

HOW ENTERTAINERS COULD TRANSFORM ARAB POLITICS

by Joseph Braude

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Egyptian vocalist Amr Diab is talented, sexy, and the wealthiest Arab in show business. His music videos are hits from Abu Dhabi to Casablanca. He broke out of Arab pop's ghetto last month--big-time--by recording a **bilingual duet with Jennifer Lopez**. There's even talk of a movie deal for Diab (hopefully a more promising vehicle than a sequel to *Gigli*). But one thing the crooner from Cairo will not do, at least not yet, is run for parliament in his country's elections. All the widespread rumors to the contrary--including Arabic press reports that he recently went canvassing in his home town of Port Said--are apparently false. "I was shocked at what the newspapers printed," Diab told the Arabic language women's magazine *Laha* last week. "I am totally busy at this time preparing my new album." Diab's ambitions, the story added, do not include politics.



Why so much fuss over the political aspirations--or non-aspirations--of an Arab pop star? For anyone concerned about the impact of religion on Arab governments today, a secular sex symbol winning an election in Egypt would be good news indeed. But such a prospect has long been little more than an amusing pipe dream in the Middle East--unlike in other parts of the world, where entertainers from "Ahnohd" to Evita have long played key political roles, using their storytelling skills to mold popular opinion. In Arab countries, Islamist dogma and the excesses of nationalism have effectively conspired to keep entertainers, and especially their wayward ideals, out of government.

Now there are signs that Middle Eastern entertainers are beginning to exercise political influence. While Western powers and media have been understandably fixated on Arabs with guns and ammo, a **different cultural stream has grown strong in the region**. Through sell-out concerts from North Africa to the Gulf and video clips on Arab satellite television, **a new generation of entertainers is challenging the forces of cultural conservatism for Arab hearts and minds--in a way that older crooners and actors failed to do**. While Diab may be disinclined to seek office this election year, his influence--and the influence of his fellow entertainers--on Arab politics is undeniable. By entering public life, Amr Diab could change Middle Eastern politics forever. And even if he won't, it seems only a matter of time before someone else rises to the challenge.

In the developing world, show business has often played a central role in politics. Consider the Philippines, a country with a film industry dating back to the 1930s. Movie star Joseph Estrada used his wealth and fame to win San Juan's mayoral elections in 1969 and the win the nation's highest office in 1998.

Or take India, where politics was altered by the social impact of a TV show. Back in the late 1980s, Indian national television broadcast a 78-episode weekly soap opera based on the Hindu



Ramayana epic. The show had an estimated 100 million viewers, and is **widely credited with uniting the country's disparate regions around a militant national myth of the warrior king Rama**. In a country of a billion people divided by culture and caste, the power of storytelling helped to engineer an angry repudiation of liberalism. The incumbent Congress Party lost control of the government, and the historic Babri Mosque was razed to the ground. Not coincidentally, scores of TV and film stars were ushered into regional and national politics. In last year's elections, nearly two dozen actors ran for parliament--many aligned with the BJP.

If Indian entertainers could demolish their country's left-wing status quo, it's tempting to ask whether Arab crooners could help do the same for their region's right-wing status quo. The question is: **What big story could Arab stars of stage and screen come together to tell?**

Decline of the Arab Storytelling Industry: Film and Music 1950-1990

FILM: First, there would be obstacles to overcome--for starters, the fact that **Arab storytelling, as an industry, hasn't been viable for decades**. The region's capital of filmmaking used to be Egypt, which at one time boasted the third-largest film output in the world after India and America. The Egyptian film industry churned out 70 movies a year in the early '50s; today it produces so few films per year--probably less than ten--that each one is a major news event. This flop reflects a victory of politics over business. Many musicals and slapstick comedies of the '30s and '40s were lucrative hits across the Arab world. Indeed, they elevated Egypt's music and culture to new heights vis-à-vis its Arab neighbors--and sometimes outsold films from America that also played in local markets. But politicians in Cairo came to view local cinema as both too lewd and too similar to Hollywood imports--a bad rap for any business in the heady days of anti-colonialism. Boycotts of Egyptian movie houses in the '50s received support from the Muslim Brotherhood and nationalists alike, and films were compared to "poison." A 1953 editorial from the newspaper *Al Misri* alleged that Western-style films--even those in Arabic--contained "criminal ideas ... deliberately directed to us" and that "those who supply this type of film intend to harm us." By 1963, Egypt's entire film industry had been nationalized and turned over to the "National Guidance" ministry. The content changed starkly, funding plummeted, and in 1970--the year Egypt's economy collapsed--production ground to a screeching halt. Critics, East and West, tend to praise nationalist-era films as serious cinema and pooh-pooh the bawdier black-and-white musicals. **But when the market votes, the old stuff wins: The Egyptian movies that repeat most often on Arab satellite television today are overwhelmingly those that pre-date nationalization.**

MUSIC: While film was assaulted and ultimately hijacked by the state, secular music in Arab capitals suffered the disdain of conservative society. All four schools of Sunni Islam, and some Shia clerics, severely discourage believers from listening to women's singing voices and melodic instruments. Though this ban is undoubtedly honored more in the breach than the observance, it's been a rallying cry for Islamist movements. It's not surprising, therefore, that the greatest icons of twentieth-century Arabic music threw their weight behind secular Arab nationalism. Umm Kulthum, the immortal diva of Egyptian song, was a kindred spirit of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser; her immensely popular songs often served to

advance the political project of pan-Arabism. The great composer and performer Muhammad Abdel Wahhab routinely sang the state's praises as well. As ornaments to the establishment, these storytellers reached great heights of acclaim. Had they chosen to be dissidents, they would have been on their own--in a most unforgiving environment.



Umm Kulthum

A similar dynamic played out even more starkly in Lebanon, another capital of Arab pop music, during that country's fifteen-year civil war. With a handful of notable exceptions--the beloved singer Fayrouz, for example, managed to survive the war as a unifying symbol of Lebanon--most vocalists faced enormous pressure to sing in praise of whichever ethnic faction they had been born into. Witness Majida al Rumi, early in her career a pan-Arab pop star. During the war, she became associated with her extended family's Christian Phalangist politics--a stigma in the Middle East that took her years to shake off.

Between the pressure of the state, the intrusion of Islamism, and the baggage of ethnicity, Arab pop culture as a locus of power took a serious beating during the past few decades. That is, until the dawn of the twenty-first century--when the region's pop stars actually found a way to hit back.

How Video Clips May be Changing the Arab World View



Nancy Ajram

Most American reporting on Arab media, my own included, spotlights the banter of politicians, clerics, protestors, and military officials, as presented on the region's news channels. But if one really wanted to convey a cross-section of Middle Eastern television today, most of the verbiage would have to be concerned with scantily clad women and buff men, singing suggestively to each other in Arabic--often while gyrating horizontally and vertically--in MTV-style video clips. **I'd venture to say that for the region's thirty-and-under set--the majority of Arab populations--these clips, together with soccer games, command at least three-quarters of viewers' attention.**

One man who does not shrink from the challenge of parsing this phenomenon is Marc Lynch, by day a sober and prolific scholar of Arab politics at Williams College. His blog includes translation and analysis of telling moments in Arab pop culture, as well as links to opinion columns on the subject by the region's leading intellectuals. He files these entries under the heading "Nancy Ajram Culture Wars." This reflects his view that a legion of mostly female pop stars, exemplified by the sultry belly dancer and vocalist Nancy Ajram, are fighting Muslim clerics for the soul of Arab youth via satellite television--and possibly winning. An excerpt:

Whether it's Nancy Ajram performing to an alleged crowd of 100,000 in Morocco, or Haifa Wehbe "dominating" male Arabic pop superstar Raghif Alama ... or the Saudi winner of Star Academy 2 being hauled in by the religious police for inflaming Saudi women to improper behavior, no

objective observer of the Arab media could possibly avoid writing about this stuff. ... Elaph runs a big story today on how satellite television's sexy singers "captivate the eyes and enthrall the minds" of Arab viewers. It begins with a worried father in the Gaza Strip, who is torn between the excitement of finally having access to satellite television and terror over how music video clips will corrupt his children. ... More seriously, Al Quds al Arabi runs a long op-ed today. ... Pointing out that the number of stations broadcasting Arabic music videos has reached critical mass, Abd al Salam Ben'isi thinks its time to start thinking seriously about their significance.

A rally against video clips by Islamist students in Alexandria; a public-decency lawsuit by an United Arab Emirates lawyer against a Lebanese satellite channel; a new "family values" association in Qatar that calls on the public to "stand up to the culture of the video clip"--if a movement gets to be defined by its opponents, then "the culture of the video clip" is surely the name of a new movement. Anti-video-clip rhetoric, which assails pop stars and their producers as purveyors of a foreign evil, sounds like '50s Cairo all over again. Egyptian critic Abdel Wahab el Messiri, for example, writes: "The video clip embodies a consumerism detached from all ethical, societal, and national affiliations. The songs often have Indian, American, or European settings; the girls are often blond, or dressed in foreign fashion." But what a difference 50 years makes: This time, Arab governments are either ill-equipped to suppress the medium or simply have too many other things to worry about.



Star Academy 2

The very qualities that critics of the clips rail against are singled out for praise by the medium's admirers. One of the first American writers to point out the political implications of clips as a cultural movement was *Reason* senior editor Charles Paul Freund. In 2003, he observed:

For nearly a century, a series of utopian political systems has been advanced in the region to attempt to break this cycle of conflict and stagnation: Pan-Arabism, Ba'athism, Nasserism, Islamism, etc. These have all failed, sometimes disastrously. **What may yet work in the region is what has worked elsewhere for centuries: commercialism that does not transmit a regime's utopian dreams but addresses the personal dreams of the audience.**

The big story Arab entertainers are telling involves a repudiation of collective labels and ideologies and a basic empowerment of the individual. If Jennifer Lopez's duet partner Amr Diab, or any other entertainer, ever takes that story to the voters, the Middle East might never be the same again.

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