation.

THE STEREOTYPES IN NAJI ATTALLAH'S CREW

Recognizing that stereotyping is a complex and nuanced phenomenon, we will use the following as our working definition of "stereotype:" "a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment."³ Stereotyping is, first of all, an error; when disparate individual members of a whole category are considered homogeneous the stereotype is necessarily inaccurate, especially when it is applied to a human group.⁴ Stereotyping also implies a process of judging the other or judging ourselves in front of the other. Stereotypes are a form of social control because of their imposition of simplicity and uniformity on another group, and they are often employed with the intent to exercise relational power.⁵

³ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stereotype>

⁴ Michael Pickering, *Stereotyping. The Politics of Representation* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 4-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*



The employment of stereotypes in *Naji Attallah's Crew* is unconcealed, unsubtle, and unmistakable, but not unsophisticated. Almost all groups who appear in the show are represented by homogenized individual characters who lack complexity and who embody the clichés and prejudices attributed to their ethnicity, community, religion, or nationality. Iraqis are victims of the occupation, Hezbollah members are determined fighters against Israel, Israelis are greedy, etc. The only characters who have a degree of complexity are Egyptians, but even most of them are presented along the lines of situations or figures that the audience can easily recognize or sympathize with. For example, among the members of *Naji Attallah's Crew* we find the following: a computer expert who is physically weak and gets scared by everyday situations; a poor city man with a good heart whose loyalty to the leader never wavers; a dutiful son who goes to the utmost extreme to help his father; a handsome young man who is in love but cannot get married because he lacks money; and a witty Casanova who discovers true love in the end.

None of these characters challenge the audience with artistry or depth, as they are all conventional stereotypes that the audience has seen elsewhere before. Even Naji Attallah himself does not exhibit depth or complexity. He is the typical father figure who cares deeply for younger characters as if they were his children, and he is a gentleman whose wisdom is respected, recognized and accepted everywhere he goes.

The stereotypes allow the Egyptian audience to connect easily and immediately with the characters. The viewer, then, rather than the scriptwriter, builds the characters, identifying each stock character and filling him or her out with the expected attributes. This is especially true when the show introduces non-Egyptian characters, who are almost always presented in a binary good/bad reference system. The stereotypes are not only employed as shortcuts to character development, but also as weapons to influence and manipulate the audience, and they have the effect of strengthening populist political views already present among those living in countries in the Middle East. The main methods to influence the audience are the principles of liking and contrasting.⁶ Israeli characters, for example, are presented in such a negative way that any behavior which others do in their presence looks good in contrast. Similarly, the viewer feels immediate sympathy for the mother who has lost a child or the father whose son is unjustly imprisoned, and correspondingly sympathizes with their cause. Most favorable characters in *Naji Attallah's Crew* are part of the *muqawama* against Israel, and the viewer is emotionally manipulated to align with this political position.

⁶ Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence. The Psychology of Persuasion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 11-6, 167.



ISRAEL, JEWS, ZIONISM

Israel is a fundamental component in the storyline of *Naji Attallah's Crew*. The soap opera opens in the streets of Tel Aviv, and Israel is the setting for portions of many episodes. Anything that distinguishes Israel from its Arab neighbors at any level—language, politics, religion, citizenship—has a strong presence in the show and is depicted in a way to make the viewer treat it as a badge of “the other.” In the drama’s good/bad binary system, Israel and all its components are bad. Jewish characters and symbols, and the Israeli security services are portrayed formulaically, described in reductive terms, and typecast.

The Mossad and the Israel Security Agency (Shabak)

The manhunt for Naji Atallah—in which various Israeli intelligence agencies participate—drives the plot of *Naji Attallah's Crew*. Inside Israel, agents of the Israel Security Agency (*Shabak*) monitor Naji Attallah while he is still a diplomat and, after the bank is robbed, they launch an investigation to find and apprehend the people responsible. When Naji Attallah escapes Israel across its northern border into Lebanon, the Mossad starts its relentless pursuit, trailing Naji Attallah and his friends on a chase that leads through Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Somalia.

It is not a surprise that all Israeli intelligence agents are negatively portrayed in the show. The Israeli agents wear dark suits, appear stealthy and treacherous, and exchange evil looks. They normally appear in half-lighted rooms and sinister music always accompanies their presence. This depiction follows the good/bad binary system, contrasting Naji Attallah representing the good side with the agents following him on the bad side. This juxtaposition emotionally sets the audience against the Israeli agents and in favor of Naji Attallah’s crew.

The two most prominent Israelis in the soap opera are a *Shabak* officer, Yossi, and a Mossad agent, Menachem. From their first appearance on the screen, they are both portrayed as cunning and almost devoid of humanity or compassion. The construction of the character of the *Shabak* member builds from his initial presentation as a cold, calculating individual. Yossi’s cold-bloodedness established, Naji Attallah’s crew—and the audience—earn a special satisfaction in their ultimate victory over him as episode by episode he is revealed to be a man dominated by bitter personal feelings who is also morally compromised by an adulterous relationship with a married woman. Yossi, as a boilerplate villain, almost forces the show to associate personal dishonor with cruel professionalism.

Nothing is known about the private life of Mossad agent Menachem, who is always shown “on duty.” An icy, brittle personality, Menachem is constantly angry, a person who does not allow anyone to ask him questions and who never shows any sign of humanity. Menachem’s presence dissipates in the show’s later episodes, and unlike



Yossi's sordid demise, there is no elaboration of a moral decline leading to Menachem's final defeat.

In the show's black or white framework, characters are simple representations. It is inconceivable that the good/bad binary system of *Naji Attallah's Crew* could allow for the possibility of an Israeli intelligence agent with a good heart or a kind soul.

Common Israeli Citizens, the "Jews"

Naji Attallah's Crew, for the most part, portrays Israeli citizens along the lines of the modern forms of European anti-Semitic stereotypes that were introduced into the Middle East in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷

In the show, Israelis are referred to simply as "Jews" on many occasions, and there is no distinction between being Israeli and being Jewish. The contrast between the goodness of the Arab characters and the negative qualities of the Israeli characters is so sharp that, using the principle of liking, the show takes the viewer clearly to the Arab side.

Most of the stereotypes about Jews that appear in the show are related to money, and Israelis/Jews are depicted as greedy and miserly people. Naji Attallah tells some stereotypical jokes about Jews' greed and there are also scenes in which the tight-fistedness of Jewish/Israeli characters is taken to extremes. In the second episode, Yitzhak Halevi, the director of the Israeli bank that Naji Attallah will rob in a following episode, offers him a serving of coffee. Naji Attallah takes the cup and soon realizes that there is almost no coffee or sugar in it.

The show also presents discord between Israelis, inferring to Arab audience the seriousness of presumably corrosive issues present in Israeli society. In the second episode, for example, the powerful director of the Israeli bank, a Sephardic Jew, disparages a weak security engineer of European origin for the Ashkenazi Jews' alleged claims to have built the country. The scene presents strong and bitter Sephardic resentment against presumed Ashkenazi arrogance.

Jewish Symbols

The representation and portrayal of Jewish and Israeli characters and institutions is visually dominated in *Naji Attallah's Crew* by the use—and abuse—of Jewish symbols. In the show, there is not a single office or household in Israel that is not prominently decorated with displays of oversized Jewish symbols. It is next to impossible to watch

⁷ For the modern European forms of anti-Semitism, see the first two chapters of Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide. The Myth of the Jewish World conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).



a scene in *Naji Attallah's Crew* that takes place in Israel and be unaware of the exaggerated numbers of menorahs and Stars of David.

When Israeli characters act deceitfully or malevolently in *Naji Attallah's Crew*, Jewish symbols are sure to be displayed. In all scenes set in offices of the Israeli secret services, the presence of menorahs and Stars of David is overwhelming, and semi-darkness evokes a threatening and sinister atmosphere. The viewer finds Stars of David on the borders of intelligence agency computer screens and as inlays on office conference tables. The show's second episode provides a particularly memorable example. In a scene set in a *Shabak* agent's office, decor includes a flag of Israel on the table, a computer screen with seven Stars of David, a sizeable menorah, and a large portrait of Herzl on the wall, along with a picture of a fighter plane. The scene takes place after sunset and only two small lights glow in the room.

Private spaces, too, are overspread with Jewish symbols. In the twelfth episode, Naji Attallah's crew has arrived in Tel Aviv and prepares to rob the Israeli bank. To disguise themselves, all members of the crew enter an Israeli apartment and change into Israeli military uniforms. As the camera brings viewers into the main room of the apartment, they are confronted with a big menorah and pictures of Golda Meir and David Ben Gurion.

Scenes such as these are typical. In half-light and even darkness, these scenes convey negative associations about the Israeli/Jewish characters. After a few episodes, the viewer has been "trained" to associate Jewish symbols with darkness, evil, and injustice.

Naji Attallah's Crew expands on the Star of David from a theme of home and office decor to ostentatious, oversized jewelry. While it is not uncommon for real-life Jews to wear a Star of David pendant, the show's fictional Jews adorn themselves with weighty, bulky Star of David ornaments. The viewer is exposed to such a garish pendant in the second episode when a woman character named Budur appears on the screen for the first time, presenting herself as an Israeli through and through.

Before going back to her true roots and becoming part of Naji Attallah's crew, Budur gives a speech in one of the classrooms at Tel Aviv University. Some of the students who attend the speech have fierce looks and, of course, the males among them are wearing rather large skullcaps. The whole speech could be the source of a paper by itself because it contains many elements, linguistic and in terms of content, that make it completely unrealistic, artificial and manipulative. It is inspired by extremist views inside Israeli society and it is clearly designed for an Arab audience, not for Tel Aviv University students. The speech includes Hebrew statements such as "*mavet l'aravim*" ("death to Arabs") and, during her speech, Budur shows her admiration for the



carnage in Deir Yassin and Kfar Kassem. These two places are often emotionally recalled by Palestinians and Arab propaganda,⁸ but their presence in the minds of Israeli young people today is not as strong as the show wants to portray.

Recall that these extremist anti-Arab views are presented to Egyptian television viewers by a person wearing a massive, flashy Star of David around her neck. The two elements of anti-Arab racism and Judaism are then associated in the mind of the viewer, forming a cognitive unit. When Budur realizes that she has been brain-washed over the course of many years and decides to go back to her Palestinian father's roots, her whole character changes: her features become less strong and tense, and her face lightens with a sweet smile. When this transformation happens, her apparel changes and the Star of David is replaced by a traditional Palestinian tunic and the white and black Palestinian scarf. The change of attitude is accompanied by a change of clothes and accessories, drawing a clear line between the evil/Jewish symbolic pair and the good/Palestinian symbolic pair.

Zionist Figures

Portraits of Zionist figures have a similar suggestive role in the show as Jewish religious symbols. The presence of portraits of David Ben Gurion, Golda Meir, and especially Theodor Herzl in the corridors and offices of Israeli institutions is overwhelming in *Naji Attallah's Crew*. As in the case of Jewish symbols, these portraits are often illuminated by faint light and conjure a threatening and sinister atmosphere.

Naji Attallah's Crew exploits the associations that Zionist figures provoke in the mind of many Arab viewers. In the Arab World today, the word "Zionist" is often used as an adjective to describe any Israeli or Jewish action, object, or individual, not as an adjective to refer to Zionism as a political or ideological movement. It is common to read in Arab press expressions such as "Zionist planes" to refer to Israeli planes, or "Zionist attacks" to any military action carried out by the State of Israel. In al-Manar, the Lebanese television station affiliated with Hezbollah, the examples are numerous. For instance, in a headline of December 2012, the Israeli ambassador to the European Union was referred as the "Zionist ambassador."⁹ Obviously, "Zionist" here does not apply to the ideology of the ambassador, but is used as a synonym of Israeli.

⁸ A search in any internet search-engine can provide multiple examples. In the website of the Syrian Embassy in Malaysia, for example, the events of 2008 and 2009 in Gaza are compared with Deir Yassin and Kfar Kassem.

http://www.syrianembassy.com.my/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=30&Itemid=47&limit=1&limitstart=2

⁹ الاتحاد الاوروبي يستدعي السفير الصهيوني على خلفية مشاريع الاستيطان الجديدة
Al-Manar, December 5, 2012.



outdoor scenes were shot in Lebanon and the viewer can easily see Lebanese license plates on the cars—and even the emblem of the Lebanese Christian nationalist Phalange Party on a wall. Critics also point out careless mistakes such as a daytime scene of Muslim characters in a coffee shop during Ramadan, and the tight and revealing outfits worn by some “Gazan” women which are far from the norm of the clothes actually worn by most young women in Gaza.

The depiction of the Palestinians in *Naji Attallah’s Crew* follows the oversimplified good/bad binary framework which the show so often reinforces. Palestinians are good-hearted people, constantly harassed by Israeli attacks and suffering the consequences, but always ready to keep fighting. The show compresses all of these stereotypes into a single family, the one who hosts the crew during their layover in Gaza. The head of the household happens to have one son who is a member of Hamas, another who is a member of Fatah, and a third in an Israeli prison. During the crew’s time in Gaza, there is an Israeli bombing, something that does not alarm any Palestinian because it happens every week. This time, however, the son who is a member of Fatah is killed. The Gaza scenes end with a funeral procession down the streets, in which all the members of the crew participate wearing Palestinian scarves. The show, then, crams myriad stereotypes of Palestinian life in the Gaza Strip into the few days that the crew spends there. Again, the show uses the tools of sympathy and contrast to lead the audience towards oversimplified good/bad pairs.

Hezbollah

Naji Attallah’s Crew portrays Lebanese Hezbollah as an organization composed of two distinct kinds of members: disciplined and effective paramilitaries and the Shia clerics in charge of them. The faces of the members of the paramilitary forces are always serious and do not express any feelings. The clerics’ faces, on the other hand, are relaxed, warm, and welcoming. That part of the show was filmed at the beginning of the Syrian civil war, before Hezbollah’s role and participation in the Syrian armed conflict was clear. For this reason, *Naji Attallah’s Crew* presents Hezbollah’s activities as having only one objective, fighting Israel, a cause that the majority of Arab viewers

[84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%AC/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D8%B7%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84.aspx](http://en.arabstoday.net/20120803171716/naji-atallahs-depiction-of-gaza-is-like-the-stone-age.html)
<http://en.arabstoday.net/20120803171716/naji-atallahs-depiction-of-gaza-is-like-the-stone-age.html>



approve of and which makes Hezbollah a sympathetic player in the show's action. Moreover, Hezbollah helps the crew to cross the border into Syria with the assistance of its Syrian *muqawama* counterpart—Hezbollah's Syrian allies being, at that historical moment, part of the "good side" in the show. It is an interesting thought experiment to hypothesize how the portrayal of Hezbollah would have changed if the soap opera had been produced a year later, when the group had been openly criticized by many prominent Sunnis because of its military support to the al-Assad regime.

Syria

Even though the crew spends more time in Syria than in any other country, the resistance in Syria, as a group, is not as visible or represented as resistance groups elsewhere. The burden of representing all characteristics of the Syrian resistance falls on the one and only main Syrian character. This elegant, well-educated man has very good connections with Hezbollah, and works together with the Lebanese Shia group when needed, such as when Naji Attallah's crew needs to escape Israeli pursuit.

The Syrian authorities are shown as approving and collaborating with "the resistance," which may be ironic as an English term from our 2015 perspective. When Naji Attallah is taken to a Syrian security office to be questioned about his true identity and political orientation related to recent events in the country, the security agents free him after being informed on good authority that he belongs to the *muqawama*.

Iraq and the Consequences of the American Invasion

Episodes 24 – 28 are set in Baghdad and various other cities in Iraq. In these episodes, the show primarily addresses two main issues: the consequences of the US occupation and the sectarian violence in the country. These two issues are presented as related in the soap opera, because the "Americans" are considered responsible for the sectarian violence in the country.

There are two Iraqi characters who stand out. The first one is *al-Ustadh* Bahjat, an educated Iraqi who suffers the consequences of the American occupation and the sectarian violence in the country. The second is "Santori," a collaborator who has betrayed his country to get the maximum personal benefit, and who illegally trades in stolen archeological relics. As it has with so many other characters, the show presents a black and white situation with no shades of grey, and as with every other depiction of Arab misery, there is an outside force to blame for the current situation of the country. The novelty in this case is the character of the "bad Iraqi," sinister and mean in appearance, who has used the American presence to enrich himself and who is contributing to the destruction of his own country. Even though this character is Iraqi, the show needs to bring him closer to "the West" to be consistent with the good/bad binary system it follows over the course of all 30 episodes. Israel, the United States,



and “the West” generally embody the bad side in this binary system, so one way or another, all “bad characters” must have a connection with those countries. In the case of “Santori,” the “bad Iraqi,” the show not only makes him a traitor, a thief, and a collaborator, but it abundantly decorates his home with European-style furniture and art. The soap opera, then, showing the corrupted character of “Santori,” employs the psychological weapon of stark contrast to make the “good Iraqis” look morally better. Not only do the stereotypical “bad” and “good” Iraqis differ in personal moral character, but “Santori”’s vulgar, overcrowded, European home decor contrasts with the simplicity of *al-Ustadh* Bahjat’s humble home, where shelves full of books stand out.

Somalia

Until its final two episodes, the soap opera’s main theme is the manhunt for Naji Attallah, with the Israelis and Americans on one side and Naji Attallah’s crew and the helpful *muqawama* on the other. In its last two episodes, which take place in Somalia, the show tries to insert the lofty concepts of justice and injustice into its good/bad binary system. In dire circumstances, viewers learn, some oppressed people may seek justice using methods that are considered outside the law. Basically, the show not only explains but justifies the hijacking of a civilian airliner.

The show’s depictions of Somalia follow the paradigm of its earlier episodes: a grand scheme of the oppressors and the oppressed, with the US and Israel trying to control the world for their own benefit, disregarding the livelihoods, dignity, and rights of individuals living in other countries. In the emotionally satisfying final episode, the weak triumph over the strong.

“AMERICANS” AND THE USA

American Characters

No more than five individual characters in *Naji Attallah’s Crew* are clearly identifiable as US citizens, but their unappealing portrayal throughout the serial stereotypes them in front of the Egyptian audience, sketching out and establishing Americans’ political, cultural, and national flaws. The American character introduced in an early episode, for example, is politically powerful yet a boorish failure as a man, easily bested both physically and intellectually by an Egyptian. With rather clunky symbolism, he is deceived, emasculated, and manipulated by a treacherous Israeli. This American character is a member of the US Congress on vacation at an Egyptian Red Sea resort. The physically unattractive man, in his fifties and tending toward the fat, is shown wearing a big hat, golden-framed sunglasses, a red shirt, and shorts. The American lawmaker’s garish appearance contrasts with that of the Egyptian characters who share scenes with him: managers and security officers wearing dark suits or fashionable sport clothes. A sub-plot develops as the American stands at the edge of a



pier, complaining to Egyptian security men about the delay of his wife, who left many hours ago with an Egyptian instructor to dive in the sea. The wife finally returns with her instructor, a womanizing young Egyptian who will later become one of the members of Naji Attallah's crew. It is clear to the viewer that the woman has had an affair with the Egyptian instructor, and was unfaithful to her American husband. The scene reveals another morally relevant twist: the cheating wife of the US senator is Israeli.

As stereotypers, the show's writers and directors craft individual characters' behavior, appearance, morality, and intelligence and present them in such a way that the audience will likely ascribe these attributes to all who share the character's identity. The wife, a genuine Israeli, is presented as counterfeit in her loyalty to her husband. It is interesting to note that no Arab woman in the entire 30-episode running of *Naji Attallah's Crew* is presented as unfaithful to her husband, but there is more than one Israeli woman who is shown cheating on her spouse. The wife of the engineer in charge of the Israeli bank's security system is caught on video having an affair with the *Shabak* agent. Unfaithfulness of Israeli women, rather than philandering by Egyptian men, is the theme that ties this scene with the serial's other portrayal of marital infidelity.

A second American official is also portrayed in the show: a diplomat who works in the US embassy in Damascus. The diplomat, who is referred to as "Mr. David," first appears in episode 22 in a half-lighted room, talking on the phone with Naji Attallah's nemesis, Mossad agent Menachem. The American's office appears remarkably similar to the Israeli offices viewers have seen before: the room is almost dark, and the scene's only illuminated spots are the diplomat's upper body, a computer screen, and an American flag. The only differences between the American and Israeli offices are that the American office displays a US rather than an Israeli flag and the Israeli office is adorned with specifically Jewish symbols and Zionist portraits.

The US diplomat is portrayed as at the disposal of the Mossad agent, following orders without questions or complaints. The Mossad agent even hangs up the phone abruptly, without any negative reaction from the US diplomat. Here again, the purpose of this scene is to advance a sweeping generalization about the overall Israel-US relationship from what the viewer has witnessed in the show. The US government is always at the disposal of Israel, which manipulates it and dictates its policies.

The physical aspect of the security guards at the American embassy in Damascus is also worth mentioning as we review stereotyping in the show. The security personnel guarding the entrance of the building and some other areas inside the embassy are probably the biggest, fiercest, and most physically imposing individuals which *Naji Attallah's Crew* portrays throughout its 30 episodes. These hulking presences appear



completely impersonal and they are all bald, almost robot-looking. As with other Americans, intelligence is not a prominent characteristic in the presentation of these security men. Americans themselves are simply hired guns, they are well-trained and prepared for violence, unremarkable in their mental capacity but ready to execute Israeli orders with dispatch.

Constant Presence of the “Americans”

The number of identifiable US citizens in *Naji Attallah’s Crew* is quite small, but the presence of the “Americans” as an entity that controls and manipulates events in Arab countries is very strong in the show. The most obvious examples are in the scenes that take place in Iraq, but we have unmistakable instances of this phenomenon in the episodes set in Syria, as well.

The “Americans” are accused of being responsible for the sectarian violence in Iraq, which came not only as a result of their occupation, but was incited by the Americans so they could have the country under their control. The show does not mention specific examples of how the Americans incited this violence, but it is treated as a fact. Episode 25 presents Naji Attallah learning from an educated Iraqi professor about the changes that the country experienced after the occupation. The Iraqi citizen compares the situation of the country before and after the American intervention, and the viewer deduces from this lesson that nothing essential has improved, that old problems have been substituted by new problems, and that the Americans are not better than Saddam Husayn.

Turning to Syria, the “Americans” are generally disliked and popular sentiment is against them. In a disturbing scene in episode 23, Naji Attallah travels by car in the Syrian countryside. A Syrian supporter of the *muqawama* is with him in the car and, after hearing that a Syrian group has claimed responsibility for an attack on the US embassy in Damascus, the man happily exclaims “Bravo!” The Syrian man is presented to viewers as a polite, charming, and helpful character, a gentleman in all but name. The show makes the Syrian into a likeable fellow, making it easy for the audience to share his opinion, which they are pre-disposed to agree with. It stands to reason that Arab viewers would always consider an Israeli attack on an Arab embassy a crime, but in September 2012 the popular mood was such that some Arab rioters felt justified in breaching US diplomatic missions in Egypt, Libya, Sudan, and Yemen. The viewer is clearly influenced by the way the characters are presented, and he is more inclined to share blindly the views of the characters he likes, than to analyze the validity of those views in general.

CONCLUSION



Naji Attallah's Crew was the most watched Ramadan soap opera in Egypt in 2012. One indubitable reason for this success was the presence of the Egyptian actor and comedian Adel Imam, who is considered one of the most famous Egyptian actors and whose mere presence attracted the attention of viewers. But the serial was 30 episodes long, and there are reasons beyond star-power that the soap opera held its audience's attention. This paper has tried to analyze one of them, specifically, the construction of almost all characters using stereotypes that facilitated audience sympathy.

The soap opera, set in different countries in the Middle East, presented the diverse conflicts that afflict that region through the eyes of Naji Attallah's crew in their encounters with citizens of Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. By necessity and design, most characters lacked depth and were built on well-known stereotypes. The non-Egyptian characters of the show lacked individualism and uniqueness, and they were two-dimensional images conforming to the expectations of viewers about people who live in particular regions.

In oversimplifying complex issues, the show drew sharp, well-defined lines between good and evil, between victims and perpetrators. As we saw throughout the article, the good side included most Arab people, presented as victims of outside powers. On the evil side, we found the United States and Israel, and those Arabs who collaborated with them. There were no shades of grey, and all elements of the show—music, light, dialogue—were used to make this good/evil division clear to the audience. The viewer is clearly influenced by the way the characters are presented, and he is more inclined to blindly accept the views of the characters he likes, no matter what they are, than to analyze the validity of those views in general.

The good/evil binary system was a crucial element in the design of the soap opera, and there were constant manipulations of the viewer's feelings to prevent him from rationalizing the pros and cons of any situation. As we saw, one of the tools used to manipulate the audience was stark contrast, presenting the Israeli components in such a negative way that everything appearing in opposition to them seemed to have good qualities. The target audience of the show, the Egyptian Arab viewer, also leaned towards sharing the opinion of those Arab characters because of their similarity with the viewer in terms of language, Arabness, and, most of the time, religion. Another way of manipulating the audience was through the character of Naji Attallah, who possessed a high degree of authority. Naji Attallah represented the father figure of the story, and the viewer tended to accept his views and decisions because of the authority that he embodied. All these mechanisms, then, maintained and promoted the good/evil division and prevented the viewer from questioning the validity of the arguments presented.



Unfortunately, *Naji Attallah's Crew* does not represent an artistic innovation and did not advance tolerance and co-existence between people, no matter their faith or nationality. The show merits study because of its significant popularity and because it is another proof of the existence of certain stereotypes in the Arab-defined Middle East. Anti-American and anti-Semitic attitudes are strongly present, and *Naji Attallah's Crew* seems to make no effort to reconsider or even question their validity. They are treated as a given and a non-questionable reality, and rational arguments are constructed over the assumed validity of these negative stereotypes. The Anti-Defamation League, a US-based watchdog group, denounced the program's anti-Semitic aspects in February 2013, and many Arab media outlets criticized the show, especially its trivialization of Arab-Israeli issues and portrayal of scenes and characters in the Gaza Strip.

That people hold stereotypes of one another is a universal phenomenon, and not restricted to specific regions or people in the world. However, certain stereotypes carry the danger of vilifying people to the point of dehumanizing certain groups, whether religious, ethnic, or national. Dehumanization positions an "in-group" above an inferior "out-group" and entitles individuals from the "in-group" to discriminate against "out-group" members, taking actions that members of the "in-group" would never take against one of their own. *Naji Attallah's Crew* was intended to be a comedy and it succeeded because of its witty dialogue and funny situations. However, this comical soap opera was also a Trojan horse that carried a dangerous weapon: the continuation and validation of destructive stereotypes. More than this, using emotionally manipulative tools of influence, it reinforced dehumanizing stereotypes' legitimacy and interfered with its audience's critical thinking.

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