'Reality is Not Enough':
The Politics of Arab Reality TV
By Marc Lynch

The neo-conservative *Weekly Standard* has called it "the best hope of little Americas developing in the Middle East."(1) *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman enthused that it was the closest thing to democracy the Arab world has ever seen.(2) Sheikh Abd al-Rahman al-Suadais, imam of the Grand Mosque of Mecca, has denounced them as "weapons of mass destruction that kill values and virtue." Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the main Islamist face of Al Jazeera and one of the most popular Islamist clerics today, has complained that they "are instruments of cultural and intellectual invasion of the *Ummah*."(3) What could possibly produce such an unlikely consensus? Only one thing: the threat posed by reality television to the Arab status quo. The first two commentators, of course, view such a threat as a good thing. Hotly contested elections and the casual portrayal of men and women living together—along with the demand for what the *Weekly Standard* jokingly called "the unalienable right to watch bad TV"—posed a serious challenge to the conservative, repressive Arab status quo. For the latter two, the challenge of reality TV lay in its affront to conservative morality, as well as its seduction of Muslim youth away from politics and prayer.

Sexy singer Haifa Wehbe gets her manicured hands dirty on the popular LBC reality TV show Al Wadi (The Farm).

Whenever such a consensus appears, it is probably wrong. Reality TV poses less of a threat to Islamism than the rhetoric of Islamist leaders might suggest, and its contributions to Arab democratization are rather more ambivalent than its enthusiasts might hope. But reality TV, and the extraordinary amount of political commentary it has generated, offers a window into the cultural politics of an Arab world in ferment. A June episode of Al Jazeera's most popular political talk show, *The Opposite Direction,* asked whether reality TV and music video clips should be seen as an American-Saudi conspiracy to destroy Arab and Islamic political unity. An LBC talk show debated the choice between *Star Academy* and Bin Laden. Dozens of op-eds have filled the pages of the elite press, with virtually every leading national and Pan-Arab pundit offering views on the meaning of Star Academy. Voting results on shows such as *Al Wadi* (The Farm) are routinely

reported as straight news stories. The liberal Egyptian daily *Al Masry Al Youm* took time out of a contentious domestic political scene to complain bitterly about the selection process for *Star Academy 3* (not even its outcome, or any show which had aired!) with stories claiming "inside information" that the producers did not want an Egyptian to win again after the victory of Mohammed Attiyah.(4) Even the eminent political columnist Fahmy Howeidy, not usually known for attention to televised popular culture, found that the intensity of the arguments on the op-ed pages about these shows compelled him to comment.(5)

Why so much fuss over what at first glance would appear to be trashy television programs? Partly because like sexy music video clips, reality television has sparked a powerful backlash: Islamists and cultural conservatives have made it an issue by virtue of their own outrage.(6) The uniqueness of this backlash is often exaggerated by those overly focused on the pathologies of Islam. Contra *The Wall Street Journal*, it isn't only the Arab and Islamic world which "isn't ready" for reality TV.(7) Elite and religious criticism of reality TV has been almost as universal across cultures as has been reality TV's runaway success. Pope John Paul II, like Focus on the Family's James Dobson, has spoken out against the "degrading" qualities of reality television. *The New Yorker* and *Le Monde* alike have run scathing denunciations of the reality television phenomenon.(8)

As for democracy, the most successful reality TV shows, such as *Super Star*, *Star Academy*, and *Al Wadi*, use audience participation and voting to determine the winners of competitions. These methods have seemed revolutionary to many observers in an Arab world characterized by repressive, non-democratic governments. The response has been extraordinary, as millions of votes have been cast in support of contestants, thousands of contestants have applied to compete, and major political figures have called in to express their support for a national champion. Here too, the novelty is exaggerated. In China, for example, some 400 million people tuned in to the August 27 finale of the reality TV program *Super Girl*—virtually identical to the Arab *Super Star*. The political discussions have been remarkably similar, with the state-run daily *Beijing Today* asking on its front page "Is *Super Girl* a force for democracy?"(9)

Cultural destruction and democratic salvation are rather weighty burdens to place on televised variety shows. Arab reality TV represents an important and fascinating political and cultural

A cartoon shows "types of TV viewers!" From left to right, viewers of reality TV, video clips and headline news.

phenomenon, but expectations that these programs are hothouses of democracy training a new generation of Arabs in the delights of voting are wildly overblown. Voting on reality TV does nothing to actually teach Arabs the hard work of democracy—organizing, defining interests, cooperating. It is "democracy lite," offering the formalities of democracy without the substance: Democracy is just voting, among pre-selected candidates, with little really at stake and with none of the discursive will-formation essential to meaningful participation. The real impact of reality television lies in exploring the possibilities of new media technologies, and normalizing their use among a wide swathe of Arab youth. Reality TV nurtures an already powerful urge for participatory cultural forms, while indirectly—but significantly—challenging the Islamist claim to offer the only viable model for society.

The Evolution of Arab Reality TV

Reality TV came late to the Arab world. The lineage of reality television is often traced back to the PBS documentary *An American Family*, which tracked the turbulent lives of the Loud family over 13 episodes in the early 1970s. A second wave of reality TV dates back to the early 1990s, with the Fox program *Cops* presenting supposedly live, raw footage of police in action. MTV's *The Real World*, which debuted in 1992, showed the lives of a group of carefully selected young people. The Dutch *Big Brother* pioneered reality TV in Europe, with its successful model—part anthropology experiment, part voyeurism, part 'competition' with viewer participation—setting the standard for much of what would follow. The breakout success of *Survivor* in the United States confirmed the appeal of the reality TV format. Over the last decade, reality TV in a dizzying array of formats has swept the world, setting off howls of protest nearly everywhere it hits.

Given the globalization of the media, and the satellite television revolution of the 1990s, it was inevitable that reality programming would also hit the Middle East. Arabs with access to satellite television had certainly seen reality TV before, in American and European flavors; In 2002, every bar in Beirut seemed to be airing *Model Flat*, a British variation of MTV's *The Real World,* with a brilliant twist of making the flat-mates supermodels. But such programs lacked several ingredients which would prove critical to the

success of the new wave of reality TV, above all viewer participation through various forms of voting.

The forerunner of the Arab reality television craze was a game show: *Who Will Win a Million?* Launched in 2000 by the Saudi-owned MBC, this Arab copy of the Regis Philbin game show hit succeeded where many other copies of Western programming had failed. Whether its success was due to an unexpected Arab hunger for quiz shows, or to the urbane sexiness of its host George Kordahi, is unclear. But popular, it surely was. Kordahi himself claimed that 80 percent of Arab viewers watched his show, and that "I wouldn't be exaggerating if I said that this programme brings the whole Arab world together."(10) When he hosted a Saudi telethon for Palestinians, Kordahi raised $100 million in one day in April. Faisal al-Qassem, Al Jazeera's leading talk show host, claimed that MBC deliberately scheduled *Who Will Win a Million?* against his *Opposite Direction* in an attempt to cut into his audience.

Who Will Win a Million? provoked some backlash, as when a top Egyptian cleric, Nasr Farid Wassel, denounced "high-stakes games" as a form of gambling. But Sheikh Mohammed al-Tantawi of Al Azhar demurred, saying that "these competitions address a series of useful religious, historical, cultural, and scientific questions and their goal is to spread knowledge among the public."(11) The program's rather high-brow and topical approach, with questions ranging over Arab and Islamic history and culture, and its overt homage to Pan-Arab political concerns such as the Palestinian issue (one of Kordahi's most popular taglines was "greetings to our steadfast people in Palestine") insulated it against political and cultural criticism. *Who Will Win a Million?* was a game show which almost all sectors of the Arab political realm could embrace. It promoted useful knowledge, it had the "right" politics, and it used its popularity to promote the "right" causes.

Who Will Win a Million? sparked some imitators, such as *The Mission* (an Al Manar game show in which contestants competed to be the first to reach a virtual "Jerusalem"), with varying degrees of success. An LBC version of *The Weakest Link* died quickly, with some complaining that its host, who modeled herself closely on the original caustic British host, was "too masculine." While quiz shows will never go away—Kordahi himself is set to host *Who Will Win Two Million?* in his grand return to MBC this November—the future lay elsewhere in reality TV.

Arab reality TV had a bit of a rocky start. The first Arab-produced reality TV show, *Ala al-Hawa Sawa* (*On the Air Together*), adapted a mix between *The Dating Game* and *The Bachelorette* to an Arabic cultural environment, with female contestants sharing a house and surveying a variety of suitors with the end goal of an arranged marriage. While this generated some controversy, it seemed to galvanize more critical commentary than viewers. MBC was so careful to avoid offending conservative sentiment that it drained the

show of much of what viewers might find appealing: the women complied with a strict dress code (no halter tops, mini-skirts, bra straps, or revealing outfits) and rules governing personal conduct (no tatoos, no smoking). At least one contestant reportedly left the show because she was bored. In its controversial finale, the winner refused to marry her designated groom. While this may not have reached the absurd levels of Fox Television's *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?*—whose centerpiece turned out to be less wealthy than advertised, and have a police record for abusing women, leading the unlucky 'winner' to quickly annul the televised wedding— it did little to generate enthusiasm for a second round the next year.

MBC had another high profile misfire with *Al Ra'is*, the official Arab adaptation of the globally successful *Big Brother* franchise. Filmed in Bahrain, it brought together 12 young men and women to live under one roof, with 24 hour surveillance capturing their boredom and their contrived contests alike. Like *Ala al-Hawa* (also an MBC progamme), *Al Ra'is* had no nudity, no filming of bathrooms or bedrooms, and an elaborate attempt to respect conservative values which included religious supervision. Nevertheless, Bahraini Islamists launched a campaign against the programme, including large demonstrations and a parliamentary inquest. A welcoming kiss by a Saudi man on a Tunisian woman's cheek on the first episode became the rallying point for a denunciation of the show's depravity and indecency. MBC canceled the program after only a few episodes, explaining that it did not wish to be the cause of cultural tensions.

Undaunted by these failures, Arab television stations looking for the next big thing experimented with dozens of other formats. Among the more notable were *Soccer Stars*, adaptations of *Fear Factor* and *Road Rules*, a show sending young teenagers to an African nature preserve, Dubai's *Green Light* (solving real social problems, such as how to help Iraqi children), and an Iraqi version of *Extreme Home Makeover* in which participants had their war-damaged homes rebuilt.

But Arab reality TV finally found the winning formula when producers embraced the rise of Rotana TV and the overwhelming popularity of sexy music video clips. *Super Star*, *Star Academy*, and *Al Wadi* embraced the video clip revolution in a symbiotic relationship. Video clip stars like Haifa Wehbi, Wael Kfouri, Nelli Maqdassi, and Elissa appeared on *Star Academy* to sing with the hopefuls, while the winners were seamlessly absorbed into the pop music playlists. Unlike the Saudi-owned MBC, Lebanon's LBC and Future TV had no compunctions about showing female skin—and lots of it (it would probably take a dozen of Haifa Wehbi's outfits on *Al Wadi* to stitch together one outfit deemed suitable for *Ala al-Hawa*).

These music-themed reality programs proved extraordinarily popular.

Bilal Labban, coordinator of *Super Star*, claims that the second season received some 80 million calls. One commonly cited statistic is that 80 percent of Lebanese between 18 and 35 watched the second season of *Star Academy*. *Super Star's* contests, and *Star Academy* and *Al Wadi* "primes" (the

Celebrating in the "Winners' Circle" of Star Academy.

weekly, multi-hour combination of competition and variety shows) became region-wide events, emptying the streets and dominating popular conversation. According to the Arab Advisors Group, advertising rates on Arab satellite channels skyrocket during reality TV programs, up to 130 percent of regular prime time rates. Woe unto the casual cell phone user who tried to get an international line during a *Star Academy* prime or a *Super Star* showdown! And when Al Arabiya TV's Website reported on *Al Wadi*, those stories were almost always the "most viewed" and "most e-mailed" stories of the day.

The first big hit was Future TV's *Super Star* in 2003. This was a pure variety show modeled after *American Idol* and *Pop Idol*, with viewer participation and voting but without the "reality TV" accoutrements of later programs (round-the-clock surveillance, concocted 'games' and competitions). *Super Star* operated as an elimination tournament, pitting contestants against each other in contests determined by audience voting. The survivors advanced round by round, culminating in a final showdown. In the first season, Jordan's Diana Karazon defeated Syria's Rwaida Attieh with 52 percent of the vote, sparking the first wave of enthusiastic press commentary about the novelty of a close, contested Arab election. In the second series, Palestinian champion Ammar Hassan lost a bitterly contested final to the Libyan Ayman al-Attar, sparking bitter denunciations of Arab abandonment of the Palestinians ("They [Arabs] sold Jerusalem … it's no surprise they now sold out Ammar.")(12) and dark grumblings about the machinations of Moammar Qaddafi to ensure a Libyan victory. By this time, *Super Star* had become a major international event, with coverage of its voting ranging from the rapturous to the bemused on a wide range of Western television stations, newspapers, and magazines. Its third season was postponed with the assassination of station owner and former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, sparking a rather fierce debate over whether popular entertainment should be held hostage to political events.

LBC's *Star Academy* pushed the envelope considerably further, marrying the pop music aspect to the *Big Brother* genre of reality television. Beginning in December 2003, 16 contestants of both genders were sequestered in a house under 24-hour camera

surveillance (available by subscription on a dedicated satellite channel) and bi-weekly "prime" episodes on LBC featuring musical performances (often starring famous Arab pop singers) and edited highlights of the week. Once a week, two contestants chosen by the class teachers faced off in an elimination match, with the winner chosen by viewer calls. The eventual winner got $50,000, a record deal, and a guaranteed entry into Arab pop stardom. When Egypt's Mohammed Attia defeated Kuwait's Bashar el-Shatti 55.1 to 44.9 percent in the first *Star Academy*, he was mobbed at airport on return to Cairo. The Saudi Hisham Abd al-Rahman's triumph over the Tunisian Amani Swissi in the second season sparked a national—indeed, regional—debate over the meaning of such a pop culture spectacle for a putatively conservative society; Hisham himself was arrested by the Virtue Police after being mobbed by young women and men at a shopping mall after his return.

Finally, the 2005 LBC reality TV show *Al Wadi* represented a perfect storm of popular culture synergies. In its format, *Al Wadi* (based on the French original *The Farm*) was no different than any number of other similar programs. Fourteen "celebrities" (of varying celebrity) came to a farm north of Beirut, where they lived like any other farmers: milking cows, tending crops, and putting on a weekly singing and dancing variety show. Once a week, two contestants were nominated by the instructors to compete, with one to be voted off the farm by the viewers. *Al Wadi* loved to pull stunts such as reuniting guest Jacqueline Khoury with her brother for the first time in four years (he lives in Australia) on the air, or allowing another guest a few tearful, joyous minutes (on the air) with her two children. But what made *Al Wadi* special was its permanent host: the hyper-popular video clip star, buxom Lebanese Shia sensation Haifa Wehbi. With Wehbi on board, *Al Wadi* emerged as the perfect synthesis of the two hottest trends in Arab entertainment: video clips and reality TV.

Where other forms of reality TV were burdened with serious problems of cultural translation—what is the point of a *Big Brother* with no chance of "accidental" nudity or an illicit peek at two house-mates engaged in "secret" sexual activity? How could *Ala al-Hawa*, where the women were forbidden to wear revealing clothing, compete with the barely dressed pop singers on Rotana TV? The musical variety programs faced no such problems. Their youthful exuberance and infectious joy captivated even cynical viewers. The oft-aired complaint that Arab reality TV is nothing but a blind copying of Western forms breaks down here. While *Star Academy*, *Super Star*, and *Al Wadi* all adapted Western programs, they developed strong Arab identities of their own. Few American reality TV shows can match the infectious joy of the musical performances and variety skits of *Star Academy* or *Al Wadi*. And the music—like the pop music of the video clips—is very much Arab.

There is no guarantee that this relatively high point represents the highest stage of evolution for Arab reality TV. One trend has been

towards more locally oriented programs like an Iraqi version of *Super Star*, for instance. Another has been towards further adaptation of Western forms. The latter trend is rather troubling. In the US, the networks' search for something new in reality TV tended towards the freak show: from the relatively tame *Bachelor and Bachelorette* to *Joe Millionaire* (where the bachelor pretends to be a millionaire but he's really dirt poor), to *Temptation Island* (where sexy mercenaries try to seduce married couples on camera), to the spider-eating, the dwarfs and the freaks. It is no accident that "reality TV" has become globally synonymous with poor taste. Will that be the trajectory of Arab reality TV? If so, will the celebratory applause fade even as network profits rise?

'Democracy'

Many enthusiasts have argued that the participatory nature of reality TV offers Arabs their first real taste of democracy. Thomas Friedman was only the first of dozens of Western pundits to declare that the hard fought, close victory of *Super Star's* winners contrasted with the typical 99 percent victories enjoyed by Arab leaders. And there is certainly something to marvel at in the heated, fervent embrace of voting on these programs. Contrary to popular American belief, however, voting in elections is not new to Arabs. Most Arab states have held contested Parliamentary or municipal elections, even if—like reality TV—those elections produce no significant political results. Ultimately, the kind of "democracy" promoted by Arab reality TV is of such a superficial, misleading variety as to actually undermine moves towards a more politically significant model.

Actual voting behavior offers some pause. These programs in some ways encourage the worst kind of mass bloc voting: Libyans vote for Libyans, whatever the qualities of the candidate. Candidates became national champions, with votes becoming something of a regional census rather than a measure of talent. And those national competitions reflected uncomfortable realities of class and wealth. Palestinians could only complain enviously against the well-funded publicity directed by the Libyan regime. Everyone complained about the dominance of Saudis, or the deference shown to Kuwaitis by networks who wanted to keep Gulf interest (see below).

Then, consider the shenanigans. King Abdullah of Jordan allowed every Jordanian to phone free of charge to vote for the Jordanian candidate in *Super Star* Diana Karazon (she won). Egypt's MobiNil offered every person who voted for Attia a free minute's call. Libya's Moammar Qaddafi was accused of spending millions to ensure the Libyan victory—he backed a nationwide publicity campaign and arranged for free phone calls to vote in favor of Ayman al-Attar. Palestinian officials cut costs of phone calls by 20 percent and set up 150 special channels to make sure callers got through in support of Ammar Hassan. That Arab dictators so enthusiastically support the interest of their citizens in these programs should immediately give pause to those inclined to see voting on *Super Star* as a

challenge to the authoritarian status quo.

All of this could discredit democracy rather than inculcate it. In response to Lebanese complaints that their candidate on *Super Star* had lost because of Syrian and Jordanian intervention, one Jordanian mused that "the riot and Future TV's emphasis that there was vote-rigging just support our Arab regimes' claims that we are not ready for democracy yet."(13) When the Tunisian Amani lost to the Saudi Hisham in the second *Star Academy*, the Tunisian press could talk of nothing else for days, with the most prominent complaint being that she lost not because of less talent but because larger numbers of wealthier Saudis voted more often.(14) Some complaints went even farther, questioning whether the votes had been counted honestly. For these Tunisians, her rightful victory was "stolen" from her because LBC wanted a Saudi to win for economic reasons. In response to such complaints, *Super Star* contracted with a British company to manage the voting process—a step towards international monitoring of elections which does compare favorably with, say, the September 2005 Egyptian presidential elections, which blocked international monitors.

LBC's *Al Wadi* took the open manipulation of the voting process to new levels, according to *Assafir* columnist Riyadh Qabisi, as the "veiled professor" announcing the results threw out votes deemed "not credible," granting the nominee with fewer votes (Farah Bin Rajab) the victory.(15) For Qabisi, this moment suggested that LBC had always manipulated the results, creating a "democracy of worthiness [*dimoqratiya jidara*]" as decreed by the management rather than a democracy honoring the will of the voters. "Why is the 'professor' unable to just say that we do not want this voting because it conflicts with our media agenda and our future plans to have a showdown between two women from the Gulf and their supporters?" Because this would remove the charade of democracy from a program built on consumption, i.e. the commercial interest in attracting viewers from the wealthy advertising markets of the Gulf. Qabisi concludes by linking the dishonesty of reality TV to the reality of Arab political elections: "the reality is that regimes cook the results of elections if they aren't satisfied with them, with the argument of worthiness ... or terrorism!"

The praise for *Super Star* or *Star Academy* as an example of Arab democracy perfectly exemplifies the shallowness of much American thinking about democracy: form without substance. Yes, Arabs vote… but for what? And how? The democracy of reality TV offers a perfect metaphor for the kind of "democracy" being pushed by many current democracy promoters: the formal mechanisms without the ingredients which make the act of voting significant. Elections alone do not make for a robust democracy. There is no element of discursive will-formation, as citizens deliberate over matters of collective concern. There is no element of accountability or oversight, where policy makers might be made responsive to citizens through a need for popular support. Above all, there is no

challenge to the continued dominance of an entrenched political and economic elite. Voting on reality TV creates the illusion of participation and of popular sovereignty, without demanding any parallel sacrifice or personal investment, without the very real risks faced by real democracy activists: beatings, lost jobs, arbitrary arrest, torture, threats to family members. Like Al Jazeera online polls, reality TV gives the illusion of participation and democracy, but is easily manipulated and has no real impact on the world. As Badria al-Bishr pointed out in *Asharq Al Awsat*, the "democracy of *Star Academy*"—in which votes actually count—should show the citizen that his vote has value, and perhaps inspire greater participation in the Saudi municipal elections.(16) But what if those votes do not in fact have any value? Is *Star Academy* only setting Arab youth up for another round of disappointment?

The Islamist Backlash

What about the challenge to political Islam? Does reality TV offer a profound challenge to the conservative norms of Islam, or to the political agenda of Islamist radicals? The backlash is real, as is the challenge, but both need to be contextualized.

An anti-reality TV poster reading "Satan's Academy"

Criticisms of reality TV by prominent Islamists are plentiful. Sheikh Abd Al Rahman Al Suadais, imam of the Grand Mosque of Mecca, most famously called reality TV shows "weapons of mass destruction that kill values and virtue." Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the popular host of Al Jazeera's *Al Shariyah wal-Hayah* (Religious Law and Life), similarly complained in the spring of 2004 that "reality TV and *Star Academy* especially are instruments of cultural and intellectual invasion of the *Ummah*." For Qaradawi, *Star Academy* and its like distract the youth of Islam from their religion and from real political issues: "these imported programs do not embody the personality of the *Ummah* and do not represent its true face." A popular Saudi campaign denounced *Star Academy* as "Academiat Al Shaytan (Satan's Academy)" in the talks and recordings of the "Mashayekh Al Sahwa" (The Awakening Clergy)."(17) These cheap cassettes, according to Faisal Abbas, urge the boycott of such shows, which help "an alliance of infidels and promoters of lust" in their mission to "target the nation." The publisher claims to have sold a million copies of "Satan's Academy" in a week as part of an Internet-based group called "Vice Busters." An Al Arabiya TV report suggested that a good number of the cassettes denouncing *Star Academy* and its like contained clear incitements to violence.(18)

Talk has at times progressed to action. In March 2004, the Saudi-owned MBC ceased production of an Arabic version of the reality program *Big Brother* in the face of intense protests by Bahraini Islamists. Islamist members of Parliament in Bahrain marched in protest against what they considered to be a major threat to religious values, taking their campaign to heated debates in Parliament, Friday sermons, and dozens of newspaper articles. In January 2005, Kuwait's Minister of Information Mohammed Abu al-Hassan was forced to step down in advance of Parliamentary hearings over his allowing "immoral" concerts in the country. This followed a May 2004 *fatwa* by the ministry of Islamic affairs prohibiting music shows with female entertainers such as *Star Academy*, and a successful campaign spearheaded by Islamist MP Walid al-Tabtabai for a government ban on holding a *Star Academy* concert in Kuwait. The next month, Kuwait's liberal Minister of Information was forced from office by Islamists enraged that he had permitted a concert by the stars of *Star Academy* in the Emirate. All of these protestors claimed to fear that reality TV shows—with their portrayal of the everyday lives of young men and women, combined with region-wide voting for the winners—posed a real threat to cultural and political values.

But many observers miss the point of these Islamist objections to reality TV. For most Islamists, this is only one front among many in a wider culture war. The popularity of *Star Academy* and *Super Star* works to their advantage by giving them a powerful wedge issue. Just as the James Dobsons of America need a "Sponge Bob" to galvanize the rank and file, to drive fund-raising and to push their political and cultural agenda (as in the Focus on the Family leader's attack on the alleged homosexuality of the PBS cartoon in January 2005), Islamists need resonant issues to help make their case. The over-the-top Islamist rhetoric denouncing *Star Academy* resembles the denunciations of popular culture issued by the Family Research Council, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Dobson. Because their political fortunes rest on fanning the flames of outrage among culturally conservative citizens, they will seize on whatever might be popular among youth—and alarming to concerned parents—to press their case. The rallies and protests over *Star Academy* come from this process of cultivating a mobilized conservative public through manufactured outrage over popular culture, rather than anything specific to Arab reality television.

Jordan, Bahrain, and Kuwait—the countries with some of the strongest Islamist campaigns against reality TV (and video clips)—are also three countries with relatively Western-oriented governments faced with an Islamist Parliamentary opposition which is largely stymied from pressing serious issues of foreign or domestic policy. *Big Brother* and *Star Academy* offer a "safe" area of cultural critique which allows Islamist politicians to hold marches, demand Parliamentary inquiries, and flex their muscles without violating any of the real "red lines" governing politics in those countries. In Kuwait, the Islamist campaign against *Star Academy*, which toppled Information Minister Mohammed Abu al-Hassan,

focused on his failure to protect social values, but the real issue may well have been that he was the only Shia member of the Cabinet. Even Saudi Arabia fits this general profile, as conservatives opposed to proposed political reforms—and threatened by the passions for pop culture among Saudi youth revealed by the voting on these programs—can publicly rail against a topic without triggering the regime's newfound sensitivity to radical Islamist terrorism.

The gender norms and the infectious joy of the variety shows do offer an appealing and strong contrast to the puritan Islamist aesthetic. Like the music video clips with which they have such synergies, they offer role models for ways of life different from local norms, while breaking down regional and national stereotypes. I've argued elsewhere that sexy video clips offer an alternative to Islamism in terms of personal behavior, dress, and gender relations. Do reality TV shows offer such an alternative? Some claim that they do. Zahra Mara'ai argues, for example, that reality TV shed light for the first time on the reality of gender relations in Arab societies.(19) Conservatives retorted that the reality programs did not offer an accurate picture, as in one Bahraini Islamist MP's complaint about *Al Ra'is*: "this program showed an abnormal way of living, which is totally opposed to our thoughts, culture, everything. It is not reality TV at all, especially in our part of the world."(20)

The surveillance and portrayal of routine, daily behavior on the *Star Academy-* style programs poses a distinctive challenge in the Middle East. Arab and Islamic cultures have traditionally had very different conceptions of the public/private divide than in the West. While Americans and Europeans were certainly titillated by the raw footage of young contestants brushing their teeth, watching TV slumped on a couch, or cooking dinner, the less rigid boundaries of the private sphere in the West more easily tolerated such transgressions. Televised portrayals of such intimate private moments resonated quite differently in societies founded on very different notions of privacy. For example, Kuwaiti star Zahra al-Kharaji came under fire from Kuwaiti Islamists for appearing on *Al Wadi*, not so much for the singing and dancing but for allowing herself to be filmed changing clothes, cooking meals, and cleaning. As one Islamist Kuwaiti MP complained, televising such activities demonstrated "Western values, foreign to our conservative Gulf societies."(21)

The challenge posed by reality TV might be seen not so much as one to Islamism, then, but to a wider notion of cultural patriarchy. The values embodied in these programs—relaxed gender relations, personal meritocracy, infectiously joyful music—are youth values. The contestants on *Star Academy* and *Super Star* are not waiting to be appointed to a government job, they are putting themselves forward in pursuit of a very individual dream. Such an affirmation of the virtues of youthful ambition necessarily challenges some of the most deeply held norms of patriarchal, conservative societies—independently of specific Islamist political agendas.

There is no obvious reason that reality TV could not be used in the service of Islamist messages, of course. Assafir columnist Ghassan Razaq recently wondered why Islamic television had not appropriated the reality TV form in the way that Sami Youssef did the video clip form.(22) As TBS Managing Editor Lindsay Wise suggests in this issue, such an adaptation may not be far away. Egyptian televangelist Amr Khaled has frequently discussed plans to create such an Islamic reality TV show, and even held a contest of his own asking viewers to write religious song lyrics to be recorded by "repentant" *Super Star* contestants.(23)

The Politics of Reality TV

Arab reality TV has often been asked to carry a remarkable political burden. It isn't easy for a musical variety show to carry the democratic hopes of the Arab nation, or to win the day against al-Qaeda, after all. What are two aspiring pop singers to do when their rivalry is analyzed in the pages of the Pan-Arab daily *Al Hayat* as "a rivalry between armed resistance and Realpolitik, with SMS messages either supporting the Palestinian cause or the Libyan opening"?(24)

Nationalist sentiments come to the fore in Star Academy and other reality shows.

For much of the Arab political elite, the real threat posed by reality TV is that it distracts Arab youth from the issues which really matter. *Al Quds Al Arabi* editor Abd al-Bari Atwan bitterly complained that "the most important victim is this generation of Arabs, whose intellect is being shaped by *Super Star* and the culture of *Star Academy* and the dancers on Rotana (the leading Arab music video station), and getting their news of the world and the progress of events from the news briefs on Radio Sawa! The stars of our age won't be poets and intellectuals and politicians and preachers, but rather the stars of *Star Academy* and the video clip singers."(25) When Hisham Abd al-Rahman won the second *Star Academy*, Mohammed Abdullah al-Sayf asked pointedly: "What did we profit from Hisham's victory?"(26) What does it say, he wondered, that large numbers of Saudi youth voted for Hisham despite strong opposition from the official clergy class and an official ban on voting on *Star Academy* by the main Saudi cell phone provider, at a time when Saudi youth show no interest in the municipal elections? (27) More directly, the Palestinian runner-up in the second *Super Star*, Ammar Hassan, was forced to end a concert in Nablus after masked gunmen

surrounded the hall and shot in the air. One Hamas activist explained to *The Independent* (London) their message to Hassan: "Don't dance on our blood, we lost a lot of martyrs and friends, and this is not appropriate."(28)

It is not entirely clear that these skeptics are right. Fahmy Howeidy, for example, observes with dismay how Egyptians mobilized in support of an Egyptian contestant but can't be mobilized to complain about corruption or incompetence or sham democracy. But what of the enthusiasm and mobilization Egypt witnessed throughout 2005? Is it possible that the anti-regime Kifaya (Enough) movement, with its decentralized networks, young base, and Internet drew inspiration from their reality TV experiences? In Lebanon, activists in the Cedar Revolution used *Star Academy* language in their chants, while Future TV producers claim that their reality TV experience trained them well to cover the spontaneous mass rallies in Beirut after Hariri's assassination.(29) Despite an official Saudi ban on voting on Star Academy, the young Saudi Hisham Abd al-Rahman won the 2004 Star Academy, presumably on the strength of Saudi votes, setting off a furious national debate. What if such a national debate, instead of only attacking *Star Academy*, actually led Saudis to recognize the manifest shortcomings of the municipal elections and to seek ways to create more meaningful political participation?

Another complaint focuses less on political misdirection than on reality TV promoting the wrong values. As Jordanian columnist (and Al Jazeera correspondent) Yasir Abu Hilala complained, *Star Academy* and *Super Star* grant Pan-Arab fame to young people with little education and with few talents to offer their nations. Jordanian children who have done amazing things remain unknown: "Why are we satisfied with *Star Academy* … which celebrates those with no learning or ambition?"(30) This complaint echoes across cultures, as cultural elitists everywhere bemoan the celebration of the banal and the talentless. While it would be easy to dismiss such complaints as the eternal grumbling of an elite never satisfied with the popular culture of the day, the criticisms take on more weight in the context of the urgency for comprehensive economic, social, and educational reform identified by successive Arab Human Development Reports.

Arab nationalists also complain about the role the reality TV shows play in stoking nationalist (*watani*) passions.(31) The examples are legion: the Tunisian government keeping four free long-distance phone lines to encourage its citizens to vote for the Tunisian finalist; the Saudi prince who sent a private jet to ferry the winner from Beirut back to Jiddah; Lebanese rioting about their champion's loss in *Star Academy*, and Palestinian rage at the Arabs for not voting for their candidate; the vast popular enthusiasm in Damascus for a Syrian contestant in an earlier program (if only they could muster such energy to demand political reforms, muses Fahmy Howeydi). Consider the headlines of the regular reports on Al Wadi in the Pan-Arab daily *Asharq Al Awsat*: "The stars of Kuwait open fire on their colleagues participating in *Al Wadi*" (September 9); "Did the Gulf

masses expel Ghassan because of his differences with his Kuwaiti rival?" (September 16). Contestants are always identified by their nationality, regardless of how they might personally identify themselves. This cuts in numerous directions, however. The Pan-Arabist might celebrate that the common spectacle of a Pan-Arab competition is inherently unifying, in the sense of involving an entire Arab world in a single, common endeavor and public dialogue in real time. And the rallying power of a nationalist champion might be rather heartening for those political forces favoring a territorial (*watani*) nationalism—not only the populist ethnic nationalists inflaming local conservative tribalism in Jordan, but also the liberal reformers seeking to focus the attention of the domestic public inward.

But the passions aroused by Arab reality TV may be a symptom rather than the disease. Fahmy Howeydi speculates that the intensity of those passions suggests that many people might be in search of "an issue" to motivate them.(32) He sees the passions aroused by *Star Academy* as in part an indictment of domestic civil society—people are so detached from their local circumstances, and distanced from the political system, that this disembodied television phenomenon is the only thing they can latch on to. As evidence, he cites a survey by a local democracy NGO which found that 88 percent of people have nothing to do with a political party, and 98 percent don't participate in any kind of public affairs. A wide sector of Arab youth, he argues, feels marginalized and neglected, and is searching for some purpose to grab on to: "For some, that will be Islam. For others, *Star Academy.*" Should an attractive cause arise—the Kifaya movement's demands for change in Egypt, for instance—these free-floating youth may surprise those who see their passions for *Star Academy* as evidence of their political apathy. Is it only a coincidence that Bahrain, the location of one of the most politically successful campaigns against reality TV, has also been one of the Arab countries where politically-minded young bloggers have had the greatest political impact?

The real significance of reality TV, it seems to me, lies in the marriage of the satellite television revolution with participatory forms of programming. A Freedom House study of Egyptian women found that programs like *Super Star* and *Star Academy* were extremely popular with respondents, who regularly reported that "the two attractive features of the new media options are that they are interactive and participatory, a quality lacking in Egypt's politics."(33) Many observers have been surprised at the sudden emergence of Arab bloggers, and the creative uses of the Internet by young political and civil activists. Like the Kifaya movement in Egypt, or political bloggers in Bahrain, reality TV fans have been innovators in the use of technology to organize and mobilize across distances. As Marwan Kraidy told an NPR interviewer earlier this year, "fans of different contestants organized, they set up Web sites, they set up all kinds of chains, using mobile phones to mobilize each other and mobilize others to vote for one contestant as opposed to the

other."(34) Without claiming too much for reality TV, it is worth suggesting that *Super Star* and *Star Academy* fandom might have provided early inspiration and opportunities for these young people to experiment with online and networked organization. The skills may be more transferable to the political realm than some realize.

These indirect effects are all more significant than the formal element of voting which has attracted the most attention from Western enthusiasts. The democracy on these programs is purely formal, devoid of essential qualities such as deliberation or influence over significant outcomes. Compared to the September 2005 Presidential elections in Egypt, or many of the other uninspiring elections which have dotted the Arab political calendar, *Star Academy*, *Super Star*, and *Al Wadi* come off rather well: real competition among multiple candidates, official neutrality, some transparency in voting. But this attention to the formal process of voting distracts attention from real political and economic issues. As democracy training, it thus seems less than ideal. If anything, it might drive dissatisfaction and even despair with elections. Nobody expects *Star Academy* to deliver real political or economic change. Presumably, citizens—and analysts of the prospects for Arab democracy—should expect more.

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NOTES
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